Creative Counter-Narratives by Arts Educators in Urban Schools: A Participatory, a/R/Tographic Inquiry

Sunny Spillane
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF VISUAL ARTS, THEATRE, & DANCE

CREATIVE COUNTER-NARRATIVES BY ARTS EDUCATORS IN URBAN SCHOOLS:
A PARTICIPATORY, A/R/TOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

By
SUNNY SPILLANE

A Dissertation submitted to the
Department of Art Education
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Degree Awarded:
Summer 2013
Sunny Spillane defended this dissertation on April 11, 2013.

The members of the supervisory committee were:

Anniina Suominen Guyas
Professor Directing Dissertation

Kathleen Yancey
University Representative

Tom Anderson
Committee Member

David Gussak
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the dissertation has been approved in accordance with university requirements.
This study is dedicated to my students, past, present, and future. It is an acknowledgment of my debt to them, and an admission that I am still learning and continually humbled by how much they have to teach me. Throughout the circuitous and sometimes tortured process of conceptualizing this study, my students became my research conscience, nagging at me when I pursued other lines of inquiry or flights of fancy. This dedication serves as a reminder of their deep impact on my life and work, and my responsibility to them as I weave together the multiple strands of this inquiry.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful for the generous support and critical guidance of my major professor Anniina Suominen Guyas. She has been an invaluable teacher and mentor throughout the processes of conceptualizing and conducting this study, and growing into the next phase of my career as an art education scholar. Her commitment to my success was perhaps most evident in her critical engagement with my work, and her constant encouragement to go further and think bigger. She is truly a critical friend.

I am also grateful to my committee members, Tom Anderson, Dave Gussak, and Kathleen Yancey for their critical feedback, support, and good humor throughout this journey. I especially wish to acknowledge Tom Anderson whose scholarship in social justice art education was an important inspiration for this study and the development of my research agenda.

I could not have completed this dissertation without the support of my family and friends. I am particularly indebted to my husband John, our children Lily and Jasper, and my mother Diane Rourke, whose love, laughter, and encouragement sustained me throughout this process. I would also like to thank Yelena McLane, Adriane Pereira, and Heidi Haire for challenging me, supporting my work, and making it fun. Thanks for being part of my inner circle.

Special thanks are also due to Florida State University for supporting and recognizing my work with the University and Legacy Fellowships, and the Art Education Department for awarding me the Jesse Lovano Kerr Scholarship that made my doctoral studies possible.

Finally, I would like to thank the educators who graciously agreed to participate in this study. Their experiences, creative work, and critical perspectives form the backbone of this study and the foundation of my future scholarship. I am forever grateful for their generosity.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables..................................................................................................................vii
List of Figures................................................................................................................ix
Abstract..........................................................................................................................xii

1. “INTRODUCTION”.................................................................................................1
   - Overview of Study....................................................................................................3
   - Research Questions...............................................................................................5
   - Participants in the Study.......................................................................................7
   - Artistic Methods and Images in the Study...........................................................8
   - Setting/Context of the Study: “Urban” Schools..................................................9
   - Summary and Rationale.......................................................................................11

2. “A/R/TOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: NAMES”......................................................13

3. “REVIEW OF LITERATURE”..............................................................................17
   - Language and Terms Used to Describe Groups of People..............................18
   - Critical Race Theory............................................................................................18
   - Deficit Thinking....................................................................................................21
     - Race in Critical Race Theory.........................................................................23
     - Whiteness.........................................................................................................25
     - Whiteness as Property....................................................................................28
     - Critique of Colorblindness.............................................................................32
     - Myth of Meritocracy.......................................................................................33
     - Deficit Thinking through the Lens of Critical Race Theory..........................34
     - Deficit Thinking as a Threshold Concept in Social Justice Art Education....36
   - Counter-storytelling...............................................................................................38
     - Counter-storytelling in Critical Race Theory..................................................39
     - Visual “Counter-stories”..................................................................................42
   - Conceptions of Identity in A/r/tography and Critical Race Theory................46
     - Identities in A/r/tography...............................................................................47
     - Critical Race Theory and A/r/tography: Co-Informing Conceptions of Identity...50

4. “A/R/TOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: MASKS/PORTRAITS”..............................52

5. “RESEARCH METHODOLOGY”.........................................................................54
   - Purpose and Overview of the Study.................................................................54
   - Research Questions.............................................................................................55
   - Research Foundations.......................................................................................56
     - The Participatory Paradigm in Qualitative Research.....................................57
     - Critical Race Theory and its Implications for Research...............................59
     - A/r/tography.....................................................................................................66
   - Research Ethics and Human Subjects Approval..............................................68
   - Setting of the Study: Description of Schools and Community.......................68
Participants……………………………………………………………………………….70
   Fiona Williams…………………………………………………………………….71
   Bob Watson……………………………………………………………………….72
   Erica Wei………………………………………………………………………….73
Study Design……………………………………………………………………….74
   Schedule of Focus Group Meetings………………………………………….75
   Participant Artwork……………………………………………………………..76
Data Collection, Analysis, and Synthesis………………………………………….78
   Member Checks………………………………………………………………….80
Structure of Final Chapters………………………………………………………….81

6. “A/R/TOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: GALLERY OF PARTICIPANTS’ ARTWORK”……..82

7. “PARTICIPANTS’ STORIES”…………………………………………………………..88
   Getting Started: Orientation and Initial Reflections…………………………….89
   Artistic Introductions: Examples of Participants’ Established Artistic Practices.92
   Reflections on Race…………………………………………………………….100
   Creative Counter-Narratives……………………………………………………109
   Final Reflections………………………………………………………………..130
   Future Directions………………………………………………………………137


9. “ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND CONCLUSIONS”……………………………144
   Analysis, Interpretation and Implications Related to Research Question One.……146
      School Performance as a Systemic Problem………………………………….147
      Accountability as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy…………………………………149
      Teacher Quality in Urban Schools…………………………………………….150
   Analysis, Interpretation and Implications Related to Research Question Two…151
      Erica Wei – The Advocate……………………………………………………153
      Bob Watson – The Seeker……………………………………………………156
      Fiona Williams – The Earth Mother………………………………………..157
      Synthesis……………………………………………………………………159
   Analysis, Interpretation and Implications Related to Research Question Three..160
   Analysis, Interpretation and Implications Related to Research Question Four…162
      Roles and Relationships through the Lens of the Participatory Paradigm……162
      Roles and Relationships through the Lens of A/r/tography…………………164
   Analysis, Interpretation and Implications Related to Research Question Five…166
      Getting Started………………………………………………………………168
      Data Collection/Creation…………………………………………………..168
      A/r/tographic Approaches……………………………………………….172
   Conclusions and Implications…………………………………………………173
      Understanding the Context of Urban Schools………………………………173
      Preparing Art Teachers for Equitable Practice in Diverse Contexts………..174
      Choosing Battles for Educational Equity……………………………………177

LIST OF TABLES

1 Excerpt of Image Transcript ..................................................................................................188

2 School Accountability and Student Demographic Data .........................................................190
## LIST OF FIGURES

1. *Names*, acrylic with linen and cotton sewn on canvas, 50 x 16 inches
   by Sunny Spillane, 2011.................................................................16

2. Masks by fifth grade art students, clay and acrylic paint, approximately 6 x 8 inches each,
   collection of Sunny Spillane, 2005...........................................................52

3. Examples of participant Erica Wei’s established artistic practice...............................82

4. Artwork created by participant Erica Wei for the study................................................83

5. Examples of participant Bob Watson’s established artistic practice.............................84

6. Artwork created by participant Bob Watson for the study.............................................85

7. Examples of participant Fiona Williams’ established artistic practice...............................86

8. Artwork created by participant Fiona Williams for the study..........................................87


10. *Fairy Incarnate*, digital image by study participant Erica Wei....................................94

11. *What Came Before Us*, digital image by study participant Erica Wei........................95

12. *DeSegregation, ReSegregation*, digital image by study participant Erica Wei.............96

13. *Closing the Achievement Gap*, digital image by study participant Erica Wei...............97


15. *Italian Landscape Madonna*, digital image by study participant Bob Watson.................100

16. *Mystic Trumpet*, digital image by study participant Bob Watson.................................101

17. *Let’s Get to Work!* digital image by study participant Bob Watson.............................102

18. *Untitled*, quilt by study participant Fiona Williams.....................................................104

19. Detail of untitled quilt (Figure 18) by study participant Fiona Williams........................105

20. *Cocoon*, quilt by study participant Fiona Williams.....................................................105
21 Natural Woman, mixed media painting by study participant Fiona Williams ....................107
22 Landscape photograph by study participant Fiona Williams........................................107
23 Sunset photograph by study participant Fiona Williams.............................................108
24 Sketchbook drawing by study participant Fiona Williams.........................................110
25 A New Normal, digital image by study participant Bob Watson .................................112
26 Teacher Tree (version 1), pencil drawing by study participant Fiona Williams...............122
27 Teacher Tree (version 2), pencil drawing by study participant Fiona Williams...............122
28 A Shift in Terminology, digital image by study participant Erica Wei ......................125
29 Test Prep Factory, digital image by study participant Erica Wei...............................127
30 The Market Model of Public Education, digital image by study participant Erica Wei.....128
31 One Heart, One Spirit, One Classroom, digital image by study participant Bob Watson 1231
32 The Property Value of Whiteness, acrylic on street map collaged onto foam board,
27 x 33 inches by Sunny Spillane, 2013….........................................................................139
33 Legend for painting in Figure 32, showing distribution of school accountability
grades in relation to average residential property values..............................................140
34 Comparison of mean percentages of whiteness and mean percentages of students
receiving free or reduced lunch in relation to elementary school accountability grades…142
35 Comparison of percentages of whiteness and percentages of students receiving free or
reduced lunch in “A” schools verses “D” school in a single neighborhood.....................142
36 Performance view (1) of All Tomorrow’s Parties, interactive performance/installation
co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012...............179
37 Performance view (2) of All Tomorrow’s Parties, interactive performance/installation
co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012...............179
38 Performance view (3) of All Tomorrow’s Parties, interactive performance/installation
co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012...............180
39 Performance view (4) of All Tomorrow’s Parties, interactive performance/installation
co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012...............180
40  Installation view (1) of *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, interactive performance/installation
    co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012..............181

41  Installation view (2) of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, interactive performance/installation
    co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012.............181
This study presents the stories and experiences of a small, racially diverse group of veteran arts educators in urban schools in order to counter deficit-based fears and stereotypes about their students, schools, and communities. Participants’ stories were explored, articulated, and communicated by them in researcher-facilitated discussions during five focus group meetings and their own independent creative inquiries through artmaking and reflective writing, which were discussed in the focus group sessions. This study is grounded in a participatory paradigm and informed by critical race theory as a framework for understanding the context and conditions of urban schooling, particularly in low-income communities of color. It employed a participatory, arts-based methodology (based largely on the framework of a/r/tography) to draw on the deep connectedness of committed, veteran arts educators in urban public schools. Participants’ experiences and critical perspectives were framed as “counter-narratives” in order to challenge deficit-based characterizations of their students, schools, and surrounding communities.

This study was conducted in a small city of approximately 182,000 residents in the Southeastern United States. Some readers may question the use of the term “urban” to describe such a small city. Based on a review of literature however, the term “urban schools” came closest to describing both the high concentrations of poverty and high proportions of students of color in the schools that are the focus of this study. While the image of the urban concrete jungle may not exactly capture the character of this relatively small city, this study’s setting makes the
important point that poverty and racial inequity affect a much wider variety of communities than may be immediately connoted by the term “urban.”

Because participants’ stories, as represented by them, were so crucial to this study, it was important to locate participants with strong studio art backgrounds and/or current practices who were familiar and comfortable with artmaking as a mode of inquiry. In order to recruit enough participants in the small city where this study was conducted, the definition of “arts educators” was expanded to include educators who currently or in their professional histories use(d) substantial and meaningful visual arts-based pedagogical approaches in their classrooms.

Five interrelated research questions guided this study: (1) In what ways do the experiences and critical perspectives of veteran arts educators in urban schools “counter” deficit-based characterizations of their students, schools, and communities? (2) How do participating arts educators communicate their experiences of multiple and intersecting identities in the context of their practices, and reveal them in their creative counter-narratives? (3) In what ways does their engagement in this process of inquiry alter participants’ perceptions and understandings of their students, schools, communities, and selves? (4) What roles do the participating educators and I take on in relation to one another in the context of this participatory process of inquiry, and how do we negotiate these relationships? (5) How does artistic practice inform this study as a method of inquiry, and suggest possibilities for communicating participants’ counter-stories?

The most substantial counter-narratives that emerged in this study focused on the relationships between high-stakes school accountability measures, perceptions of school and teacher quality, and re-segregation of neighborhoods and public schools. Participants framed the supposed failure of urban public schools as a systemic problem that reflected pervasive social
inequities rather than simply a failure of individual teachers and schools to meet accountability goals. Participants also described the ways high-stakes accountability became a self-fulfilling prophecy that restricted the breadth and richness of educational programming in urban schools. Finally, the participants’ experiences and critical perspectives challenged deficit-based characterizations of urban teachers in public discourse about school quality, accountability and teacher effectiveness.

Artistic practices, particularly creating artwork, collaboratively viewing and discussing artwork, and analyzing artwork in a variety of ways, contributed significantly to this study’s participatory methodology. Specifically, the use of artistic practices facilitated the processes of establishing rapport among the researcher and participants, developing a shared language of mutual interest, facilitating difficult conversations, and connecting to community.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In my last year of teaching elementary art before I went back to graduate school, I worked with a talented student teacher whose deep commitment to social justice was reflected in her specific request to be placed in an urban school like mine that served a diverse student body in a low-income community. Toward the end of her student teaching experience, she invited me to be a guest speaker in her portfolio class to talk about my experience teaching art in a “Title I” school. ¹ She revealed that many of her classmates who were also interning that semester had some misgivings and confusion about what it was like to teach in schools like ours. They had heard horror stories about urban students’ behavior, their purportedly unsupportive families who did not value education, and their language and learning “problems.” They had also heard rumors that once you agreed to work in a Title I school in our district, you had to pay your dues there for years before you could transfer to a “good” school. While this saddened me, it did not particularly surprise me. Their fears and misgivings about Title I schools were consistent with those I had heard expressed time and again by white, middle-class parents who were afraid to send their children to their neighborhood schools.

But that was not the whole story. Although parents justified their fears by pointing to the schools’ performance on standardized tests, or measures of adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), their fears, like those of my former interns’ classmates, reflected pervasive, deficit-based characterizations of urban students (especially students of

¹ This designation refers to Title I - Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged - of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), which provides supplemental funding for schools with high concentrations of students living in poverty, along with fairly strict accountability measures designed to promote the academic achievement of every child.
color) as violent, intellectually deficient, and/or poorly socialized and portrayed the schools they attended as “failing” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Valencia, 2010). Deficit theories are the stock stories or tacit societal understandings that attribute social inequities, such as the disproportionate experiences of school failure among low income students of color, to their own internal defects of intellect, moral character, culture, or familial socialization (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 2010). By essentially blaming the victim, deficit thinking masks the role of societal factors, such as under-resourced public schools and systemic discrimination, in placing these students at risk of school failure (Bastos, Cosier, & Hutzel, 2012; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Pollack, 2012; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 2010; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). Deficit thinking is not merely an affront to human dignity. It shapes the dominant societal narratives about people of color and the poor, which in turn impact social policy and practice in areas such as education and the law (Valencia, 2010).

It is well documented that the public school student population is growing increasingly diverse, and that this diversity is not equally reflected in the teaching force (Davis, 2009; Hagiwara & Wray, 2009; Kozol, 1991; National Education Association, 2003; Zumwalt & Craig, 2008). Pre-service art teachers, like most pre-service teachers, are predominantly white, middle class women from suburban backgrounds (Cosier & Nemeth, 2010; Desai, 2010a). As indicated by the fears and misperceptions of my former intern’s classmates, these future art teachers may be underprepared, even afraid to work with diverse students, especially in urban contexts. Deficit thinking reifies fears and stereotypes about urban students (Nieto and Bode, 2008) and can scare future teachers away from working in potentially rewarding contexts where students
sorely need arts-based learning experiences as part of a rich, holistic, humane, and empowering education (Burkholder, 2011; Quinn, 2005).

These deficit-based characterizations of urban students, schools, and surrounding communities do not comport with my own extremely rewarding and positive experiences as an art teacher in a lower income, predominantly African American community in Florida. Though my first few years of teaching were tough (mostly due to my inexperience) I grew to develop strong relationships with my students and colleagues, and a feeling of solidarity with the school community. My reflections on these experiences and relationships were the inspiration for this study, which draws on the insights of veteran arts educators in urban schools to challenge deficit thinking and reframe the societal narratives that inform educational practices and impact educational outcomes. The stories of successful, veteran arts educators in urban schools have the potential not only to change deficit-based dominant narratives, but to inspire pre-service art teachers to teach in diverse urban contexts, and help prepare them to do so successfully.

**Overview of Study**

This study presents the stories of successful, veteran arts educators in urban schools as a way of countering some of the pervasive, deficit-based fears and stereotypes about their students, schools, and communities. Participating teachers’ stories were explored, articulated, and communicated by them in researcher-facilitated discussions during five focus group meetings, and their own independent creative inquiries through artmaking and reflective writing. This study employs a participatory form of a/r/tography, an arts-based framework for conducting educational research. A/r/tography is a practice-based qualitative research framework that mines the relationships between researchers’ roles as artists, researchers, and teachers (the “a/r/t” in a/r/tography) through an interrelated process of artmaking and reflective writing (the “art” and
“graphy” in a/r/tography) (Holbrook & Pourchier, 2012; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2012; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008; Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson Kind, 2005). This approach facilitates and capitalizes on these interconnected roles, and privileges participating teachers’ knowledge by positioning them as artists and researchers in addition to their roles as teachers. All participants in the study (including myself) are practicing teachers with an interest in social justice and educational equity, telling our stories with/in/through art. Because of this, I characterize the group formed by the participants and myself as a creative, countercultural community of practice (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Springgay & Irwin, 2008) which “recognizes the existence of a dominant set of institutional norms and practices and intentionally sets itself up to counter those norms and practices” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 11). To facilitate the group collaboration, all participants were recruited from the same city. Group meetings were recorded on video, which I reviewed between meetings and later transcribed to facilitate analysis.

This study is informed by critical race methodologies (Buendia, 2003; Chapman, 2005; Dixson, 2006; Hylton, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Lee, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Torre, 2009) and other democratic, participatory, and collaborative frameworks (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Greenwood & Levin, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Lather, 1991) that actively work to dismantle oppressive power relationships, eradicate discrimination, and promote social justice for all people. These approaches advocate democratic, reciprocal, and non-hierarchical relationships between researchers and research participants, and characterize research as something done “with and for” rather than “to” the communities and people with whom we work (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005). This is especially important in this study because I am a white scholar conducting research in, with, and about historically marginalized
communities of color. In keeping with the democratic, participatory ethos of this study, I looked for participants who were my superiors in many respects – whose length of teaching experience and earned credentials exceeded my own – so that all of us were more equitably positioned in relation to one another throughout our inquiry. Additionally, because teachers’ stories, as represented by them through their artwork, are so crucial to this study, it was important to me to locate participants with strong studio art backgrounds and/or current practices who were familiar and comfortable with artmaking as a mode of inquiry. In order to recruit enough participants in the small city where this study was conducted, the definition of “arts educators” was expanded to include educators who currently or in their professional histories use(d) substantial and meaningful visual arts-based pedagogical approaches in their classrooms.

While this study is fundamentally about the participants’ stories, it is also about my own learning with and from the participants, and the “mutual change” (Holbrook & Pourchier, 2012) engendered in and through our work together. A/r/tography, with its emphasis on the interconnected roles of artist/researcher/teacher, is a reflexive, practice-based inquiry into self (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004) sometimes, as in this study, in relation with others (Bickel, 2012; Detlefsen, 2012; Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong, & Bickel, 2006). This study uses a/r/tography in connection with critical race theory and other democratic, participatory, and collaborative frameworks for conducting research. These frameworks demand that I walk the walk, by continually interrogating my assumptions about what I think I know about arts education in urban schools and the ways I characterize and live out my roles as an artist, researcher, and teacher. I present my own a/r/tographic investigations in the “A/r/tographic Interludes” between each chapter of this research text.
Research Questions

There are five interrelated research questions that guided this study:

1) In what ways do the experiences and critical perspectives of veteran arts educators in urban schools “counter” deficit-based characterizations of their students, schools, and communities?

2) How do participating arts educators communicate their experiences of multiple and intersecting identities in the context of their practices, and reveal them in their creative counter-narratives?

3) In what ways does their engagement in this process of inquiry alter participants’ perceptions and understandings of their students, schools, communities, and selves?

4) What roles do the participating educators and I take on in relation to one another in the context of this participatory process of inquiry, and how do we negotiate these relationships?

5) How does artistic practice inform this study as a method of inquiry, and suggest possibilities for communicating participants’ counter-stories?

Questions (1) and (2) are adapted from Milner’s (2008) study of successful teachers in an urban middle school, titled “Disrupting Deficit Notions of Difference: Counter-narratives of Teachers and Community in Urban Education.” Question (1) addresses this study’s focus on countering deficit thinking, while question (2) highlights the perspectives, experiences, and identities of the diverse group of educators who have agreed to collaborate with me in this study. Question (3) addresses teachers’ potential for learning and professional growth through their participation in this study. Question (4) examines the extent to which this study is truly participatory. Finally,
question (5) is a meta-question that examines the ways different aspects of artistic practice, such as creating, viewing, discussing, and reflecting on art, functioned in this inquiry.

Participants in the Study

There were three participants who worked with me in this study, each of whom are veteran educators who currently or in their professional histories have used substantial visual arts-based pedagogical approaches in their classrooms, and maintain an active, current artistic practice of some kind. They are: Erica Wei, a National Board Certified elementary school teacher of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) with 19 years of teaching experience and an active current artistic practice as a digital photographer; Bob Watson, an elementary school technology coordinator with previous experience as a middle school graphic arts educator who has 22 years of teaching, and an active practice as a digital photographer; and Fiona Williams, an elementary school art teacher with 19 years experience and a Ph.D. in Art Education and an active practice in quiltmaking, painting, and photography. I wanted to work with a small group of participants in order to facilitate the quick development of group rapport and to enable each participant to explore the study themes in depth. Three participants seemed like an ideal number for the purposes of this study. The group was large enough to represent a diversity of perspectives, and small enough to allow each participant to reflect deeply and share their stories and experiences at length without posing practical challenges in managing the focus group sessions.

Because of the weighty history of racism in the United States and its role in creating and maintaining educational inequities, I recognize that my whiteness and educational privilege are potential limitations of this study. To address this, I purposely sought out a group of participants who differed from me in terms of age, gender, race, and cultural background, in order to push me

---

2 All participants’ names have been changed to pseudonyms.
beyond the perceptual limits imposed by my social position and racial identity. Erica Wei is a Chinese American woman who immigrated to the United States with her family when she was a child; Bob Watson is a white man from Florida; and Fiona Williams is an African American woman from the Northeastern United States. As the study commenced, however, a different issue emerged: foregrounding participants’ differences could potentially create a situation where their insights and critical perspectives were arbitrarily tokenized or essentialized along the lines of race and/or gender. I have attempted to address this potential limitation of the study in the ways I communicated with participants, and the ways I interpreted the experiences and perspectives they shared.

**Artistic Methods and Images in the Study**

Artistic practices permeated virtually every aspect of this study, including: my initial conceptualization of the study; the methods used to gather data and facilitate the focus group meetings; and my analysis and synthesis of research data. This study employed three main types of artistic practices: creating artwork; viewing and collaboratively discussing artwork in the context of the focus group sessions; and analyzing artwork in different ways. The participants and I all created artwork as part of the study, albeit at different times and with different emphases. We also viewed and discussed artwork during the focus group sessions, including examples of all of our established artistic practices, and artwork we created for the study. After the focus group sessions concluded, I analyzed the participants’ artworks (both examples of their established artistic practices and the artwork they created for the study) in a variety of ways through the lenses of each research question and for emergent themes. In addition to my analysis of the participants’ artwork and the ways it functioned in the study, I also used the framework of a/r/tography (Holbrook & Pourchier, 2012; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2012; Springgay,
Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008; Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson Kind, 2005) as a creative counterpoint to the structured and focus analysis described above.

Because of this study’s extensive use of artistic methods by the participants and myself, both the study and the research text are intentionally multivocal and multimodal. Critical race theory, which informs the theoretical underpinnings of this study, demands multivocality as a way of challenging the monovocal, deficit-based, dominant narratives that demean and mischaracterize poor and working class people and people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Because my whiteness constricts the range of my social perception and my ability to discern and name injustice, the diverse voices and insights of this study’s participants are critically important sources of the counter-narratives that emerged from this study (Lawrence, 1995; Milner, 2007). This study employs a/r/tography as a holistic method of generating, synthesizing, presenting and communicating knowledge through interwoven processes of artmaking, and narrative, reflective, and analytical writing. The integrated methods of inquiry and forms of presentation and communication used in this study are inherently multimodal: meanings are created and communicated in and through multiple, interwoven visual and verbal “modes” (Kress, 2010). Drawing on Barone and Eisner’s (1997) work, Sullivan (2006) succinctly summarized their claims for the unique contributions of arts-based research: “What distinguishes this kind of research [from science-based research] is the multiplicity of ways of encountering and representing experience, and the use of forms of expression that can effectively communicate these phenomena” (Sullivan, 2006, pp. 23-24). The design, materials used, images created and presented, and artistic processes engaged in this study and the research text (within the limitations of approved formats for dissertations) evidence this multimodality.
Setting/Context of the Study: “Urban” Schools

Throughout this research text (indeed even in the title) I use the term “urban schools” as a shorthand way of describing the setting and context of this study. Drawing on Noguera’s (2003) work, Bastos (2012) described the way the term “urban” is used less as a “geographical or physical location descriptor” and more as a “social and cultural construct pertaining to certain people and places, particularly poor and non-white” (p. 14). Milner (2008) described the ambiguity of the term “urban schools,” noting that there was no “static definition of urban education” (p. 1574) in the educational research literature. For him, the most salient features of urban schools, regardless of location or city size, were higher concentrations of students living in poverty and greater cultural and ethnic diversity than are typically found in suburban schools. Like Milner (2008), Russo (2004) also described the term “urban schools” as ambiguous and confusing to apply in practice. Her institution, the State University of New York at Oswego, has a policy of placing all its pre-service teachers in at least one significant field experience in an urban setting, as part of its emphasis on social justice and diversity. Other than a location in an urban area, the following school characteristics were used to determine appropriate field placements: a relatively high rate of poverty, and relatively high proportions of students of color and English language learners.

For many people, the term “urban schools” immediately brings to mind the kinds of “savage inequalities” described so vividly by Jonathan Kozol (1991) in his comparison of schooling conditions in major cities like New York and Chicago with those of their suburbs. This image of the urban “concrete jungle” does not exactly capture the character of the relatively small city of barely 175,000 permanent residents (not including college students) in the Southeastern United States in which this study was conducted. However, this study’s setting
makes the important point that poverty and racial inequity affect a much wider variety of communities than may be connoted by the term “urban.” In addition to “urban schools,” I occasionally use the term “Title I schools” as a way of describing the context of this study. While this term aptly describes the high concentration of poverty in the schools that employ the educators who have agreed to collaborate with me, it does not reflect the correlation of (non-white) race and poverty in urban schools. It is also educational jargon that is not evocative or descriptive in the way “urban schools” is. Other terms such as “high-poverty schools” or “low socioeconomic status (SES) schools” may sound similar to “Title I schools” in describing the concentration of poverty. However, I rejected these terms outright as deficit-based (particularly “low SES”). Although some readers may quibble with me over my use of the term, “urban schools” comes closest to describing both the high concentrations of poverty and high proportions of students of color in the schools that are the focus of this study.

Summary and Rationale

This study presents teachers’ stories in order to counter some of the pervasive, deficit-based characterizations of urban students, schools, and communities that create and maintain educational inequities that disproportionately impact low-income students of color. There is a purportedly neutral story about urban schools, which is nevertheless informed by deficit-based dominant narratives – the story told by test scores. When schools are reduced to a single number or letter grade (frequently low ones in urban schools) these dominant narratives fill in details about the identities, abilities, and characters of the students, the quality of teachers, and the life of the school community. The first-hand stories and experiences of veteran teachers with strong relationships and deep commitments to urban school communities have potential to function as powerful counter-narratives, which Delgado and Stefancic (2001) define as writing (or in this
case multimodal creative texts) that is intended to “cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (p. 144). Participants’ creative counter-narratives have potential to change the discourse about urban schools by drawing on their experiential knowledge to open up complex and potentially asset-based (Hutzel, Bastos, & Cosier, 2012) conversations about urban students, schools, and communities.
CHAPTER TWO

A/R/TOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: NAMES

This study is inspired by my own deep connections and enduring sense of gratitude and responsibility to my former students. My students made me a teacher by demanding more of me than I knew I had, by insisting that I reorient myself to their realities, by forgiving my blunders, and by letting me try again and again to do a better job. As a way of grounding this study in my own formative experiences and caring relationships with my students, I undertook an initial a/r/tographic inquiry into some of the major themes of this study. This led to the creation of a mixed media painting titled “Names.” This piece marks the beginning of my a/r/tographic inquiry, and it represents a very early take on some of the themes and issues addressed in this study filtered through the lens of my personal experiences as a teacher. An excerpt from my a/r/tographic journal is included below:

I wanted to make a piece about my students’ names. I was grasping for a way into this dissertation study, thinking about stories and counterstories, and about how the stories I told about my day-to-day teaching experiences to friends outside the school community so often provoked shock and gave them an opportunity to demean my students. It was as though any information I shared with certain white, middle-class friends reinforced the stereotypes they already held about my students, my school, and that side of town. Simply saying their names would provoke ugly comments and off-the-cuff lampooning. At first I thought about making a piece about some of my male students, the ones who frequently got in trouble for fighting or defiance or disruptive behavior. But then I thought more about their names. I had a copy of my gradebook from my last year in the classroom and as I looked through it I had a profound kind of experience just reading their names. They were so beautiful, so majestic and proud, and I felt a flood of love for my students come over me through this connection to their names. This feeling intensified as I gave in to the impulse to write down some of their names in my sketchbook. I didn’t follow any specific criteria, I just wrote the names as they spoke to me, sometimes because I liked the sound of them, sometimes because I remembered a particularly sweet or exceptional child, sometimes because I remembered a child who challenged me.
My first idea was to fill a giant canvas with the names of each and every child I taught in a given school year. I was thinking about my personal, loving connection to my students through their names in contrast with the mean-spirited misunderstandings their names sometimes provoked in people outside the school community. Their names had power. They had power for me in reinforcing my connection to them, and power to provoke negative reactions from people who were disposed to misjudge them. I liked the idea of an overwhelming gestalt of their names on a giant canvas, the confrontational nature of it. However, that idea also brought out my protective impulse – I wanted to shield my students from these negative reactions and judgments. I had a deeply felt dilemma – how could I share their names with a public audience in a way that conveyed my love, respect, admiration and gratitude for them and at the same time protect them from hostile misjudgments? I wanted to embroider their names or embellish them in some way, writing them in sequins and beads. I hoped the care I took would embody the connection I felt with them, but not just that: I had a sense that this would both create and reinforce my connection to them in a sublimely positive way, as it did when I merely wrote their names in my sketchbook.

At some point I determined that I didn’t need to get it right. I saw a previous piece of mine, just a throw-away sketch, really, made of thin strips of canvas sewn together horizontally to make a kind of fabric hanging. On that ground I had painted patterns and embellished them with beads and sequins and then mirrored that with glitter glue. It is a two sided piece: I painted the front and the back side (the side with the raw seams). It gave me an idea for this piece – the story and counterstory of my students’ names, my relationship to them and outsiders’ relationship to them. I cut strips of artists’ linen and other fabric scraps and decided to paint each child’s name on one strip and then sew them all together. Since this was a sketch, I decided to pick a single class and base the piece on it. When I initially thought about the large canvas with the names of every child in the school, it occurred to me that the artwork could function as an aesthetic way of quantifying the demographics of my school: the names, that were so deeply inscribed by race(ism) and class(ism) gave a powerful picture of just how segregated the school is. For this smaller piece, this iteration, I thought choosing one class would also give the same gestalt impression just with a smaller sample that showed the same proportion of demographic makeup: out of 18 students, 15 were black, 2 were Latina/o, and one was white.

Some thoughts that came up while making this piece: after I cut each strip and started drawing each name in chalk I thought of name tags, like elementary school teachers make for the first day of school to assign seats to their students. Each strip was about three inches tall and 16 inches wide, which made the entire piece about 50 inches tall and 16 inches wide once I completed each name and sewed the strips together. This was roughly the height and size of an elementary school aged child. I chose a palette of earth tones, three different shades of metallic gold, and white. I wasn’t sure what colors I would use and what if any symbolism or metaphor the color scheme would hold. Then I remembered one of my most successful projects that I did every year with my fifth graders – clay masks – in which I used a similar palette. I have four of these masks in my studio that were made by former students and left behind after they moved away. I didn’t
think that consciously about it at first, but then my choice of unprimed linen instead of canvas, seemed to call for this palette. The color of the linen, a rich, light brown, seemed like a better choice than the cream colored canvas for my students’ names. The pale canvas was normally my default choice for painting. In contrast to the darker linen, it called my attention to the ways I take my whiteness for granted and normalize it. I also liked the linen for this piece because it is a more expensive, higher quality material than the white canvas, and I liked that metaphor for my relationship with my students. I wanted to emphasize my students’ value through this work. I wanted to use my best materials, and a labor-intensive process.

As I worked through the more tedious aspects of creating the piece, such as painting the background or the borders, my mind wandered and I reflected on other ways names had been used in art and visual culture that resonated with my use of my students’ names in this piece. Here they are in no particular order:

- The *Paratrooper* series of installation works by Korean artist Do Ho Suh, which draws on his experience in military service. The pieces in this series include the embroidered names of thousands of people who are connected in some way with his life and career (Csaszar, 2005).

- The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt (http://www.aidsquilt.org). While my piece is not a memorial, there is a lot of resonance here in terms of materials, the use of names, the embodiment and documentation of loving connections with individuals.

- Baby name tattoos (http://www.babynametattoos.com).

- The practice in some churches of making baptismal banners as a material representation of the commitment of the church community to help newly baptized children grow in faith. Each of my children has one of these.

- The different contexts and purposes in which teachers write their students’ names: desk name tags on the first day of school, attendance rosters, gradebooks, names on a seating chart, names on the chalkboard for misbehavior.

When I was a new teacher, I marveled at the complex musicality of some of my students’ names. It took me a while to get used to their rhythm and cadence, to internalize the sounds and stresses of the syllables until I gained some fluency. I taught elementary art for six years, long enough to have known a cohort of children through their entire elementary school experience from kindergarten to fifth grade. Over this time I developed from a terrified novice to a competent veteran, and found myself forging deeper connections with my students and the school community. This was not just a result of becoming a more experienced teacher; it was being there for the long haul, settling into that particular place, and growing along with my students. As a veteran teacher, my students’ names no longer sounded unusual. They took on a deeper, more beautiful timbre because they belonged to individual children whom I had grown to love.
Figure 1. *Names*, acrylic with linen and cotton sewn on canvas, 50 x 16 inches, by Sunny Spillane, 2011
CHAPTER THREE

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature is divided into three sections. The first section elaborates on the concept of deficit thinking, viewing it through the lens of critical race theory in order to articulate the multiple ways deficit thinking impacts urban students, schools, and communities, and creates/maintains educational inequities. This includes a critical examination of whiteness and its role in deficit thinking. The second section focuses on counter-storytelling as a creative, counter-hegemonic strategy and a framework for educational research. This section also makes connections between counter-storytelling and a/r/tography. The third section examines conceptions of identity in critical race theory and a/r/tography in order to situate the multiple, intersecting personal and professional identities of the participants and myself in relation to deficit thinking and its impact on our students, schools, and communities. Critical race theory, as its name indicates, is concerned with racial(ized) identity and how it informs social relationships and hierarchies (Bell, 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado, 2000a; Delgado & Stephanicic, 2001; Espinoza & A. Harris, 2000; Gotanda, 2000; Haney Lopez, 2000, 2006; A. Harris, 2000; C. Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Perea, 2000; Wildman, 2000). A/r/tography emphasizes the ways that the interconnected identities of artist, researcher, and teacher inform one another in the context of a holistic, living inquiry (Holbrook & Pourchier, 2012; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2012; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008; Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson Kind, 2005).

This study is informed by critical race theory (CRT), which encompasses a large body of interdisciplinary scholarship focused on redressing social inequities in all areas of society. I
preface the literature review with an introduction to CRT and an overview of its major tenets, and include discussions of relevant CRT literature in each of the subsequent sections of the literature review.

**Language and Terms Used to Describe Groups of People**

Throughout the literature review there may be inconsistencies in the terms used to describe groups of people by race or ethnicity. These inconsistencies are due to differences in the language choices of the authors whose work is reviewed, which reflect their individual perspectives, disciplinary affiliations, and the time periods in which they were writing. A substantial portion of the scholarly work reviewed in this chapter, particularly the literature on critical race theory, was written by scholars of color. Their insights and informed theoretical perspectives contributed greatly to the conceptual framework and philosophical underpinnings of this study. As a white scholar, I refuse to make judgments on the “correctness” of language that scholars of color have used to describe themselves and their communities. Therefore, when quoting directly from these scholars’ work, I leave their language unchanged, without comment, as a way of dignifying their choices.

**Critical Race Theory**

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced critical race theory (CRT) to the field of education because of their conviction that race and its role in educational inequality were undertheorized. The authors were frustrated with multicultural education, which they believed did not sufficiently challenge the hierarchical construction of race relations and therefore was not radical enough to effect substantial change in education policies, practices, and outcomes. This position is supported by Steinberg and Kincheloe (2009), who advocated a “critical form of multiculturalism” (p. 5) that recognizes and works to dismantle white privilege and its role in
social and educational inequity. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted that CRT offered a powerful framework for understanding and redressing the persistent educational inequities impacting low-income students of color. Contemporary scholars from various fields of inquiry who are concerned with educational equity have built on Ladson-Billings and Tate’s work, recognizing the utility and relevance of critical race theory (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2011; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Cosier & Nemeth, 2010; Desai, 2010a, 2010b; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Kohli & Solorzano, 2012; Lopez & Parker, 2003; Lynn, 2004; Milner, 2008; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Preston & Chadderton, 2012; Stovall, 2006; Young, 2011; Whitehead, 2012; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). Critical race theory is an interdisciplinary body of scholarship developed primarily by scholars of color. It has roots in critical legal studies, but has since been adapted and expanded by scholars in many fields who are concerned with human rights and social justice. CRT, at its core, is concerned with effecting social change and eradicating discrimination of every kind. As such, it is not “purely” theoretical; rather, it emphasizes activism and the practical applications of social theory.

In Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, legal scholars Delgado and Stefancic (2001) provided a straightforward synthesis of the major tenets and underlying assumptions of CRT. According to Delgado and Stefancic, CRT holds that racism is a normal and ordinary part of life in the United States, although it is often difficult to recognize and to remedy except in its most glaring and egregious manifestations. Racism serves the interests of whites by securing and maintaining white privilege. Because of this, critical race scholars assert that civil rights gains for people of color occur only when their interests converge with those of whites. Although CRT characterizes racism as a normal part of life, it holds that the concept of race is socially
constructed, with no basis in biology or genetics. Not only does society create races, it does so differentially, racializing different groups of people at different times in response to different societal needs, such as the labor market. CRT rejects racial essentialization, recognizing that all people have overlapping, and intersecting identities and allegiances beyond their race, including gender, religion, language, sexual practice, and social class, among others, some of which may result in intersecting experiences of oppression. While CRT acknowledges the intersectionality of identity, it also (somewhat paradoxically) recognizes the existence of a unique “voice of color” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). The voice-of-color notion maintains that people of color, by virtue of their histories and personal experiences of oppression, may have intimate knowledge of racism that whites do not possess. Their stories are important resources for helping all people to understand and redress the many different impacts of racism and other forms of discrimination in society.

Several major themes of critical race theory are especially relevant for this study. The notion of whiteness as property (Bell, 2000a, 2000b; C. Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and CRT’s related critiques of colorblindness and the myth of meritocracy (Desai, 2010a; Gotanda, 2000; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011) help to understand the impact of deficit thinking on urban students, schools, and communities and its role in educational inequity. Critical race scholars have devoted considerable attention to the construct of race itself (Espinoza & A. Harris, 2000; Haney Lopez, 2000, 2006; Perea, 2000) including critical examinations of whiteness and how it functions in a racialized society (Haney Lopez, 2006; Wildman, 2000). CRT’s emphasis on oppositional voices and experiential knowledge, its use of storytelling to challenge dominant narratives, and its emphasis on praxis contribute significantly to this study’s conceptual framework.
Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking, a construct that was identified and elucidated by education scholar Richard Valencia (1997a, 1997b; 2010) and others (Foley, 1997; Menchaca, 1997; Ronda & Valencia, 1994) is at the core of the most pervasive and damaging dominant narratives about urban schools, students, and communities. Deficit thinking is not merely an affront to human dignity: it shapes the dominant societal narratives about people of color and the poor, which in turn impact social policy and practice in areas such as education and the law (K. Brown & A. Brown, 2012; Menchaca, 1997; Pollack, 2012; Valencia, 1997a; 2010). Valencia (1997a) described six features of deficit thinking, which he characterized as:

1) a process of blaming the victim; 2) a form of oppression; 3) pseudoscientific in its pursuit of knowledge; 4) a dynamic model, changing according to the temporal period in which it finds itself; 5) a model of educability: that is, it contains suggestions or actual prescriptions for educational practice; 6) a model so controversial that dissent, and in some cases, heterodoxic discourse is inevitable.” (pp. xii)

Education scholars in particular have focused on the damaging impacts of deficit thinking on the educational experiences of students of color and those from poor and working class backgrounds (K. Brown & A. Brown, 2012; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Fine, 1990; Pollack, 2012; Ronda & Valencia, 1994; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 1997a; 2010; Yosso, 2006). The following section expands on the construct of deficit thinking and contextualizes it in relation to critical race theory.

Scholars have identified three strands of deficit thinking within contemporary American educational discourse: neohereditarianism or the genetic pathology model (Valencia, 1997b, 2010); the accumulated environmental deficits or at-risk model (Fine, 1990; Pearl, 1997; Ronda
& Valencia, 1994; Valencia, 2010); and the culture of poverty model (Foley, 1997; Valencia, 2010). Neohereditarianism, according to Valencia (2010), is a contemporary resurgence of what he refers to as “scientific racism,” (p. 13) in which racial inequities are attributed to the genetic failings of people of color, particularly in terms of intelligence. Neohereditarianism is exemplified by books like Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) *The Bell Curve*, which posited that racial disparities in socioeconomic status are due in large part to differences in genetically inherited intelligence. Valencia (1997b; 2010) connected Herrnstein and Murray’s work to a history of hereditarian theories that were used to justify inadequate schooling for immigrants and other people of color based on their supposedly limited educability. Another deficit notion that scholars have confronted is the idea that certain kinds of students (namely poor and/or of color) are “at risk” for school failure (Fine, 1990; Ronda & Valencia, 1994; Pearl, 1997; Valencia, 2010). Valencia (2010) refers to the at-risk model as an “endogenous” (p. 6) theory that attributes the disproportionate experiences of school failure among students of color to their own internal defects of intellect, moral character, culture, or familial socialization. Endogenous theories mask the role of systemic societal factors, such as under-resourced public schools and systemic discrimination, in placing these students at risk of school failure. Finally, scholars have critiqued the culture of poverty model (Foley, 1997; Valencia, 2010), expounded by Ruby Payne (1996) among others, and perpetuated by the wide use of her book in professional development and diversity training workshops for teachers. Payne characterized low-income students as lacking language, thinking, and social skills, and attributed their supposed lack of these skills to a pervasive culture of poverty in which school and learning were not valued. The goal of schooling, for Payne, was to indoctrinate low-income children into the values and mores of the
middle-class so they would be prepared to enter the professional world and thereby break the cycle of poverty.

These deficit theories collude in and are informed by dominant narratives that normalize whiteness, advocate colorblindness, and characterize the United States as a meritocracy. All of these notions have been critiqued by critical race scholars in education and the law, and by critical scholars in the field of art education.

**Race in Critical Race Theory**

CRT legal scholar Haney Lopez (2000), whose work focuses on legal constructions of race, defined “a ‘race’ as a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry” (p. 165). He further characterized race as “neither an essence nor an illusion, but rather an ongoing, contradictory, self-reinforcing, plastic process subject to the macro forces of social and political struggle and the micro effects of daily decisions” (p. 165). He noted that according to this conceptualization, whites also constitute a race. In his preface to the revised edition of *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, Haney Lopez (2006) expanded on his earlier definition of race in order to emphasize its material or instrumental function in society, a central concern of critical race theory:

Race and racism are centrally about seeking, or contesting, power. They have their origins in efforts to rationalize the expropriation and exploitation of land and labor, and they remain vibrant today only because racial hierarchy remains in the material interest of very many in our society. (p. xvi)

Haney Lopez (2000) described the social construction of race as a “racial fabrication” (p. 168) with four important aspects: (1) humans, not abstract societal forces, produce races; (2) races are
interrelated in a social fabric that includes gender and class; (3) the meaning-systems surrounding race change quickly rather than slowly; and (4) races are constructed relationally, not in isolation. This last facet of race is especially important because it points out that race is meaningless except in the context of social relations, especially in relations of power.

In his article titled “The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race” Perea (2000) deconstructed this binary paradigm, pointing out how it marginalizes and minimizes the particular forms of racism experienced by Latinas and Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, for example. He drew on Kuhn’s (1962) work in an extended analysis of how paradigms shape societal thinking about race. Perea (2000) described how under the black/white binary paradigm, “other people of color” (p.346) are only cursorily mentioned, and their experiences of racism and discrimination are assumed to be substantially the same as those of African Americans. Perea asserted the need to complicate theories of race and “racisms” in order to reflect multiple forms of oppression and the systemic nature of white privilege.

Leslie Espinoza, a Latina critical race scholar, and Angela Harris, an African American critical race scholar, responded to Perea’s article in a staged debate in over the notion of racial “exceptionalism,” or the idea that one race’s experience of racism is so egregious that that race should take center stage in all discussions of race (Espinoza and A. Harris, 2000). A. Harris (for purposes of debate) articulated African American slavery as a basis for African American exceptionalism, while Espinoza discussed colonization and immigration to make a case for Latina/o exceptionalism. It is important to note that Espinoza and A. Harris’s debate was staged at a symposium on Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit theory), a fact that A. Harris commented on eloquently and sensitively:
I cannot speak as a Latina or for Latinos/as. But I can try and ask myself what LatCrit theory requires of me as an African American. How is the way I am used to analyzing white supremacy changed by LatCrit theory? How is my way of experiencing the world altered by trying to imagine it through Leslie’s eyes? To what extent am I invested, as an individual and as a black person, in the black-white paradigm? (Espinoza and A. Harris, 2000, p. 444).

Her reflections suggest that recognizing each group’s different histories of oppression and experiences of racism help create a fuller and more nuanced foundation of understandings for all people interested in working for social justice.

Just as critical race theory recognizes differential racialization, CRT also acknowledges that individual people may experience multiple, intersecting forms of oppression in addition to racism related to gender, social class, sexual practice, or English language proficiency, for example (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Crenshaw, 1995; A. Harris, 2000). Crenshaw (1995) who was one of the first CRT scholars to explore the concept of intersectionality, cogently described the ways that feminist and antiracist movements left women of color out of the conversation and failed to address their particular vulnerabilities to domestic violence. hooks (1990) also described the ways that mainstream (white) feminism essentialized the concerns of all women as substantially similar to those of middle-class white women. The concept of intersectionality is important because it draws attention to the multiplicity of individual experience and helps avoid oversimplifying racism and other forms of oppression.

**Whiteness**

Critical race legal scholar Ian Haney Lopez (2006) described whiteness as a “contingent, changeable, partial, inconstant, and ultimately social” category of identity that “takes on highly
variegated nuances across the range of social axes and individual lives” (p. xxi). Whiteness is not just another racial category; it is the axis around which other races are constructed in hierarchical relations of power and both material and psychological privilege (Haney Lopez, 2006; Wildman, 2000). After reviewing a century of legal decisions related to prospective immigrants’ racial identities, and living his own life on the margins of whiteness as a multiracial Latino, Haney Lopez (2006) concluded the following:

Whiteness exists as the linchpin for the systems of racial meaning in the United States. Whiteness is the norm around which other races are constructed; its existence depends upon the mythologies and material inequalities that sustain the current racial system. The maintenance of Whiteness necessitates the conceptual existence of Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and other races as tropes of inferiority against which Whiteness can be measured and valued. (p. 132)

Other critical scholars, particularly those whose work is grounded in critical pedagogy, have discussed social class as another axis of power, with middle-class and upper class status, mores, and values, positioned as normative, (Aronowitz, 2009; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009; McLaren, 1989). Public schooling policies and practices have been critiqued for privileging both whiteness and middle-class status as a way of maintaining unjust social hierarchies (hooks, 1994; Valencia, 2010). However, it is important to note that critical race scholars have asserted that whiteness in and of itself is a category of privilege that shapes public discourse around such interrelated topics as race, poverty, crime, and education (Haney Lopez, 2006; Wildman 2000). Whiteness is positioned as natural and normal, and associated with goodness, honesty, purity, cleanliness, and morality, while non-whiteness becomes aberrant and associated with evil, violence, dirtiness, and immorality (Dyer, 1999; Fanon, 1999; Ross, 2000). These (perhaps
unconscious) metaphorical associations with race make it easier for whites to absolve ourselves of personal responsibility for the injustices enacted by whiteness, and blame the victims of poverty and inequity for their plights, setting the stage for deficit thinking.

In order to understand the impact of racial discrimination, it is important to recognize its function in securing and maintaining white privilege. This may be a challenge since many whites are neither accustomed to nor comfortable with thinking about ourselves in racial terms (Haney Lopez, 2006). Stephanie Wildman, a white CRT legal scholar, described the many ways whites are privileged, including the privilege to ignore race, and to choose which racial battles to fight (Wildman, 2000). She pointed out that the language of anti-discrimination law obscures the relationship between discrimination and privilege by trying to eradicate discrimination without dismantling privilege. She urged the creation of new language that reveals and concretely names privilege so that it is possible to meaningfully address systemic and structural discrimination.

Art educators have recognized the need to dismantle white privilege as part of socially just art education scholarship and practice (Acuff, Hirak, & Nangah, 2012; Chou, 2007; Cosier, 2012; Cosier & Nemeth, 2010; Daniel & Stuhr, 2006; Deniston, Desai, & Check, 1997; Gude & Cosier, 2012; Katz, 2005; Knight, 2006a, 2013; Rolling, 2009). Art education scholars Deniston, Desai, and Check (1997) asserted that race and racism were “undertheorized in critical and multicultural art education discourses” (p. 51) and urged that race be contextualized and understood historically in terms of its role in shaping societal structures and institutions in the United States. Rolling (2009) wrote poignantly about the multiple ways that whiteness implicitly pathologizes the experiences and identities of people of color, and how these societal messages are internalized by children of color as negative self-image. Daniel and Stuhr (2006) studied personal narratives written by a diverse group of artists of color as a way of looking through
multiple lenses to critique white privilege and normativity as a form of power. Participants in Chou’s (2007) study “contaminated” (p. 55) Disney fairytales by recreating them in ways that revealed racial and gendered stereotypes in this pervasive form of visual culture. Finally, Katz (2005), a white art educator, engaged in an extensive critical examination of her own white privilege as it was manifested in her education and upbringing in an affluent, predominantly white suburb.

In their practices working with pre-service and practicing art educators, Cosier and Nemeth (2010) and Knight (2006a, 2013) described ways they helped their students critically examine white privilege in order to foster socially just teachers. Cosier and Nemeth assigned all their students intensive field experiences in urban elementary and secondary classrooms, which students then reflected on through the theoretical lenses of feminism, queer theory, critical race theory, and critical white studies. Knight employed a “pedagogy of discomfort” (2013, p. 30) to challenge her students’ tacit (mis)understandings of racial inequity. She described several strategies she used with her students including autobiographical journaling, field-based experiences, and a “raced” race between her students in which their starting positions were altered according to their answers to a series of questions about their racial identities.

**Whiteness as Property**

CRT legal scholar C. Harris (1995) explicated how whiteness became a kind of property during the period of slavery because although not all African Americans in the United States were slaves, no whites were slaves. When slavery became encoded in law, whiteness became a definitive protection against enslavement. C. Harris (1995) stated:

Because whites could not be enslaved or held as slaves, the racial line between white and black was extremely critical; it became a line of protection and demarcation from the
potential threat of commodification, and it determined the allocation of the benefits and burdens of this form of property. White identity and whiteness were sources of privilege and protection; their absence meant being the object of property. (p. 279)

Founding CRT legal scholar Derrick Bell (2000a, 2000b) also wrote about the property value of whiteness, arguing that the United States Constitution was primarily intended to protect the property rights of white elites, rather than their inalienable human rights. To support this assertion, he pointed out the wide economic disparities engendered through exploitation of African American labor. Wealthy white property owners benefitted economically from African American enslavement, while poor whites maintained a property in whiteness that masked the economic injustice they suffered, and persuaded them to support policies that harmed them materially.

In their foundational article that introduced critical race theory to the field of education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) drew on C. Harris’s (1995) work by connecting her conception of the property functions of whiteness more specifically to the field of education. Among the functions they discussed are two notions that are particularly relevant to this study: whiteness as reputation and status property; and the absolute right to exclude (from whiteness). Both of these concepts are discussed in greater detail below.

**Whiteness as Reputation and Status Property.** Ladson-Billings and Tate asserted that “to identify a school or program as non-white in any way is to diminish its reputation or status” (1995, p. 60). As an example, they argued that bilingual education programs to help immigrant children of color acquire English as a second language have a much lower status than foreign language immersion programs for elite white students. Additionally, they described the differences between the reputations of urban and suburban schools, and how suburban schools
that see large influxes of urban students (particularly students of color) find their reputations suffering.

**Absolute Right to Exclude.** Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggested that “whiteness is constructed in this society as the absence of the ‘contaminating’ influence of blackness” (1995, p. 60). In the context of education, African American children historically were denied access to schooling and then sent to legally segregated schools. In contemporary U.S. society, the right to exclude is illustrated by white flight from urban to suburban areas (Kozol, 1991), and the de facto resegregation of public schools through magnet programs, school choice, charter schools, ability grouping or tracking, gifted programs, and Advanced Placement classes. In order to illustrate some of these forms of contemporary school resegregation, I conducted a micro-critical race analysis of the school demographics and enrollment patterns of the three public elementary schools closest to my home in Tallahassee, Florida. I conducted this analysis using school demographic data from the National Center for Education Statistics (www.nces.ed.gov) and my own personal experiences and observations as a parent of school-aged children in this community.

My family and I live in a modest home in a racially and socioeconomically integrated neighborhood near the city center. Our home zone school (Dolphin Elementary) has a magnet program for math and science, and accepts students from all over the school district, as well as students who live within the school’s home zone. The student population is diverse, reflecting the racial demographics of the city as a whole. Specifically, 40% of the students at Dolphin are African American, 47% are white, 7% are Latina/o, and 5% are Asian. Many students of all races transfer to Dolphin from schools in surrounding neighborhoods that are perceived to be failing. One such school is Neighborhood Elementary, which is located less than two miles away.

---

3 All names of schools are pseudonyms.
away from Dolphin. Although the community surrounding Neighborhood is similar in racial and socioeconomic makeup to that of Dolphin (my home is located halfway between both schools), Neighborhood has seen its population of white students diminish steadily over recent years. It is not within the scope of this micro-analysis to definitively attribute the cause of this white flight from Neighborhood Elementary. However, I have had many informal conversations with white parents in my community who simply refused to send their children to Neighborhood because of the school’s racial demographics (81% of students are African American, 9% are white, 5% are Latina/o, and 2% are Asian). Many of these children transferred to Dolphin.

Dolphin’s school zone boundary line is bordered on the east by the boundary of Big Elementary, a large school of 897 students (compared to Dolphin’s 550). Big Elementary is located in a middle-class, suburban area in the northeast section of the city. Big Elementary’s size has been brought up as an issue at school board meetings, where concerns were raised that such a large school created an impersonal atmosphere for the students there. When discussions of redistricting were introduced, parents at Big stridently voiced their objections to being forced to send their children to Dolphin. Many of them professed a belief that Dolphin was not as “good” of a school as Big. It might be illuminating to describe the racial demographics of Big Elementary at this point. At Big, 66% of its students are white, 18% are African American, 9% are Asian, and 5% are Latina/o. None of the Big Elementary parents specifically mentioned Dolphin’s student demographics as the cause of their reluctance to rezone there. However, the demographics of all three of these schools and their relationship to one another tell a story that lends support to Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) and C. Harris’s (1995) characterization of whiteness as a form of reputation and status property, with one of its functions being the absolute right to exclude.
Critique of Colorblindness

Colorblindness is the notion that as a result of the Civil Rights Movement the United States is a colorblind society in which people of all races are treated equally and race no longer matters (Desai, 2010a; Gotanda, 2000; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). This idea is particularly salient in the era of Barack Obama’s presidency. In the first paragraphs of their introduction to Critical Race Theory Matters: Education and Ideology, Zamudio et al. (2011) situated their discussion of racial inequality in education against the backdrop of Barack Obama’s historic election to the presidency of the United States in 2008. They described the popular sentiment that Obama’s election signaled an end to racism and affirmed that the United States was indeed a meritocracy. While they agreed that Obama’s election shows how far we have come as a nation toward achieving social justice, they asserted that “these gains should be understood in the context of the massive problem of racial inequality and measured along a path that shows how far we still need to go” (Zamudio et al., 2001, p. 2). They pointed to the persistence of educational inequity, the subject of their book, as a major indicator of continuing racial disparity. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argued that while colorblindness or racial neutrality as it is enacted in laws and social policies allow us to redress egregious acts of intentional racism, it does not recognize the extent to which racism is subtly woven through the fabric of social life. Art education scholar Dipti Desai (2010a) bluntly summarized the contemporary dominant narratives about race in the U.S.:

Despite differences in the terms used to describe our current racial condition, broadly speaking, the beliefs and views that frame contemporary discourses on race include the notions that (1) people of color should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, implying that they are unmotivated; (2) discrimination is not the cause of racial inequality; (3)
government gives too much attention to race and gives too many opportunities to people of color and not to Whites; (4) people of color are to blame for the persistent gaps in socio-economic conditions and in education; (5) race is no longer an issue; (6) Whites face reverse racism; and (7) people of color tend to use the race card to their advantage.

(p. 23)

From the colorblind perspective that Desai (2010a) described, the remarkable achievements of individuals like Barack Obama lend support to deficit-based characterizations of people of color who have not been able to individually overcome poverty and/or discrimination. Indeed, the only explanation for racial inequality available within the ideology of colorblindness is in the deficient character, ability, or motivation of people of color.

Not only does colorblindness give credence to deficit thinking, it also normalizes whiteness in the sense that whiteness is the presumed, default cultural standard against which all people are measured (Gotanda, 2000; Zamudio et al., 2011). Founding CRT legal scholar Neil Gotanda (2000) asserted that refusing to acknowledge race in this way allows racism to continue. Colorblindness, he argued, entails first recognizing race, then ignoring its complex and conflicting moral, political, personal, and social significance. Regardless of the reasons for “noticing but not considering race” (p. 35) doing so leaves racism and oppression unexamined, allowing them to continue.

Myth of Meritocracy

Closely related to CRT’s critiques of colorblindness is its critique of the meritocracy, a particular focus for critical race scholars in education. Meritocracy is the idea that in the United States, education is the great equalizer that levels the playing field so that anyone who works hard enough can achieve every level of success in life. This idea has considerable allure,
especially in the era of Barack Obama’s presidency. Indeed, Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman (2011) described the meritocracy as one of the most powerful master narratives in United States society. However, critical education scholars declare meritocracy to be a “myth” because of the glaring inequities in the allocation of educational resources between schools in affluent, white (suburban) areas and schools in poorer (urban) neighborhoods that serve predominantly students of color. Jonathan Kozol (1991) most notably exposed these “savage inequalities” in his searing expose of the insufferable conditions of inner city schools in St. Louis, Chicago, and New York, compared to the well-heeled suburban schools in neighboring districts. In the contemporary educational rhetoric of No Child Left Behind (2001) urban schools like those that Kozol profiled are characterized as “failing schools.” However, given the disparities in the allocation of educational resources (funding, facilities, teachers, educational materials) between urban and suburban public schools, Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008) asserted that urban schools are not failing, but are “doing exactly what they are designed to do” (p. 1) – preserve the status quo in an inequitable, racialized social hierarchy.

**Deficit Thinking through the Lens of Critical Race Theory**

According to Yosso, “looking through a CRT lens means critiquing deficit theorizing and data that may be limited by their omission of the voices of People of Color” (2006, p. 173). Seen through the framework of critical race theory, it is clear that deficit thinking uncritically (and perhaps even strategically) contributes to dominant narratives that normalize and privilege whiteness and maintain racial inequities. Looking again at deficit thinking, it can be argued that neohereditarian theories ignore the discriminatory history of intelligence testing in communities of color, and fail to question the validity of unilaterally developed intelligence measures, or indeed the practice of intelligence testing in and of itself (Valencia, 1997b, 2010). Labeling
certain demographic blocks of students as being at-risk for school failure blames the victims of systemic structural inequality for their inability to rise above racism and discrimination (Fine, 1990; Pearl, 1997; Ronda & Valencia, 1994; Valencia, 2010). It targets school reform efforts at individual students and their supposed innate deficiencies rather than the inequitable system as a whole. The culture of poverty model construes students’ families, friends, and neighborhoods in denigrating terms as toxic environments that children should want to escape from (Foley, 1997; Valencia, 2010). This model fails to recognize the positive roles students’ communities have in their lives or the considerable skills and abilities these children actually bring to school with them. Together, these deficit theories justify racialized social hierarchies and contribute to powerful societal narratives that support inequitable educational policies and practices that predetermine winners and losers.

Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005) described deficit thinking as a way of pathologizing students’ lived experiences that creates a powerful discourse that not only impacts educational policy and practice on a large scale, but impairs relationships between individual teachers and their students. They examined the impacts of deficit thinking on education in colonized indigenous communities in the United States, New Zealand, and Israel. They identified a litany of pathologizing practices that were particular to the communities where they conducted research, and emphasized the role of discourse as a lens or frame for constructing meaning. For educators, the discourses we participate in shape the ways we make sense of our students’ academic performance and perceive their engagement with school and potential for achievement. They also impact how we define our roles as educators and position ourselves in relation to our students and our school communities.
Deficit Thinking as a “Threshold Concept” in Social Justice Art Education

Despite a growing body of scholarship devoted to socially just art education practice in urban schools and communities (Charland, 2010; Congdon, 2010; Cosier & Nemeth, 2010; Creel, 2010; Davidson, 2010; Desai, 2010a, 2010b; Fehr, 2006; Hutzel, 2007; Hutzel, Bastos, & Cosier, 2012; Hutzel & Resler, 2010; Lee, 2013; Quinn, 2005; Quinn & Kahne, 2001; Sanders-Bustle, 2010; Selig, 2009; Sickler-Voigt, 2006; Simpson, 1995; Venable, 2005), the construct of deficit thinking has not been clearly articulated in the art education literature. This gap in the literature is reflected in the inconsistency with which art education scholars have adopted asset-based (as opposed to needs-based or deficit-based) approaches and discourses in their work with urban students, schools, and communities. While her work did not specifically name deficit thinking as a barrier to socially just practice, Hutzel’s (2007; Hutzel, Bastos, & Cosier, 2012; Hutzel & Resler, 2010) work with urban communities is notable for its explicitly stated asset-based orientation. Other scholars’ work with urban communities and pre-service art teachers exhibited, though did not explicitly articulate, an asset-based approach (Congdon, 2010; Cosier, 2012; Cosier & Nemeth, 2010; Fehr, 2006; Davidson, 2010; Hochtritt, Houdek, & Quinn, 2010; Selig, 2009; Whitehead, 2012). In all these instances, the lived experiences and perspectives of urban students and community members were viewed as important resources for expanding the knowledge and transforming the practices of institutional art educators, and were not pathologized or demeaned. In contrast to this important asset-based art education scholarship, other scholarly work (perhaps unknowingly) participated in deficit-based discourses by characterizing urban students as having “at-risk tendencies” (Creel, 2010; Sickler-Voigt, 2006) and championing an art education aimed at remediating their many social, emotional, cognitive, and moral “needs” (Simpson, 1995; Venable, 2005). While these art educators’ concern for
urban students was evident, the deficit-based frameworks they employed – particularly the “at-risk” label – perpetuated notions that the problems in urban schools stem from the character and behavior (the “tendencies”) of urban students rather than from systemic social inequities. More crucially, participation in deficit discourses prevents art educators from critically examining our complicity in unjust social structures, making it less likely that we can meaningfully transform them.

I propose that this study makes an important contribution to the field of art education by articulating deficit thinking as a barrier to socially just art education practice and scholarship. Seen through the lens of critical race theory, especially its critical examination of whiteness and its function in a racialized society, deficit thinking is revealed to be a discourse whose main function lies in maintaining white privilege. Drawing on veteran teachers’ knowledge and experiences, this study identifies and dismantles deficit notions about urban students, schools, and communities that contribute to divisive fears and stereotypes and scare pre-service art teachers away from working in schools where art education is badly needed.

I assert that the construct of deficit thinking should be considered a “threshold concept” (Meyer & Land, 2006) in social justice art education, particularly in urban schools and communities. Cousin (2006) described threshold concepts as: transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded, and “likely to involve forms of ‘troublesome knowledge’” (p. 4) that are counter-intuitive or defy students’ common sense understandings. Based on these defining characteristics, deficit thinking was certainly a threshold concept for me in the process of conceptualizing this study and articulating my particular approach to social justice art education in urban schools and communities. In my early scholarly work as a doctoral student I wrote several papers that drew on my formative experiences of practice shock as a new teacher in an
urban school. That work attempted to identify “best practices for working with urban students” (Spillane, 2010) and made the implicit assumption that the challenges I experienced as a new teacher were due to the characteristics of my students and the school culture, rather than my own limited competency. Looking back at that work with an understanding of deficit thinking, it is clear that I was participating in deficit discourses that pathologized my students and severely limited the transformative potential of my work. According to Solorzano and Yosso (2001), “critical race scholars in . . . education acknowledge that schools operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower” (2001, p. 3). It is my hope that this study’s explicit articulation of deficit thinking as an impediment to social justice will contribute to the emancipatory and empowering potential of socially concerned art education in all areas of scholarship and practice.

**Counter-storytelling**

The first section of this review of literature articulated deficit thinking as a core element of dominant societal narratives about urban students, schools, and communities. This section focuses on counter-storytelling as a creative, counter-hegemonic strategy aimed at challenging and ultimately transforming these damaging dominant narratives. Critical race counter-stories often have an aesthetic as well as a rhetorical character – they frequently read like fiction or poetry (see for example Bell, 2000a; Delgado, 2000b; Rousseau & Dixson, 2006). This aesthetic component is an important aspect of counter-narratives - they invite audiences to suspend their disbelief and consider their propositions by engaging them in well-told stories (Delgado, 2000a; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In addition to these predominantly verbal approaches, scholars in the arts and education have used visual imagery to tell “counter-stories” about urban students, their families, and communities. Though they do not specifically espouse a CRT counter-

This section describes and gives examples of critical race counter-storytelling and its use in educational research and gives examples of visual “counter-stories” by scholars in education and the arts.

**Counter-storytelling in Critical Race Theory**

Making a case for the validity of storytelling in the law and other fields of scholarship, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) asserted that “attacking embedded preconceptions that marginalize others or conceal their humanity is a legitimate function of all fiction” (p. 42). Delgado originally conceived of counter-stories as stories by “members of what could be loosely described as outgroups, groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective – whose consciousness – has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized” (Delgado, 2000a, p. 60). He contrasted these counter-stories with the narratives circulated and perpetuated by the dominant group in order to make its dominance seem natural and normal. Counter-stories serve two functions: they create cohesion and strength for outgroups and function as a kind of “counter-reality” that preserves their dignity in the face of dehumanizing dominant narratives; and they open “a window onto ignored or alternative realities” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 39) for members of dominant groups. This idea is based on the CRT premise that whites cannot know what it is like to not be white, and therefore
cannot easily see the ways dominant narratives normalize and naturalize white privilege and perpetuate discrimination against people of color. In this sense, well-told stories can build bridges of understanding by naming different experiences of discrimination so they can be deconstructed and dismantled, highlighting silenced perspectives, and “reminding [audiences] of our common humanity” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p.43).

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) were among the first critical race scholars in education to articulate counter-storytelling as a framework for education research. They offered the following definition of counter-storytelling:

“...We define the counter-story as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform.” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32)

Synthesizing Solorzano and Yosso’s (2002) work, Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman (2011) explained that counter-stories, or counter-narratives “harmonize with CRT tenets, most importantly: (1) they challenge the dominant ideology; (2) they have a commitment to social justice; and (3) they highlight the centrality of experiential knowledge” (p. 125).

Counter-stories in education research can take many forms. Three of the forms described by Solorzano and Yosso (2002) were personal narratives (as in the chapters by each of the four authors in “Part III: Narratives of the Oppressed: Countering Master Narratives” in Zamudio et al., 2011), other people’s narratives (as in Milner, 2008), and fictionalized “composite” stories drawn from multiple sources of “real” data (as in Lopez, 2003; Rousseau & Dixson, 2006). More broadly speaking, CRT educational research in and of itself could be characterized as a
form of counter-storytelling because of the ways it challenges deficit-based dominant narratives (as in Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2011; Clark-Ibanez, 2007; Esquivel, 2003; Morris, 2006; Rousseau, 2006; Yosso, 2006). Critical race studies in education have used counter-storytelling to confront many forms of deficit thinking, for instance: debunking notions that parents of color are uninvolved or unsupportive of their children’s education (Chapman, 2006; Donner, 2006; Lopez, 2003); revealing cultural wealth in urban communities that have been repeatedly characterized as culturally “deprived” (Yosso, 2006); troubling dominant notions of equal educational opportunity by examining the negative impacts of historic desegregation (Morris, 2006) and contemporary resegregation (Rousseau, 2006) on African American teachers and students in public schools; and illuminating the wealth of exemplary teaching practices employed by effective teachers in urban schools (Chapman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Milner, 2008).

Critical race theory is avowedly interdisciplinary, challenging traditional bases of knowledge and drawing on insights and strategies from the humanities, literature, social science, education, and the law to articulate and redress racial inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Artistic or aesthetic counter-storytelling reflects this interdisciplinarity. Although aesthetic or artistic elements are not ubiquitous in all critical race educational research, there is a growing body of CRT literature that attempts to articulate an aesthetic of resistance in counter-storytelling (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2011; Buendia, 2003; Calmore, 1995; Dixson, 2006). Critical race scholars have written about the rich history of storytelling in African American, Latina/o, and Native American communities in connection with CRT counter-storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Zamudio et al., 2011). They have also used African American jazz as a metaphor and an inspiration for an authentic, oppositional aesthetic or voice (Calmore, 1995) and for critical race research methodology (Dixson, 2006). CRT educational scholars such as Chapman (2005) have
also embraced “portraiture” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) as an aesthetically framed research methodology. The interdisciplinary and (in many instances) aesthetic orientation of CRT counter-stories, especially those used in/as scholarly research, resonates with visual research frameworks that use images and artmaking to challenge preconceptions and tell untold stories.

Visual “Counter-stories”

Socially concerned scholars in diverse fields including sociology, visual anthropology, education, and the arts have used visual methods to craft compelling “counter-stories” about the lives of urban students and communities (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2011; Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; David, 2007; Davidson, 2010; Hutzel & Resler, 2010). Although these scholars have not explicitly characterized their work as counter-stories (hence my placement of the term in quotes) or espoused a CRT framework for describing or positioning what they do, each of their studies takes an asset-based stance and critiques negative and deficit-based characterizations of urban students and communities. Clark-Ibáñez (2007), Davidson (2010), and Hutzel and Resler (2010) all worked with children in urban communities, giving them disposable cameras to document important people, places, and activities in their lives. Hutzel and Ressler (2010) facilitated a service-learning project in which art education graduate students at the Ohio State University worked with children and their parents in the Weinland Park neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio to create a collaborative artwork that represented the community. This project began with an asset-based “mapping” activity in which the neighborhood children, the “experts” on their community, acted as tour-guides for the university participants as they walked around the neighborhood. The children were given cameras and asked to photograph neighborhood assets they encountered as they walked. The authors’ privileging of children’s knowledge and their asset-based approach
stand in direct opposition to characterizations of the Weinland Park neighborhood as dangerous and blighted, and its children as poorly socialized and deprived.

In another photography-based project with urban youth called “Finding Oral Culture and Urban Stories” Davidson (2010) gave cameras to middle-school students in Milwaukee and asked them to photograph and interview important people in their lives that they considered role models. The young people’s photographs were then publicly exhibited along with their essays based the interviews they conducted. The exhibition received many poignant comments from visitors, such as: “The photos show a vibrant energy, caring compassionate leaders and a new side of America. The youth seem strong and grounded. – T.W.O.” and “It’s so nice to see young African Americans doing something constructive! It’s great that you give African Americans as a whole a positive name, instead of the media portraying us as animals. – Tara” (Davidson, 2010, p. 112 [italics in original]). As evidenced by the public response to the exhibition, the students’ work forcefully countered deficit-based stereotypes of urban students and their family members, many of whom the children looked up to as inspiring role models.

In Clark-Ibáñez’s (2007) study of the life experiences of inner-city youth in Los Angeles, she used the visual research method of autodriven photo elicitation, in which photographs taken by children were used as a basis for conducting interviews with them. Clark-Ibáñez gave disposable cameras to over fifty children in her study and asked them to photograph the important aspects of their lives outside of school. Based on her experience conducting ethnographic fieldwork in inner-city schools, she “realized that many children had richly complex home lives, and . . . wanted to understand how this impacted their school lives” (p. 169). In this case, the photographs were not publicly exhibited (although many were included in the published study). Rather, they were used to give agency to the children as they documented
the most salient and meaningful aspects of their lived experiences from their perspective. In a poignant example, Clark-Ibáñez described interviewing ten-year-old Nanci on a Saturday morning while she took a break from working with her father in a garment factory. Looking through Nanci’s photos, she discovered that Nanci regularly performed as a mariachi singer with her parents. In a later interview with Nanci’s teacher, Clark-Ibáñez discovered that the woman was aware of this incredibly rich and unique life experience, but dismissed it, suggesting that Nanci’s parents used her to earn money instead of encouraging her to focus on her schoolwork. The stock story or dominant narrative espoused by Nanci’s teacher (that inner city parents do not support their children’s education) and many others were directly confronted in Clark-Ibáñez’s study that documented the richness of urban children’s home lives and communities in their own (photo)voices.

David (2007) tells a different kind of “counter-story” about so-called urban blight in New Orleans. Using his own camera, he documented a visual “war” between local graffiti artists/activists and Fred Radtke, the president and founder of Operation Clean Sweep, Inc. a non-profit anti-graffiti group. Known for his organization’s quick responses to reports of graffiti, Radtke was nicknamed the “Gray Ghost” for his unilateral use of gray paint to cover graffiti regardless of what surface it appeared on. In reaction to the ubiquitous gray patches of paint that appeared all over the city, local graffiti and street artists began using these blank “canvases” for their work, which became tacit (and sometimes explicit) comments on the urban blight created by Gray Ghost. Over the course of this study, David (2007) came to characterize the New Orleans graffiti as “visual resistance” (p. 232) that raised important questions about what constituted blight, who had the authority to make and enforce those judgments, who the
community belonged to, and whose visual intervention (the graffiti artists’ or the Gray Ghost’s) exhibited greater care for and connection with the city.

I hesitate to dilute or colonize CRT by using the term “counter-story” to describe scholarly work that does not confront dominant narratives that create/maintain social inequity along lines of race, class, and gender (hence my use of quotes, again). However, as an artist and art educator I have encountered a litany of dismissive mischaracterizations of art, artists, and art education as frivolous, esoteric, non-rigorous or non-serious, and merely “playing around with paint.” This marginalization of art and art education was also recognized by Rolling (2011) in his article that was (interestingly) titled “Circumventing the Imposed Ceiling: Art Education as Resistance Narrative.” Springgay (2004), one of the early co-developers of a/r/tography as a framework for educational research, tells yet another kind of “counter-story” about the nature and purpose of art itself. In her a/r/tographic study, the author used artmaking and writing as a way of interweaving the different strands of her practice as a socially engaged artist, teacher, and researcher. Her narratives of teaching revealed the nuances of sophisticated critical engagement with artistic problem solving and social issues in contemporary art. Her study revealed some of the many ways that art is inherently and fundamentally about the multiple, overlapping, contradicting, and compelling experiences of being human.

Art educators have long recognized this capacity of art to tell our human stories and connect us to one another, as well as to critique social policies and practices that would degrade and debase our humanity (Anderson, et al, 2010; Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Campana, 2011; Darts, 2004; Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Dewhurst, 2010; Freedman, 2003; Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002; Gude, 2007, 2008, 2009; Hutzel, Bastos, & Cosier, 2012; Nordlund, Speirs, & Stewart, 2010; Tavin & Ballengee Morris, 2013; Staikidis, 2007; Stewart & Walker, 2005). In the
opening pages of their book *Art for Life*, Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) described the functions of art in human society as a way of anchoring their approach to art education for social reconstruction:

One of [art’s] primary functions has been to help tell our human stories, to help us know who we are and what we believe. This concept assumes that the aesthetic form, which is at the heart of most artworks, is used to effect some kind of communication. It also assumes that artists use skills, composition, and technique to create artworks that extend beyond themselves to tell us something about human experience. Thus the chief purpose of art education for life is to help students understand something about themselves and others through art and thereby to contribute to personal growth, social progress, and a sense of global community. (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p. 3)

This study tells the human stories of veteran urban arts educators and their experiences and relationships with their students, schools, and communities. These human stories, told through interwoven processes of artmaking and writing, and elaborated through critical conversations, are complex, multidimensional, and subtly nuanced, reflecting the messiness of human experience. They stand in contrast to the one-dimensional stock stories, stereotypes, and dominant narratives that would demean and delimit urban students, and alienate teachers from them.

**Conceptions of Identity in A/r/tography and Critical Race Theory**

This section focuses on the ways teachers experience their multiple and intersecting identities in the context of their practices, and reveal them in their creative counter-narratives. The discussion of identity draws on literature in critical race theory (Bell, 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado, 2000a; Delgado & Stephancic, 2001; Espinoza & A. Harris, 2000;
Gotanda, 2000; Haney Lopez, 2000, 2006; A. Harris, 2000; C. Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Perea, 2000; Wildman, 2000) and a/r/tography (Holbrook & Pourchier, 2012; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2012; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008; Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson Kind, 2005) both of which inform the philosophical underpinnings and conceptual framework of this study. Critical race theorists call on educators to acknowledge the salience of race in persistent educational inequity and in deficit discourses about urban students, schools, and communities. From a CRT perspective, this entails more than acknowledging racism as an abstract social force that impacts urban students; CRT insists that educators foreground our own racial identities in our scholarship and practice because of the powerful ways that race shapes our understandings and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2000). A/r/tography envisions the identities of artist/researcher/teacher as fluid, multilayered, and interrelated (Irwin, 2004) and advocates a conscious focus on the ways these multiple roles form and inform one another within the context of a living practice.

**Identities in A/r/tography**

A/r/tography in its very name (the “a/r/t” of artist/researcher/teacher) is inherently about these and other identities as they inform, contradict, and move in and through one another. A/r/tographers self-consciously use these multiple and shifting positions and identities as lenses through which they reflect on and engage in their practices from many vantage points. Suominen Guyas (2008) opened her a/r/tographic essay, which explores and articulates her experiences of displacement through the metaphor of water, with this statement: “How we live, interact with others and our various environments, engage in art, teach, and research is intertwined and inseparable from our identity” (p. 25). Winters, Belliveau, and Sherritt-Fleming
(2009) described how a/r/tographic conceptions of identities functioned in the context of their research into the practices of an educational theatre company.

The a/r/tographer, for example, may open up the space between teaching and researching. And using art, drama, and/or movement as a possible pathway she may reflect on her own teaching practice, or explore, interrogate, or expand a particular language arts idea or pedagogical phenomenon (e.g., in different shows they draw upon patterns of language, sentence fluency, or conventions of writing). However, the a/r/tographer doesn’t remain in this one space. She may then move to explore other spaces such as those that lie between art-making and research, art-making and teaching, writing and teaching, and so on. With each new exploration of in-between spaces, she is given new insights and encouraged to re-organize her identity again and again. (Winters, Belliveau, and Sherritt-Fleming, 2009, p. 7).

A/r/tography, with its emphasis on the interconnectedness of multiple identities is well-suited to articulating experiences that are so particular as to be largely untheorized and therefore unknown. These “untold stories” might not specifically be characterized as counter-stories, because in many senses there are no stories about these particular, situated, intersecting, performed, conflicting identities (see O’Donoghue, 2008; Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong, & Bickel, 2006; Pryer, 2004; Spillane, 2012; Suominen, 2003, 2005; 2007; Wilson, 2004). O’Donoghue (2008) used a/r/tography to articulate and reveal the experiences of men who teach at the elementary level, as their experiences were informed and constrained by societal expectations/characterizations of men, elementary school teachers, and men who teach. He found that the social expectations of men frequently conflicted with social expectations of elementary school teachers, a position largely associated with caring and nurturing. Wilson
(2004) poignantly articulated her experiences mothering a severely disabled child through seasons of loss, living with the constant presence of death, the “unique and exquisite joys,” (p. 49) and constant pain that her individual experiences entailed.

There is a significant body of a/r/tographic research devoted to diasporic, trans-cultural, trans-national, hybrid experiences and identities. (Irwin et al., 2006; Pryer, 2004; Suominen, 2003, 2005, 2007). Irwin et al. (2006) explored the experiences of Chinese-Canadians in the city of Richmond. Their inquiry was guided by two overarching questions:

What artistic products might be created through a community-engaged process examining the Chinese-Canadian experience in the City of Richmond, a geographically and culturally hybrid place? What is brought forward from a prior place in immigrant or diasporic culture . . . and how is that culture and memory transformed and maintained through identity, place and community?

Suominen (2003) explored her experiences negotiating the transition from Finnish to American culture, gendered and generational identity, and language, concurrently with her transition from graduate student to academic professional. Pryer (2004) described the hyphensslashes between a/r/tography’s artist/researcher/teacher identities as hybrid or liminal “third spaces” (Bhabha, 1990). She characterized these spaces as nomadic, in the sense that the practices and orientations associated with these interwoven identities are dynamic and constantly moving.

Several studies employed a range of collaborative/participatory approaches to a/r/tographic research (Darts, 2004; Irwin et al., 2006; O’Donoghue, 2008; Powell, 2008; Springgay, 2008). In O’Donoghue’s (2008) study of men who teach in elementary school he alone made art as part of a process of reflecting on and synthesizing knowledge that was revealed through collaborative dialogue. Irwin et al. (2006) opened their study so that participating
families could collaborate in the artmaking process to the extent that they felt comfortable. In studies conducted by Darts (2004), Powell (2008), and Springgay (2008), the authors worked with high school and college level student/participants who engaged in their own individual a/r/tographic inquiries. In these studies, the students worked independently to varying degrees in terms of the form and focus of their inquiries. However, there were different relational positions of power and authority between the teacher/researchers and student/participants.

Particularly relevant to my study is Leitch’s (2006) work with a group of teachers that used highly structured artmaking activities (developed by the author) to reveal aspects of teachers’ identities that verbal/written narrative methods may have left hidden. She stated: “through the creation of images in relation to self, new meanings, previously unaware, unvoiced, unexpressed, half-understood came to be significant and capable of being incorporated into the participants’ social and/or emotional understanding of themselves” (p. 566). She contrasted this revelatory capacity of visual and creative narratives with more traditional narrative research, which she felt “continues to privilege consciously narrated experience and pays only lip-service to unconscious, emotional dimensions, which may be latent but powerful in directing action and meaning in life story” (p. 566). Leitch concluded with a call for the educational research community to expand its conception of narrative research to encompass visual and artistic methods that “go beyond the limits of language to capture the meaning of lived experience in more holistic ways” (p. 567).

Critical Race Theory and A/r/tography: Co-Informing Conceptions of Identity

Although critical race theory foregrounds raced identity, it does not view race as an essence of identity. In fact, CRT’s purposeful focus on race is intended to dismantle race as a category of discrimination and privilege to make it less salient and thereby effect justice for all
(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This may seem counter-intuitive, but CRT’s emphasis on race is intended to make race less meaningful and less materially determinative in society in order to free all people to define ourselves in more expansive and personally authentic, dignifying, and empowering ways. A/r/tography’s focus on multiple, intersecting, fluid, dynamic identities dignifies the expansiveness of human experience by recognizing the impossibility of pinning down or “mastering” anyone’s cultural, gendered, classed, sexual, religious, family or any other identity. This study incorporates both critical race theory’s focus on the multiple and intersecting ways that race impacts individuals’ perceptions and experiences, and a/r/tography’s emphasis on shifting and relational personal and professional identities as they reveal and articulate the complexities of participants’ practices. The complex, expansive, and previously untold stories that emerge from this inquiry have potential to counter the narrow stock stories, and prevailing, deficit-based characterizations of urban students, schools, communities.
CHAPTER FOUR

A/R/TOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: MASKS/PORTRAITS

Figure 2. Masks by fifth grade art students, clay and acrylic paint, approximately 6 x 8 inches each, collection of Sunny Spillane, 2005
I have thought a lot about these masks throughout this study. They occupy a prominent place in my history as an art educator. They are one of my first successes as an elementary art teacher, in the sense that I figured out the logistics of setting up, using, and cleaning up clay and acrylic paint in a series of 30-minute class periods, and the students made some beautiful work. This was a lesson I borrowed from a veteran art teacher who was mentoring me in my early years as a teacher. I did not then have the critical perspective to interrogate the use of stereotypical African-inspired motifs and imagery in this one-dimensional and perhaps even racist approach to multiculturalism. What I saw (and what I still see) is my students’ sensitive handling of paint, their inventive approaches to embellishing and building out from the clay surface, and their sophisticated design choices. Whatever my failings in conceptualizing the lesson, my students made these masks their own with an abundance of creativity, personality, and skill.

Early in this study I contemplated using these masks to create conceptual portraits of my students. I thought about these four masks in relation to four male students of mine who were known as troublemakers in their grade level. None of these students actually made these particular masks, but the fact that there were four masks made me think about these four young men. Like the masks, these particular children figured prominently in my history as a teacher. All of these boys were in the same grade, and I taught their cohort for five out of my six years at the school. I was a second year art teacher when they were in second grade with an equally inexperienced classroom teacher. Neither of us had the classroom management skills to deal effectively with their disruptive behavior or their occasional defiance at that early stage in our careers. However, as the years passed I gained more competence, the boys gained more maturity, and the school community became more and more invested in their success as we all grew together.

Misbehavior by young black men is often interpreted through the lens of deficit thinking (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Menchaca, 1997; Pollack, 2012; Valencia, 1997a, 2010) and frequently to their detriment. My own children (who are white) frequently misbehave. My ten-year old daughter makes bad grades, has struggled with reading fluency and multiplication facts, and sometimes tells lies. My four-year-old son has been suspended from preschool. He throws tantrums, defies his teachers, and behaves willfully. Yet in spite of their many faults and frequent misbehavior, I think of my own children as creative, smart, loving, resourceful, funny, active, and charismatic. Of course, I am biased. But when black boys misbehave, this normal childhood behavior often comes to define and dehumanize them in a way that it does not define or dehumanize my children, because of the ways deficit thinking frames societal perceptions of black boys (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Menchaca, 1997; Pollack, 2012; Valencia, 1997a, 2010).

I wanted to use these masks, which I saw as striking visual examples of my students’ intelligence, creativity, and skill, as part of a visual counter-narrative to challenge deficit-narratives about them, perhaps by pairing each mask with a portrait of a child. But participant Erica Wei challenged me to think about how I would avoid viewers’ dichotomized thinking or their perceptions of these pairings as a kind of Jekyll and Hyde. After hearing her comments, it seemed to me that the masks themselves already told a story: despite the many ways in which I limited their choices and their opportunities for expression, my students spoke back eloquently and inventively, showing me how much more they were capable of.
CHAPTER FIVE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Purpose and Overview of Study

The purpose of this study is to counter some of the pervasive, deficit-based fears and stereotypes about urban students, schools, and communities that contribute to “white flight” and maintain separate and unequal educational experiences for students of color. To this end, this study draws on the stories, experiences, and critical perspectives of successful, veteran arts educators in urban public schools. Participants’ stories were explored, articulated, and communicated by them in researcher-facilitated discussions during five focus group meetings, and participants’ own independent creative inquiries through artmaking and reflective writing. All participants in the study (including myself) are practicing teachers with an interest in social justice and educational equity, telling our stories with/in/through art. Because of this, I characterize the group formed by the participants and myself as a creative, countercultural community of practice (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Springgay & Irwin, 2008). There is a purportedly neutral story about urban schools, which is nevertheless informed by deficit-based dominant narratives – the story told by test scores. When schools are reduced to a single number or letter grade (frequently low ones in urban schools) these dominant narratives fill in details about the identities, abilities, and characters of the students, the quality of teachers, and the life of the school community. The creative counter-narratives of veteran teachers with strong relationships and deep commitments to urban school communities have potential to change some of these damaging dominant narratives, and perhaps not only inspire pre-service art teachers to teach in urban contexts, but prepare them to do so successfully.
Research Questions

There are five interrelated research questions that guided this study:

1) In what ways do the experiences and critical perspectives of veteran arts educators in urban schools “counter” deficit-based characterizations of their students, schools, and communities?

2) How do participating arts educators communicate their experiences of multiple and intersecting identities in the context of their practices, and reveal them in their creative counter-narratives?

3) In what ways does their engagement in this process of inquiry alter participants’ perceptions and understandings of their students, schools, communities, and selves?

4) What roles do the participating educators and I take on in relation to one another in the context of this participatory process of inquiry, and how do we negotiate these relationships?

5) How does artistic practice inform this study as a method of inquiry, and suggest possibilities for communicating participants’ counter-stories?

Questions (1) and (2) are adapted from Milner’s (2008) study of successful teachers in an urban middle school, titled “Disrupting Deficit Notions of Difference: Counter-narratives of Teachers and Community in Urban Education.” Question (1) addresses this study’s focus on countering deficit thinking, while question (2) highlights the perspectives, experiences, and identities of the diverse group of educators who have agreed to collaborate with me in this study. Question (3) addresses the participating educators’ learning and potential professional growth through their participation in this study, in essence, the potential for transformation through this kind of collaboration. Question (4) examines the extent to which this study is truly participatory.
Finally, question (5) is a meta-question that examines the ways different aspects of artistic practice, such as creating, viewing, discussing, and reflecting on art, functioned in this inquiry.

**Research Foundations**

Drawing on and synthesizing the philosophical foundations and conceptual frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) and a/r/tography, I characterize my approach to this study as participatory (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Herron & Reason, 1997; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Tedlock, 2005) and arts-based (primarily inspired by a/r/tography) (Holbrook & Pouthier, 2012; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2009, 2012; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008; Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson Kind, 2005) with a critical/activist emphasis (Buendia, 2003; Chapman, 2005; Dixson, 2006; Hylton, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Lee, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Torre, 2009). From a participatory perspective, it can be argued that teachers’ expertise, knowledge, and authority on their own experience has been marginalized by university scholars. This study’s emphasis on participatory methods conveys my respect for teachers’ knowledge, especially the knowledge of deeply connected, veteran arts educators with long histories at their schools and extensive experience with their students and school communities. This study is not wholly collaborative, in the sense that I have unilaterally determined the research questions, theoretical lenses, and methodological frameworks that guide the study. However, this study’s design is intentionally flexible and somewhat emergent to leave space for the participants to pursue their own interests in relation to the study’s broad themes, which they did through their independent artmaking and our conversations in the focus groups sessions.
The Participatory Paradigm in Qualitative Research

Drawing on Heron and Reason’s (1997) work, Guba and Lincoln (2005) elaborated on the participatory paradigm, which views the research process, the relationships between researchers and participants, and the construction of knowledge as collaborative and reciprocal. According to Guba and Lincoln (2005) “the way in which we know is most assuredly tied up with what we know and our relationships with our research participants” (p. 209) [italics in original]. In participatory research, knowledge is accumulated (data is gathered) in “communities of inquiry embedded in communities of practice” and is viewed as co-constructed by the researcher and participants with an emphasis on practical, experiential knowledge and “critical subjectivity” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 196). Participatory research frequently entails a call to action, particularly action determined and directed by research participants and perhaps facilitated by researchers (Foley and Valenzuela, 2005). Some important issues in participatory research concern control of the study, which includes: crafting research questions; determining what constitutes data, and designing the methods used to gather/create it; deciding how to use findings and where or whether to publish them; and negotiating representations of participants in research texts (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Other important issues in participatory research are voice, reflexivity, and textual representation (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Participatory research is inherently multivocal. It not only includes participants’ voices as well as the researcher’s voice, it also demonstrates a conscious attention to the relationships between these voices (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As such, participatory research entails a degree of reflexivity on the part of researchers. Tedlock (2005) described this reflexivity as the “observation of participation” in which researchers “reflect on and critically engage with their own participation” (p. 467) in their research as it
relates to their own learning and their relationships with participants. These considerations of voice and reflexivity should be evident in the way research texts represent the participants, the researcher, and their relationships to one another as well as the knowledge that emerges from participatory studies.

Based on the above description of the participatory paradigm, it is probably accurate to say that this study is not wholly participatory, because of my strong roles in designing the study, determining the guiding questions, interpreting the participants’ stories and experiences, and representing them in this research text. Despite my strong roles as a designer and interpreter however, I still locate this study within the participatory paradigm for several reasons. Within the structure I designed, the participants had wide latitude to explore whatever aspects of the study themes or guiding questions were most compelling and relevant to them, through whatever communicative mode(s) were most comfortable for them. The participants’ freedom entailed a loss of control for me as a researcher because there were no guarantees that the participants’ interests would speak to the research questions I initially posed in this study. Although the participants articulated their own stories and experiences through their artwork and their critical conversations in the focus groups, I ultimately was responsible for interpreting or synthesizing their stories and representing them in this research text. To the extent possible, I made consistent efforts to collaboratively interpret and represent the participants by member checking my emerging interpretations with the them during the focus group sessions, modifying my interpretations based on their feedback, and reflecting consciously on my own participation in this study through the a/r/tographic interludes and other sections of this text.
Critical Race Theory and its Implications for Research

This study draws on critical race theory (Buendia, 2003; Chapman, 2005; Dixson, 2006; Hylton, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Lee, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Torre, 2009), and other critical, collaborative, and participatory frameworks (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Greenwood & Levin, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Tedlock, 2005) that actively work to dismantle oppressive power relationships, eradicate discrimination, and promote social justice for all people. Like participatory research, these approaches advocate democratic, reciprocal, and non-hierarchical relationships between researchers and research participants, and characterize research as something done “with and for” rather than “to” the communities and people with whom we work (Lincoln and Denzin, 2005).

Contributions of CRT to Qualitative Research. According to Solorzano and Yosso (2002), research that is informed by critical race theory recognizes and embodies at least five elements, drawn from the basic tenets and underlying assumptions of CRT:

1. The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination;
2. The challenge to dominant ideology;
3. The commitment to social justice;
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge; and
5. The transdisciplinary perspective (p. 25-27)

The transdisciplinary orientation of critical race theory is evident in the multiple methods and frameworks employed by CRT scholars in education (Lynn & Parker, 2002). Ladson-Billings (2000) outlined the contributions of CRT to qualitative research:
The “gift” of CRT is that it unapologetically challenges the scholarship that would dehumanize and depersonalize us. . . . In CRT the researcher makes a deliberate appearance in his or her work . . . The deeply personal rendering of social science that CRT scholars bring to their work helps break open the mythical hold that traditional work has on knowledge . . . CRT helps to raise some important questions about the control and production of knowledge . . . particularly knowledge about people and communities of color (p. 272, 2000). (cited in Lynn & Parker, 2002, p. 271)

In the context of this study, critical race theory’s emphasis on experiential knowledge contributed to the use of arts-based methods, which gave participants a free forum to articulate and share their stories, which were grounded in their day-to-day experiences as arts educators in urban schools.

**Counter-storytelling.** This study employs counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research, as articulated by Solorzano and Yosso (2002), who offered the following definition of counter-storytelling:

We define the counter-story as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. (p. 32)

In this study, these untold stories are the intertwined narratives of the participants, and their relationships and experiences with their students, schools, and communities.

**White Researchers and Critical Race Theory.** There is some debate within the CRT community about whether white researchers can legitimately engage in critical race scholarship.
Because critical race theory draws on epistemologies and frameworks developed primarily by scholars of color, some critical race scholars maintain that white researchers should not “colonize” CRT (Hayes and Juarez, 2009). I believe this is a valid concern. The nature of whiteness makes it difficult for white scholars to recognize the extent to which our perspectives are shaped by racial fabrications and by our own privileged positions. This was in fact the primary concern that motivated me to invite such a diverse group of educators to participate in this study. Throughout the process of conceptualizing this study, Angela Harris’s (Espinoza and Harris, 2000) reflections on her relatively privileged position within the CRT community as an African American at a LatCrit symposium have resonated with me deeply. Harris’s words prompted my own reflections, along similar lines: I recognize that I cannot speak as a person of color or for my students and their families. But I can systematically ask myself what critical race theory requires of me as a white scholar. How is the way I am used to analyzing the conditions of urban schools and the role of art education changed by critical race theory? How is my way of experiencing the world altered by trying to imagine it through my students’ eyes? To what extent am I invested, as an individual and a white person, in white privilege? Because of the context of this study and its explicit social justice orientation, it is important for me as a white researcher to critically confront my whiteness and its potential impact on the methods and outcomes of the study.

Whether or not this study is characterized as a critical race study, I feel it is important for me, as a white researcher, to recognize the contribution of critical race methodologies to the larger project of educational research in the interest of social justice. According to Pillow (2003),
race-based methodologies . . . offer a larger critique of the epistemological and methodological foundations of social science research, i.e., a powerful critique that is of considerable significance to all researchers. Race-based methodologies do not offer an “add race and stir” approach, but offer an epistemological shift in how we know what we know, how we come to believe such knowledge, and how we use it in our daily lives. This shift impacts and raises questions that are central to educational research including who can be a “knower,” what counts as knowledge, and what the purposes of research and knowledge production are or should/could be. (p. 183)

Relationships between Researchers and Participants. While CRT does not advocate or espouse any single methodology, several critical race scholars in education have begun to develop frameworks for conducting CRT-informed research. Focusing specifically on relationships between and among researchers, participants, and communities, Dixson (2006) developed a conceptual model for conducting critical race educational research that she termed a “jazz methodology.” In an extended metaphor, Dixson compared research relationships to the creative relationships between jazz musicians in a band as they improvised together on a musical theme. She described jazz methodology as an oppositional discourse with a resistance aesthetic that emphasized connectedness with research participants and communities. “Given that the tenets of CRT are first and foremost about social change, from my perspective it is essential that CRT researchers take seriously the importance of developing meaningful, reciprocal relationships within the communities in which they do research” (Dixson, 2006, p. 228). The kinds of reciprocal relationships that Dixson envisioned preclude researchers from “asking questions for the sake of asking questions” (p. 228) or engaging in research that does not directly address the pressing issues of the community, as perceived by the members of the community.
themselves. In the context of this study, Dixson’s jazz methodology is a particularly apt description of the dynamic, collaborative relationships between the participants and myself that were facilitated in large part through each participant’s artistic creations.

Buendia (2003) also focused on relationships in terms of the ways they are shaped by the metaphors researchers use to describe their roles and those of their participants. According to Buendia, metaphors function as frames for qualitative research perspectives and can include meta-narratives (or dominant narratives) or metaphors for race, including the “White man as conqueror” (p. 55) and “the non-White as savage” (p. 56). He was particularly critical of characterizations of the researcher as all-seeing, and advocated the use of alternative metaphors as a way of changing researchers’ conceptual frameworks.

From my perspective as a white scholar conducting research in a predominantly black community, this suggests that I cannot rely solely on my own perceptions or “expertise” to understand or equitably represent the life of the community. Rather, as in the staged debate between LatCrit scholar Leslie Espinoza and African American critical race scholar Angela Harris at a LatCrit symposium (2000), I hope this study will yield a more nuanced and complex understanding of teaching, learning, and community in urban schools through a process of “speaking with” a diverse group of educators (such as the participants in this study) rather than attempting to unilaterally “speak for” them (Alcoff, 1991). According to Alcoff (1990) there are two main problems with speaking for others (in education research, political advocacy, and other contexts) particularly when white people attempt to speak for people of color. First, the speaker’s social location affects the meaning and truth of what he/she says. Second, when privileged persons speak on behalf of less privileged persons, there is a real danger of reinforcing stereotypes, no matter how well-intentioned the speaker may be. In the context of daily life, I am
neither more nor less privileged than the participants, who all have similar or higher credentials than I. However, it can be argued that in the context of the study, I occupy a privileged position as a researcher in relation to the participants. This is consistent with Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) recognition that the history of qualitative research, particularly ethnography, is intimately intertwined with the violence of imperialism and colonization. By locating this study within the participatory paradigm, I have attempted to mitigate these hierarchical relationships through the use of participant-directed artistic methods, and through multimodal and multivocal forms of textual representation.

Delpit (1995) believed that achieving educational equity for urban students required frank dialogue and humble listening between educators and diverse members of urban school communities, and suggested that “it is those with the most power, those in the majority who must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process” (Delpit, 1995, p. 46). Engaging in this kind of dialogue requires that each of the participants in this study (especially myself) acknowledges our multiple, intersecting, and relational social positions and reflects critically on how these impact the stories we tell (Desai, 2000).

**Focus on Praxis; Commitment to Communities.** Because of CRT’s explicit focus on social change, critical race methodologies emphasize praxis grounded in equitable, reciprocal relationships, an ethos that is also supported by participatory action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) and critical ethnography (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Tedlock, 2005). This amounts to nothing less than an ethical imperative for CRT researchers, as Carter (2003) explained:

> As researchers we do have an obligation to the experiences that we expose. We cannot be casual participants, curious onlookers, or disinterested scholars if our purpose is to
conduct research that is grounded in truth telling that seeks to liberate rather than oppress. We must not be motivated or intoxicated by the extrinsic rewards of the academy. We have a responsibility to resist the temptation to do “hit and run” research that is unconcerned about the consequences of our work. Instead, as much as is possible, we must encourage a researcher sensibility and ethic that expresses and demonstrates concern for the collective good of our communities. (p. 33)

This study is guided by the principles and ethics of critical race and participatory methodologies (Buendia, 2003; Chapman, 2005; Dixson, 2006; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Herron & Reason, 1997; Hylton, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Lee, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tedlock, 2005 Torre, 2009), and grounded in equitable and reciprocal relationships with research participants and our shared interest in urban communities.

I characterize this study as having a critical/activist orientation. This relates to CRT’s emphasis on praxis, which is “understood as critically informed action in the service of social justice” (Zamudio, et al, 2011, p. 7). The avowed purpose of this study is to confront deficit-based characterizations of urban schools, students, and communities, and change the tenor of public discourse about educational equity. This is done primarily through the participants’ independent artistic inquiries into the study themes as they relate to their own experiences and are filtered through their own critical perspectives. This is not “pure” research, but research with a social conscience that intends to go beyond merely “doing no harm,” toward effecting positive change in the community (Carter, 2003).
**A/r/tography**

This study employs a participatory form of a/r/tography (Irwin and de Cosson, 2004; Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind, 2005; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, and Gouzouasis, 2008), an arts-based framework for conducting educational research that attends to identities and “is concerned with self-study, being in community, [and] relational and ethical inquiry” (Irwin and Springgay, 2008). A/r/tography mines the relationships between researchers’ identities/roles as artists, researchers, and teachers (the “a/r/t” in a/r/tography) through an interrelated process of artmaking and reflective writing (the “art” and “graphy” in a/r/tography). Its emphasis on these interconnected roles privileges participants’ knowledge – especially their practice-based knowledge related to their experiences as teachers – by positioning them as artists and researchers in addition to their identities/roles as teachers. A/r/tography is also considered a form of practice-based research that is grounded in the practices of artists and teachers, and situated within particular communities of practice (Irwin and Springgay, 2008). A/r/tographic inquiry is fundamentally relational, in that it explores and articulates relationships between, among, in, and through the identities of artist, researcher, and teacher, and the modes of artmaking and writing, within the situated context of community, all of which shape and are shaped by one another. In a/r/tography, these interconnected identities, modes, meanings, and relationships unfold continually in conversation with one another as part of a living inquiry (Irwin and de Cosson, 2004). A/r/tography is not concerned with pinning down meanings or distilling essences; rather a/r/tography creates openings that make room for other (inter)subjectivities and relational meanings, especially those of viewers/readers.

**A/r/tography and Storytelling.** A/r/tography tells stories, often extremely moving, sensitive, and compelling ones (as in O’Donoghue, 2008; Suominen, 2003; Wilson, 2004).
A/r/tographic stories are complicated and richly nuanced. They also self-consciously attend to multiple, shifting, intersecting identities in specific situations (for example: being a man and an elementary school teacher in Ireland; negotiating a transition from one country, culture, and language to another, and one professional identity to another; mothering a multiply disabled child). These kinds of complex, multilayered stories may be the ideal vehicles for countering the one-dimensional, monovocal, stock stories about urban students, teachers, schools, and communities. Framing these stories as counter-stories requires conscious attention to viewer/readers potential to connect and relate with a/r/tographic stories (O’Donoghue, 2009; Bresler, 2006), which is also a concern of visual rhetoric (Handa, 2004; Hill and Helmers, 2004; Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003; Kress, 2010). Characterizing the creative counter-narratives that emerge from this inquiry as rhetorical (in addition to aesthetic or personally meaningful) requires attention to where, how, with whom, and for what purposes these counter-stories will be shared.

This study’s methods can be characterized as arts-based, an approach I chose for several reasons. Because all participants have extensive art backgrounds and and/or active current artistic practices, artmaking is a familiar and comfortable mode of inquiry for all of us. As exemplified by the a/r/tographic studies reviewed in Chapter Two, artmaking can also be a form of deep reflection, facilitating and articulating connections between multiple, overlapping, and contradicting feelings, experiences, and perspectives that may not be revealed through traditional methods. Artmaking can also be considered a form of inquiry, similar to the ways Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) articulated writing as a form of inquiry. Arts-based research has also been discussed in relation to social justice. Finley (2005) made astute connections between arts-based research, activism, and social justice, while Barone (2006) argued for an arts-based approach that was both “socially engaged” (p. 219) and “epistemologically humble” (p. 221). Artistic methods
are especially suited to this inquiry because they take participants beyond intellectualizing abstract knowledge about diversity and equity, and facilitate reframing and transforming the narratives we use to understand our practices, our students, our school communities, and ourselves.

**Research Ethics and Human Subjects Approval**

Before this study commenced, the Human Subjects Committee at Florida State University approved my application to conduct this study as a pilot (Appendix A). After my prospectus defense, I submitted a change in protocol application and received approval to conduct this study for my dissertation (Appendix B). I then renewed this application in the fall of 2012 to be sure I had enough time to complete data collection (Appendix C). All participants reviewed and signed an informed consent form, which detailed risks and benefits of their participation in this study, clarified issues related to possession and documentation of their artwork, and explained how the videos of the focus group meetings would be used and stored for data analysis. A copy of the approved consent is attached (Appendix D).

**Setting of the Study: Description of Schools and Community**

The participants in this study were all recruited from the same small city of approximately 182,000 in the Southeastern United States. Although this study could have been conducted using video conferencing with participants in different locations, I decided to recruit participants from one city in order to facilitate group rapport and provide some common frames of reference in one particular community. According to census data, the racial population demographics of the city where the study was conducted are as follows: 57.4% white, 35% black, 3.7% Asian, and 6.3% Hispanic or Latino. The city is residentially segregated to a certain extent along both racial and socioeconomic lines. According to average listing prices for home
sales on the real estate website www.trulia.com, the northeast section of town has the highest property values. Based on school enrollment data from the National Center for Education Statistics, it is predominantly white (approximately 75%). The southwest section of town has the lowest property values and is predominantly African American (approximately 85%). In comparison, the midtown area is more integrated racially and socioeconomically with property values in between those in the northeast and southwest sections of town, and school enrollments that more closely mirror the overall racial demographics of the city as a whole. The educators who participated in this study are uniquely positioned to reflect on the racial and socioeconomic dynamics of the city and the ways they see these manifest in relation to their students and schools. The two schools in which the participants currently work have the highest percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunch (91% and 93%) as well as the highest percentages of students of color (96% and 98%, almost entirely African American) of all the elementary schools in the district.

As mentioned in Chapter One, I use the term “urban schools” throughout this research text (indeed even in the title) as a shorthand way of describing the setting and context of this study. Although some readers may quibble with me over my use of the term, in my review of the literature “urban schools” came closest to describing both the high concentrations of poverty and high proportions of students of color in the schools that are the focus of this study. While the image of the urban concrete jungle may not exactly capture the character of the relatively small city in which this study was conducted, this study’s setting makes the important point that poverty and racial inequity affect a much wider variety of communities than may be connoted by the term “urban.”
Participants

I chose to work with a small group of participants in order to facilitate the quick development of group rapport and to enable each participant to explore the study themes in depth. Three participants seemed like an ideal number for the purposes of this study. The group was large enough to represent a diversity of perspectives, and small enough to allow each participant to reflect deeply and share their stories and experiences at length without posing practical challenges in managing the focus group sessions.

Because of the weighty history of racism in the United States and its role in creating and maintaining educational inequities, I recognize that my whiteness and educational privilege are potential limitations of this study. When I conceptualized and designed this study, I purposely sought out a group of participants who differed from me in terms of age, gender, race, and cultural background, in order to push me beyond the perceptual limits imposed by my social position and racial identity. However, as the study commenced I began to fear that foregrounding participants’ differences could create a situation where their insights and critical perspectives were arbitrarily tokenized or essentialized along the lines of race and/or gender. I have attempted to address this potential limitation of the study in the ways I communicated with participants, and the ways I interpreted the experiences and perspectives they shared. In keeping with the democratic, reciprocal ethos of this study I also looked for participants who were my superiors in many respects – whose length of teaching experience and earned credentials exceeded my own – so that all of us were authentically positioned in equitable relationships with one another throughout our shared inquiry. Additionally, because teachers’ stories, as represented by them, are so crucial to this study, it was important to me to locate participants with strong studio art backgrounds and/or current practices who were familiar and comfortable
with artmaking as a mode of inquiry. Because of the importance of the above-mentioned criteria for choosing research participants, I expanded my definition of “arts educators” to include educators who currently or in their professional histories use(d) substantial and meaningful visual arts-based pedagogical approaches in their classrooms.

Following are profiles of the accomplished arts educators who graciously agreed to participate in this study. These brief biographies include information about each participant’s educational background, work experience, artistic practice, and involvement in the local art community. This information was gathered in the first focus group meeting, in which the participants and I introduced ourselves to one another by answering the following questions:

- How long have you been teaching?
- Describe your current position and other relevant professional experience.
- What are your credentials (advanced degrees, certification, etc.)?
- Describe your artistic practice and involvement with local, regional or other arts communities.

It was important to me that we start off the study by getting to know one another as educators and artists. Although I knew a bit about each participant already from the process of recruiting them for the study, they did not know as much about one another. The following subsections summarize each of our responses. All participants’ names have been changed to pseudonyms.

**Fiona Williams**

**Number of years teaching:** 19 years

**Current position:** Elementary Art Teacher

**Description of Professional Experience:** Fiona began her career as an elementary art teacher in 1993 at a suburban elementary school in the city where this study was conducted. She
worked at that position for one year before she was hired at her current institution, where she has been teaching for 18 years. Prior to becoming an art teacher, also Fiona homeschooled her sons and taught at a private school for tuition for her sons. Her commitment to art education is evident in her pursuit of a Ph.D. in Art Education, which she earned in 2009, and in her active engagement with the local art community and her own creative work.

**Credentials:**  K-12 Art Teacher Certification, PhD in Art Education

**Description of Artistic Practice and Involvement in Local Art Community:**  Fiona had taken a break from her personal artistic practice for a time while she completed her dissertation, but is now returning to it. She works in a variety of media including quiltmaking, painting, printmaking and mixed media. Fiona also actively and regularly attends art gallery openings in the local community, and is a board member of a local not-for-profit gallery.

**Bob Watson**

**Number of years teaching:**  22 years, plus 10 years in the private sector

**Current position:**  Elementary School Technology Coordinator

**Description of Professional Experience:**  Bob began his career as an educator in 1974 at an elementary school in a low-income rural community in Georgia. After teaching there for five years, Bob worked for ten years at a yearbook company where he trained students and faculty in public schools to design and layout school yearbooks. He later returned to public education, teaching graphic arts and printmaking at an urban middle school for five years before he was recruited to his current position, where he has been for twelve years. Bob’s decision to move from classroom teaching to his current school technologist position was related to his desire to devote more time to his personal artistic practice.

**Credentials:**  Technology Education Certification, Masters Degree in Social Work
Bob has been on a “steady creative path for the last 15 years.” His work consists primarily of digital photography, which he manipulates extensively using Photoshop. He devotes a significant amount of time to his artistic practice, spending a few hours a day, five days a week on his digital work. Bob exhibits his work widely in the local community. He was a member of an artist-run cooperative gallery for six years, and recently started a Digital Artists Guild with Erica Wei, who also participated in this study. He is also a member of several community arts centers where he has taught and exhibited his work.

Erica Wei

Number of years teaching: 19 years

Current position: Elementary School Teacher of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

Description of Professional Experience: Erica began her career as an educator in 1993 teaching English as a foreign language in Japan for three years. After this formative teaching experience, Erica enrolled in a Masters of Multilingual and Multicultural Education program. She worked for a year as a high school substitute teacher, and another year as an instructional aide before starting her current position as an elementary school ESOL teacher in 1998. I invited Erica to participate in this study because she makes extensive use of arts-based pedagogy in her ESOL classes, and frequently collaborates with her school’s art teacher on interdisciplinary units.

Credentials: Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Art, Masters in Multilingual and Multicultural Education, and National Board Certification in ESOL

Description of Artistic Practice and Involvement in Local Art Community: Erica has worked in a variety of media including watercolors, drawing, and sewing. Her current work
consists mainly of digital photography, particularly images of children. Two events contributed to the development of her current artistic practice: the adoption of her niece in 2007 sparked her interest in photographing children; and learning to use Photoshop helped her get started with digital imaging. Erica’s two main bodies of current work are her “Angels” and “Fairies” series, in which she digitally manipulates images of children, combining them with nature imagery to re-envision them as angels and fairies. She is a founding member of the Digital Artist Guild along with Bob, and is married to an artist.

**Study Design**

The design of this study draws on both Seidman’s (1998) approach to in-depth phenomenological interviewing, and auto-driven (Clark, 1999; Clark-Ibanez, 2007) participant-generated (Guillemin & Drew, 2010) visual methodologies. The study design also departs from these approaches in key respects. Rather than conducting one-on-one interviews with participants as advocated by Seidman (1998), their stories and experiences were shared during a series of interactive focus group discussions. Additionally, this study uses participant generated artwork, rather than photographs as in Clark (1999) and Clark-Ibanez (2007), as the basis for reflection and discussion. The participants and I met in a series of five focus groups over a period of two months, during which time the participants also engaged in their own independent, self-directed artmaking as a way of reflecting on and sharing their experiences as urban arts educators. Prior to beginning the study, I drafted a schedule of questions to guide the focus group discussions, which was distributed via email to the participants before the first focus group session. The participants and I approached these questions holistically and recursively, rather than systematically or compartmentally, meaning that each participant reflected on and pursued
whichever question(s) were most salient to her/him at different times in the group discussions and in their independent artmaking. The schedule of questions are listed below:

1. How do you characterize the challenges and opportunities connected with the contexts of your practices as arts educators in urban schools?

2. How would you characterize your relationships with your students and other members of your school communities?

3. What roles do you feel race, gender, and other aspects of your personal or professional identities (particularly your artist/teacher identities) play in your relationships with your students and other members of your school communities?

4. What are some of the most common misperceptions of your students, schools, and communities that you have encountered?

5. What are some of the untold stories about your students, schools, and communities that you feel need to be shared, in order to “counter” these misperceptions?

Although we began the study by reflecting on the guiding questions listed above, as the study progressed we pursued emergent directions in response to participants’ interests, experiences, and perspectives. This flexibility in the study design was crucial because participants had a great deal of freedom to determine the form, materials, content, style, mood, and message(s) of the artwork they created in this study.

**Schedule of Focus Group Meetings**

This section briefly describes the topics discussed in each focus group meeting. A more detailed account can be found in Chapter Four, which presents a narrative report of the focus group sessions interspersed with images of the participants’ artworks as they emerged and were used in the context of the study.
**First Meeting.** The first research group meeting was devoted to introducing the major concepts and methods underpinning the study, gathering background information from the participants, identifying instances of deficit thinking that they have encountered, and beginning to contemplate ways their experiences might counter deficit thinking. I spent a good deal of time at the beginning of this session explaining my interest in the study, describing the framework of a/r/tography, and defining deficit thinking in relation to the context of urban schools. The participants took over the discussion in the session by responding verbally to the first question on the schedule listed above. This meeting was also focused on getting to know one another and beginning to develop the rapport necessary for a productive, shared inquiry.

**Second Meeting.** The second group meeting was devoted to sharing examples of participants’ personal artwork that they felt exemplified their established artistic practices, and their first forays into a/r/tography. A gallery of the participants’ images can be found in the A/r/tographic Interlude on page 80 of this text. Images of their artwork are also included throughout the text of the narrative report of the study in Chapter Four, as they emerged and were discussed in the focus group sessions. The participants’ images became touchstones for shared reflection and discussion of our teaching experiences and relationships in the larger context of the community as a whole. Participants also reflected further on the concept of deficit thinking as it related to their students, schools, and communities. Although I did not specifically steer the session this way, the critical conversations engendered by the participants’ artwork touched on questions two, three, and four of the schedule above.

**Third Meeting.** I began this meeting by conducting member checks with each participant. At this point in the study I had developed working metaphors for each participant as a way of conceptualizing their own characterizations of their teaching experiences and
relationships with their students, as they expressed them through their artwork and their
discussions in previous focus group sessions. After the member checks, participants continued
to share their a/r/tographic work in progress, the images they created specifically for the study as
a way of reflecting on, articulating, and sharing their experiences and critical perspectives on
their teaching practices. In this meeting the participants and I also discussed our own racial
identities in relation to our practices as urban arts educators, as well as some of the racial and
socioeconomic dynamics of the city as a whole. I initiated this discussion in response to the
participants’ references to race and racism in their artwork and/or in previous focus group
discussions, and in order to more fully address question three above, which relates to the second
research question guiding this study.

**Fourth Meeting.** In the fourth meeting, participants continued to share their
a/r/tographic work in progress, bringing in new images for discussion and shared reflection. In
this meeting I also conducted an additional member check with participant Fiona Williams
because my initial metaphor for her (the “Matriarch”) did not seem quite right to her in our last
meeting and I did not feel comfortable using it if she did not identify with it.

**Fifth Meeting.** The fifth meeting was devoted to final reflections on the participants’
learning through the process of participating in the study, and discussions of possible next steps
for community action. We began this session by discussing two final images that participant
Bob Watson brought in to share. I then asked the participants to reflect on their participation in
this inquiry and to describe what it meant for them. I also asked them whether and to what
extent they felt they had learned from their participation and from one another. I closed this final
session by asking them to discuss any ideas they had about possible outcomes or next steps for
community action, and by thanking them for their generous participation in the study.
Participant Artwork

Philosophically and methodologically, it was important to me to honor participants’ experiences and perspectives by giving them as much freedom and agency as possible while remaining true to the critical/activist purpose of this study. Participants were provided with the five guiding questions listed above prior to the first focus group meeting and were invited to reflect on them through interrelated processes of writing and artmaking. However, they were not policed in the ways they approached these guiding questions or in the amount of attention they devoted to each question. Because the participants’ individual interests guided their independent inquiries, each participant’s artwork and process of reflection took different forms and pursued different directions. Additionally, as the group members met to share work in progress, their images, words, ideas, and insights informed and inspired each another, prompting each participant to diverse, potentially deeper understandings or new directions in their individual inquiries.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Synthesis

Virtually all of the study data was gathered in researcher-facilitated focus group meetings with the participants. Data consisted of the focus group discussions as well as images created by the participants and myself. Because artwork was such a central component of this study and the focus group sessions, it was important to develop a user-friendly format for documenting and viewing the artwork that participants and I created and/or shared during the course of the study. In preparation for the second focus group meeting in which participants and I shared examples of our existing artistic practices, I created a PowerPoint presentation that included images of all of our work (the “Study PowerPoint”). The Study PowerPoint was continually updated with digital images of the participants’ artwork as the study progressed and
participants created new work. The Study PowerPoint became an important tool in the inquiry, as we referred to the images contained in it repeatedly and consistently throughout the course of the study.

All focus group meetings were recorded on video, which I reviewed between meetings and later transcribed to facilitate data analysis. After the series of focus group meetings concluded, I created a matrix that correlated the video transcripts of each meeting with the images in the Study PowerPoint as they emerged and were used in the context of the study, as an intermediate analytical step. An excerpt of this composite document (the “Image Transcript”) is attached (Appendix E). The Image Transcript, a practical, multimodal representation of both visual and verbal research data, functioned as the major analytical tool or resource for my data analysis, and was used in a variety of ways. First, it facilitated my process of synthesizing and presenting the participating teachers’ stories and experiences in the narrative report of the study in Chapter Four, using their own words and images as they emerged in the context of the focus group meetings. This was similar to Seidman’s (1998) approach to crafting “profiles” of participants from interview transcripts. However, rather than separating each participant’s story into individual profiles, I chose to present their stories in a way that more closely reflected the dynamic character of our shared conversations in the focus groups. This data is presented in Chapter Four of this dissertation. The Image Transcript also facilitated thematic qualitative analysis related to this study’s research questions, in which I read through the document multiple times, highlighting and annotating according to prefigured and emergent themes. This analysis is presented in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

In addition to the participant-generated artwork that forms the core of this study, I also engaged in my own a/r/tographic inquiry as a way of freely reflecting on, responding to, and
synthesizing research data, and connecting it to my ongoing practices as an artist, researcher, and teacher. Before the study commenced I had envisioned my artistic role in the study as being very similar to that of the participants: I imagined that, like them, I would create artwork on my own, in between focus group meetings as a way of reflecting on and communicating my experiences and relationships as an urban arts educator. However, this was not to be. For one thing, there were extensive demands on my time and attention as the facilitator of the study. In between focus group meetings I reviewed the video recordings of previous sessions, looked for emergent themes, and made decisions about how to direct the next meetings. For another thing, as the study progressed and the participants’ stories began to take shape, I wanted to devote more attention to listening and understanding their experiences and critical perspectives than to telling my own story. This is not to suggest that my voice and perspective have not shaped the participants’ stories as they are presented in this research text. Rather, I began to understand and accept that my role as the researcher and the role of my artmaking in the context of this study did not have to be exactly the same as those of the participants in order for our relationships to be equitable and reciprocal. I present my a/r/tographic inquiry throughout this research text as A/r/tographic Interludes, which appear in between chapters of this text.

**Member Checks**

Member checking was an important part of the process of data collection and analysis and served a crucial function in maintaining equitable and respectful relationships between the participants and myself (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). I conducted member checks in two of the five focus group sessions, in which I summarized my emerging interpretations of each participant’s story, drawing on the experiences they discussed and the themes and imagery in their artwork. As the study progressed, I developed working metaphors for each participant as a
kind of shorthand characterization of their personalities and relationships with their students. I
shared these metaphors with the participants as part of the member checks to see if these rang
true and seemed like accurate characterizations. In all cases, I revised my interpretations and
characterizations of the participants’ stories and experiences based on their feedback. These
member checks were productive intermediate analytical steps that helped create and maintain
respectful and equitable relationships between the participants and myself.

Structure of Final Chapters

The remaining chapters of this research text present the study data and analysis,
synthesis, and implications. Chapter Seven is structured as a narrative report (Chase, 2005) of
the data gathered in the focus group sessions, which was culled from the Image Transcript and
includes both a condensed transcript of the focus group discussions and the participants’ images.
Chapter Nine presents a further synthesis of data through the lenses of the research questions.
Because the processes of data analysis, synthesis, and interpretation unfolded in an integrated
way over the course of the study, this chapter was not intended to reveal hidden patterns in the
data. Rather, my intent was to summarize and further synthesize the data in relation to the
theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study, and through the lenses of the research
questions.
CHAPTER SIX

A/R/TOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: GALLERY OF PARTICIPANTS’ ARTWORK

Erica Wei

*Figure 3. Examples of participant Erica Wei’s established artistic practice*
Figure 4. Artwork created by participant Erica Wei for the study
Bob Watson

*Figure 5. Examples of participant Bob Watson’s established artistic practice*
Figure 6. Artwork created by participant Bob Watson for the study
Figure 7. Examples of participant Fiona Williams’ established artistic practice
Figure 8. Artwork created by participant Fiona Williams for the study
CHAPTER SEVEN

PARTICIPANTS’ STORIES

This chapter shares the teachers’ stories and images as they emerged in the context of the focus group meetings. These interwoven stories were culled from the Image Transcript and minimally edited for flow, narrative structure, and organization. In crafting this narrative, I tried to strike a balance between staying true to the participants’ voices (including my own) and making sense as a story. The stories in this chapter are presented in a script format with participants’ images interspersed throughout, appearing in the text in the same places they first appeared in our shared conversations. Although the participants and I repeatedly flipped back and forth in the Study PowerPoint to refer back to images that were previously shared, each image only appears once in this chapter. In sections where participants or I discuss an image that appeared previously in the text, I refer readers/viewers to those particular images using the appropriate figure numbers.

I include my own voice in this narrative report, using what Chase (2005) refers to as the “researcher interactive voice” (p. 666). I was not a silent observer, but an active participant in the focus group sessions. My approach to facilitating the focus groups owes something to Seidman’s (1998) approach to in-depth, phenomenological interviewing, as well as to auto-driven (Clark, 1999; Clark-Ibanez, 2007) participant-generated (Guillemin & Drew, 2010) visual methodologies. I tend to think, however, that it also reflects my background as a teacher and my sense of responsibility for creating learning environments that participants/students experience as positive and special. In the focus groups I shared my own experiences and asked detailed
questions, sometimes to gently challenge participants’ assumptions and assertions, and other times to create rapport.

**Getting Started: Orientation and Initial Reflections**

These are the participating teacher’s initial reflections on their practices in our first focus group meeting. This section can be considered a kind of baseline indicator of the participating arts educators’ ways of thinking about their practices and relationships with their students and school communities. Although these are reflective, they are the participants’ initial responses to the first focus group questions I asked. As the study progressed, and especially as the participants began reflecting on their experiences in, through, and with art, their reflections became noticeably more nuanced and articulate. Before the first focus group meeting I emailed the participants with the following schedule of guiding questions:

1. How do you characterize the challenges and opportunities connected with the contexts of your practices as arts educators in urban schools?
2. How would you characterize your relationships with your students and other members of your school communities?
3. What roles do you feel race, gender, and other aspects of your personal or professional identities (particularly your artist/teacher identities) play in your relationships with your students and other members of your school communities?
4. What are some of the most common misperceptions of your students, schools, and communities that you have encountered?
5. What are some of the untold stories about your students, schools, and communities that you feel need to be shared, in order to “counter” these misperceptions?
The group approached these questions holistically and recursively, rather than systematically or compartmentally. Each participant reflected on and pursued whichever question(s) were most salient to her/him at different times in the group discussions and in their independent artmaking.

**Sunny:** So, the first thing I want to spit out there is that I believe schools on the south side of town have a bad rap for reasons that have nothing to do with adequate yearly progress or NCLB but just have to do with the communities where they are located, and the kids that go there. The reason I asked you all to work with me in my dissertation study is because you all are accomplished, veteran educators who have worked in Title I schools for a long time, and my assumption is that this is by choice because you’re committed to the schools where you’re working and the communities you’re working amongst.

I emailed you a series of questions but before we start to look at them I wanted to state that the real focus of my study is to challenge deficit-based fears and stereotypes about low-income communities and Title I schools. I want to do that through facilitating all of us telling our own stories from our own practices and our own experiences as veteran teachers who work in urban schools. As part of this I will ask each of you to do some of your own independent artmaking as a way of exploring any aspect of your own experience that you think might counteract some of these fears and stereotypes about your students and school communities. We’ll meet fairly regularly, maybe every couple of weeks or so to talk about our work in progress and share some ideas, with the goal actually being somewhat collaboratively determined. My goal is to do my dissertation, but since you all are active practitioners in your schools, whether as classroom teachers or other kinds of professional educators, and artists in the community, I thought I would open it up to you all to think about possible outcomes. Some possibilities might be to do some kind of an exhibition, a project with students, or some other kind of project in the community to make the biggest impact.

Since I’ve been doing a whole lot of talking, I wondered if there were one or two questions [from the emailed list] that you might have a response to or might like to talk about.

**Erica:** Well, I can talk about all of them! I think with question one, characterize the challenges, it’s definitely very hard and it’s tiring, but I think the opportunity is that we work perhaps as hard as the children and families that we serve. I feel like we’re in the trenches with them. Working with people from poverty or with people who are immigrants keeps it real for you. You see the harsh realities every day and it helps us appreciate what we have compared to the people we serve.

**Sunny:** Do either of you have a response or beginning thoughts about the first question? Maybe you, Fiona, since you’re in the classroom like Erica.
Fiona: Well, it’s very tough, and I think it’s getting tougher. It doesn’t seem to be getting any easier. I think the actual teaching, my routine, what I do with students is easier because I’ve been there so long, but there’s a new crop coming in every year, and every five-six years. I think part of it is the testing stress, and part is that television and other things in our culture take children away from things that would help them in the classroom. There are positive aspects, too. I think the relationships you forge with the children and their families.

Sunny: Alright, Bob do you have any reflections on that first question?

Bob: Well, I’m really going to try and get in touch with my time teaching middle school, when I was really face to face with the challenges. I certainly felt that the schools where I’ve taught were highly misunderstood. When I talked to my peers about where I worked I found that they really didn’t want to know a whole lot more. They were kind of like, yeah, well I’m not really interested in this, like they kind of get the picture. One challenge personally was getting the kids to trust me, to see me as someone who had something to offer them. And also for me to see that they had something to offer me, and really appreciating their beauty. I feel like we educated each other over the years that I spent in Title I schools. A wonderful thing that I experienced was seeing a lot of beautiful creativity below the surface of some very difficult kids. In fact with some of the most challenging kids I worked with behaviorally, I’d sometimes see a flash of their drawings or something, and it was like, “whoah, this is amazing!” Working with this population has really been a process of enlightenment for me, and I think I’ll be reflecting on that a lot as we go through this.

Sunny: Before I totally close this off, is there any other question or any other thought that any of you would like to share?

Fiona: Well, its not really from me, but over the last two years is we’ve started taking bus trips into the community so we can see how our students live, and where they live. We get out and stop at a few apartment complexes or housing projects. We see parents and the kids, and oh my gosh, the kids are so shocked to see us. They’re like, “What are you doing here?” We usually have something to hand out so we knock on doors and hand out fliers. Before we go, the principal will give us a lot of background information on the community. A lot of it we already know, but she’ll say things like, “Just remember last week someone was killed in this apartment complex. And our children live there. So think about that as you go around door to door.” So we do a lot of thinking.

Sunny: So these are teacher bus trips into the community?

Fiona: On the regular school bus.

Sunny: In the school bus. So you just get out en masse at the apartment complex knocking on doors and handing out fliers, “Come to our parent night?” (laughing)
**Fiona:** One of these places is a trailer park and the road is really not ready for the bus. We were bouncing all the way up to the ceiling so I’m thinking, “Man the kids have to go through this every day?” It’s horrible.

**Erica:** They say that one of the ways schools can make a difference is by going out into the community instead of expecting them to come to us. That’s supposed to be in the research.

**Sunny:** And I know this from being a working parent, a lot of stuff happens at school when you don’t have childcare, or you have to work. I don’t think it boils down to that parents don’t care – you hear that all the time, “these parents don’t care.” While I’m sure there are some parents who don’t care, I think a lot do but might not have the wherewithal to get there. Sometimes I feel like I’m that parent! You know, like my daughter could really use some more time with me to drill her on her multiplication flashcards, but I have to write my dissertation prospectus and facilitate my focus group meeting!

So, what I’d like to do is between now and the next time we meet is to start some brainstorming, maybe just thinking about the question we talked about today, and starting to think about how you might explore some of these ideas with images and maybe doing some independent writing. And that writing could take whatever form, maybe just journal writing or free writing. Think about how you might like to tell a story about your students, the school community or any other aspect of working at your school. Fiona, I thought it was really cool of you to mention the teacher bus trips into the neighborhoods because I think that’s another misperception of Title I schools, that the teachers or administrators are disengaged and not connected to the community. That’s an incredible example of the whole school getting out and really trying to make connections to the community. It might be helpful for you to think about a specific instance like this as a jumping off point for your reflections.

**Erica:** I already know what I’m going to do! I’ve been thinking about it for a long time and now I have the chance to do it. So this is kind of like action research, huh? But we don’t need to have research questions or read articles, right?

**Sunny:** No, I get to do all that disgusting work! You all just get to do the fun part!

**Artistic Introductions: Examples of Participants’ Established Artistic Practices**

After our first focus group meeting I asked the participants to email me digital images of their artwork that they thought exemplified their established artistic practices, as well as any images they might have had a chance to create specifically for the study. I believed that the success of this study depended in large part on the rapport that we could develop as a group, and I thought that sharing examples of our individual artistic practices could help us get to know one
another. Bob emailed me four images that he selected, while Erica and Fiona both emailed me links to their portfolio websites. Prior to our second focus group meeting, I compiled participants’ images into the Study PowerPoint so we could refer to them easily. I included all the images Bob emailed to me and I selected several images from Fiona and Erica’s websites to include in the Study PowerPoint.

Although I included examples of my own artwork in the Study PowerPoint and shared them with the group, I do not include them here. I shared examples of my artwork with the participants as a way of getting to know one another and continuing to develop rapport. But my own work did not become part of our ongoing conversation in the ways their work did, as their stories took shape over the course of the study. Each time the participants introduced new images into the study, we continually referred back to themes and images in their established artistic practices, to contextualize their new work and to develop a shared language with which to discuss our practices and our individual relationships with our students and school communities.

**Sunny:** Since each of you was so awesome as to email me images of your work, I thought we would start by looking at some of the work. So, I made a little PowerPoint and I just have it organized by sections for each of you with your images. I figured we could start with each of you scrolling through your images and telling us a little about the background of your artistic practice and your past work. For Bob and Erica, the last slide I have for each of you is the image you emailed me that you made for this project. Erica, you’re up first.

**Erica:** Ok, so what I do is I photograph families and their kids for free, and then in return they allow me to use images of their kids in my artwork, and that’s how I get my imagery. I’ve been working with kids in my artwork in two bodies of work, the angel or celestial messenger series, and the fairy series. After taking photographs of children, I overlay those images with images of nature and clouds. I guess I’ve been doing fairies and angels for a while now. When we had the BP oil spill, I wanted to do an image where God and the angels were looking down on us for spilling all that oil. I never did do that image, but I continued that angel series and called it “Celestial Messengers” and thought that maybe this is the way that God was telling us that we need to take care of our earth. So this is what I’ve been doing, angels, clouds, and images from nature (see Figure 9).
The adoption of my niece really started me on the fairies and angels series (Figure 10). I suspect that my niece is an incarnate of a fairy or something to do with nature. This image is older, so I did a lot of nature stuff, again superimposing or layering images of a child with natural imagery. I really enjoy photographing kids because they are themselves, they are true, they’re not worried about “oh, how’s my hair, oh my legs look fat” they’re just natural human beings and they don’t have any hang-ups.

*Figure 9. Celestial Messengers*, digital image by study participant Erica Wei

*Figure 10. Fairy Incarnate*, digital image by study participant Erica Wei
Erica: After the fairy/angel series I started using a lot of vintage photographs. This is part of a series called “What Came Before Us” (Figure 11). I was scanning photographs of my family and my husband’s family and layered those images with a river that runs through it. It’s based on the book by Norman McLean, “A River Runs Through It.” It’s also the river of life. The river represents how life goes on from generation to generation. I tried to do this maternal-children theme, kind of like Madonna and Child.

Figure 11. What Came Before Us, digital image by study participant Erica Wei

Erica: So, the first two pieces I did for this project are inspired by an article called “A Diminished Vision of Civil Rights” by James Crawford who was the former president of the Association for Bilingual Education (Figures 12 and 13).

Since we’re talking about education in this project, I did some research and little is known that in 1947, they desegregated the schools in the entire state of California. This happened because Sylvia Mendez’s parents challenged the law, and other Mexican families joined them to file a class action lawsuit. Thurgood Marshall was on that case and later in 1954 when he handled the case for Brown vs. Board of Education, he used the argument from the California case for that case (Figure 12). So the two girls on the left are Linda Brown and Sylvia Mendez, and I juxtaposed their images with – you know
while I was working on this image I was like “ugh! I can’t stand looking at these guys there, you know” but it has to be a political statement, right? And I’m like, I’m used to working with children’s images and natural images and now I have to look at these guys and I’m like, God, you know? (laughing)

Figure 12. DeSegregation, ReSegregation, digital image by study participant Erica Wei

Erica: So anyway, those were cases about desegregation and James Crawford’s article makes the point that what these guys have done is like re-segregation. Crawford says that with NCLB and the term “Closing the Achievement Gap” now what we’re really doing is re-segregating the kids. The effects of this policy are causing minority children or poor children to experience less equal access to education because now all they have to work on is math and reading. In the earlier civil rights cases, it was more about equal access to education for all people.

So this was my original idea, that NCLB forces the subgroups to always be running to catch up to this kid here, but they’re really running in a hamster wheel, and they’re not going anywhere (Figure 13). They’re constantly running, running, running, but they’re never going to catch up. The research says yes the achievement gap has closed more since the sixties, but I believe that it will never be the same because America just won’t allow that to happen. So we’re constantly making minority kids just run and run trying to catch up to this kid and it’s just never going to happen. The New York Times just published an article that says that even though the gap may be closing for ethnic kids,
the socioeconomic gap between poor kids and rich kids is actually widening. Maybe the next issue we look at is not just about the ethnic groups, but about economic status.

Figure 13. Closing the Achievement Gap, digital image by study participant Erica Wei

Sunny: When you say in terms of closing the achievement gap, that you think the poor and minority kids are on the hamster wheel and will never catch up, could you expand on that a little bit? Why do you think they’ll never catch up?

Erica: Well, I think that America is racist (laughs). We have a history of racism in America so we’ll never let the minority kids catch up to the privileged or the majority. That’s not ever going to happen. Also I think in America race is correlated to socioeconomic status, so like if we look at China or somewhere else where the majority of people are of one ethnic group, the poor will always have less access than the rich, and we can say that people who live in the cities have better resources than people who live in rural areas. And in a place like China, we can’t say that this is because one group is white and one group is black, but in America, it IS like that, because that is our history.

The other thing is, you’re not going to stop the white kid from running. He’s always going to be going ahead in the race. He’s not going to stop and say “Hey you guys, catch up to me so we can close the gap!” That’s not going to happen, no affluent family is going to give up their privileges and say, you know, my child’s school is not going to have any access to computers or art classes. That’s human nature and that’s America.
Sunny: So do you all have any comments or questions for Erica?

Fiona: Well, I really like the image. I think it says a lot. I think it should be in the newspapers because it says so much. I hadn’t thought of some of the things with the hamster wheel, but it says a lot.

Bob: Erica and I were talking a little about this in the car on the way over here, and one of the things that comes up for me is that 50 to 100 years from now, white people will not be the majority in our culture. It’s actually even closer than that, it’s more like 20 or 30 years when that shift is gonna take place. And I think there’s some real shaking of the knees for some parts of our culture. It’s a very different world today. And I think that some of the policies and the way we are looking at things are an old, outmoded paradigm that doesn’t really apply to our world today, and will apply less to our world in the next 20-30-50 years. When Egypt went through their transition a year or so ago, I thought I could really see this happening in our country. I could see there really coming a time when the former middle class and the poor team up to make some radical changes.

Sunny: So, any other thoughts or comments or reactions to Erica’s work before we go on to Bob’s images? Oh, I have a question. I don’t know whether these were conscious choices or not, but I think that’s the cool thing about artmaking, that sometimes when you’re creating an image things come out that you haven’t really verbalized perhaps, or that make you start to think a little bit more about it just by examining the image. Like here, that’s a boy, and like why is the white kid a boy? And then I’m thinking, is there also a gender-based achievement gap? I just started to wonder what is the role of gender in the achievement gap?

Erica: Yeah, that’s true, because that’s not a subgroup according to NCLB, they don’t look at it according to gender. But you’re right, I did pick this one because he’s wearing a cap, and he looks just like a typical white boy even though it’s all semi-lit. I thought about putting a girl here, with her ponytail. And I did think should I use the official language for the subgroup names, which is African American, Hispanic, students with disabilities, ELLs [English Language Learners]. But then I thought no, I’m just gonna go very casual, so like the white kid, the black kid, the Latino kid, just make it more informal, because I didn’t want to look like I’m making a statement against the policy, I didn’t want to use the official language, their terms, so much.

Sunny: Wow, so that’s just another interesting thing about your work. Well, I think maybe we should move on to Bob.

Fiona: I hope you’ll hold off on mine! I was just thinking, I have been doing a lot of experimenting. What did you end up choosing?

Sunny: Oh, the images from your website? I pulled up two of the art quilts and um, well . . . I just pulled what I liked, Fiona! (Laughing)
Fiona: Well, I’m curious to see what you have, that should be interesting.

Bob: Well I come from a very different perspective from what Erica has shared about her work. It’s been really interesting for me to start thinking about these children and education in terms that I don’t always think about. My whole view of life is about consciousness, my own evolving consciousness, the consciousness our country, and in this project, the consciousness of students and parents. There’s a part of me that believes there is a lot going on behind the scenes that we don’t know about or don’t talk about. My art is always going to have a sense of mystery. You’re not going to see everything that’s there – you’ll need to think beyond the surface of what you see about the important issues of life.

*Figure 14. Believe, digital image by study participant Bob Watson*
Bob: This is a piece that I did several years ago that shows, well, it shows the Trinity (Figure 14). Typically you’ll find in spiritually related artwork that it has groups of three, which is a very spiritual number. It’s done here very symbolically and very subtly, but I think viewers would understand that there’s some mystery or something going on beneath the surface there, and might ponder the significance of the three elements in this piece. Another theme that runs through my work is the integration of the natural world. I believe the entire universe is infused with the spirit of the holy one, the higher one, the Holy Spirit, or whatever one might believe about that, if you do believe about that. So one of the places that I see it in its purity is in the natural world. So, my artwork often includes items from nature.

![Figure 14. Trinity, digital image by study participant Bob Watson](image)

*Figure 15. Italian Landscape Madonna, digital image by study participant Bob Watson*

Bob: So, this is an image from a trip to Italy (Figure 15). There’s something about the union between mother and child that is a very special thing to me, it’s a sacred union. One thing I was exploring for this project is the idea that we’re all the same, that children, regardless of their vessel, whether they’re from Calcutta, from northern Europe, or from Africa, that their soul and spirit, their essence of being human is exactly the same. One of the things I’m going to explore artistically is that although our exterior is different, the core part of us is exactly the same. One of the things I’ve come to embrace working in the schools, as part of my enlightenment, is coming to realize that these children are
all these dynamic little beautiful lights. I also started to think about this: what do parents have in common? And I thought what’s in common is that they all want the best for their children. They just express this in different ways. Some of the people I come in contact with are damaged, they’ve had some very difficult times in their lives, and have been forced to make very difficult, challenging decisions. But as a teacher, if you talk to a mother or father about their child’s experiences in school, they’re all interested in the wellbeing of their child.

One thing that came up when I was journaling is that “Just because we’re different, doesn’t mean that somebody’s wrong, you know?” Because I have a sense that there are powers and policies in our country that say because you’re not like me, your values are not like me, your skin is not like me, and you don’t behave like me, that we need to fix you, and we need to change you. I think our current public education is putting down a curriculum which is very limited in scope and very limited in what it allows people to be, what it celebrates in people. It puts the highest value on academic performance, and yet there are people who can excel in many different areas if you understand the concept of multiple intelligences. So part of my artwork is going to try to reflect the commonality of we humans, the sameness of we humans, and the sameness of what we’re trying to achieve.

Figure 16. Mystic Trumpet, digital image by study participant Bob Watson
Bob:  This image is a digital scan of a trumpet flower (Figure 16). It has some mystery about it, and this is interesting relative to what we’re doing here. I took a scan of the stamen and everything inside, and I wanted the viewer to be able to see what was on the inside, so I scanned it and put it on the outside, so that you then saw the beauty of the petals of the flower, but then you also had the opportunity to see the beauty of what was inside. And now isn’t that a great metaphor for children and what we’re talking about?

![Figure 17. Let’s Get to Work! digital image by study participant Bob Watson](image)

Bob:  And then I put together, this is Rick Scott, “Let’s get to work” (Figure 17). So I got an image on the Internet of his face, and I combined it with another hip-hop-looking guy, and I got the pimped out car with the Fruity Pebbles, and the urban background. So here it says, “Let’s get to work!” but then “Pends on yo hood!” So the idea is that, yeah we’re going to do great things for students in education, but it kind of depends on where you’re from. So we’re going to kind of stack the deck for teacher recognition money and all that stuff. The kid who was running ahead in Erica’s hamster wheel image is gonna be fine, he’s gonna pass the high stakes tests, he’s got nothing to worry about. He’s got time on his hands to take art and music and violin lessons, and he’s gonna travel to Europe and go to Disneyland with his parents and all that. But the kids from other neighborhoods are really not getting the resources that they need. And I’ve always said, one of my favorite analogies about education that I use when talking to people about this is if you’re trying to get all populations to succeed, it’s like getting two thoracic surgeons and saying to one surgeon I’m gonna give you people who have
never smoked, who eat a low fat diet, and who exercise regularly, and for the other surgeon, we’re going to give you the obese people, the people who smoke, the high fat diet, and etc., but then we’re gonna expect to get the same results out of you. So Rick Scott is saying, yeah, I’ll help you, let’s get to work, but if you’re not like me, I’m not sure how much help I can be.

Sunny: Now your email comment makes sense. You said, “I’m not sure if this is the direction I’m going with the project, but it felt good to get some anger out.” So now I understand. Now I get it.

Bob: The other comment I would make is that I’m working with two ideas: one is the commonality of the children and commonality of the parents; and the other thing is my own personal journey of enlightenment that is still unfolding. That comes from my first exposure to other cultures and other types of students, where I felt like, well “what’s wrong with you” to coming to realize that they are who they are, and this is their culture and it’s ok. So, I’m still processing, but those are the things that are interesting my soul, so to speak.

Sunny: Wow, so you talked about a whole lot of stuff that is coming through from your established artistic practice, ideas of what you’re interested in, the idea of consciousness, spirituality, the innate dignity of every human being, and revealing that and honoring that but now in the context of Title I schools. Any other comments or questions for Bob before we move on to Fiona?

Fiona: Can you see that? It’s kind of small. It’s a quilt I did as part of a series – actually I’m probably still doing a series on hair and black women, basically (Figure 18). Sometimes people actually have brown skin but sometimes I get creative and do other colors like orange skin or blue, just because I like the creative aspect of it. But the main reason I do that is because in this society, even though there’s differences with everybody, I think African American women in particular have kind of an issue with hair, shall we say. Out of all the things that racism has kind of popped on us, the hair is a big issue. So I have a lot of quilts or paintings or drawings that address that, maybe a different hairstyle and kind of taking back the hair, just saying you know, this is how our hair grows, this is what it does, and so I do a lot of different things with that. This one is not that old, this is kind of a recent one. When I was in school, I didn’t do that much, so I’m sort of a returning artist. This is from probably 2006-07, something like that.

Sunny: And so when you say “when you were in school” you mean when you were doing your Ph.D.?

Fiona: Yeah, while I was working on my dissertation. After I finished my degree in 2009 I’ve been slowly getting back into it, but then I jumped into a sewing group and I’ve been doing charity work, so I haven’t done a quilt in a while. This is one of my favorites, actually.
**Figure 18.** Untitled, quilt by study participant Fiona Williams

**Erica:** And so, what is your comment about African American women’s hair? Is it that it’s different, or hey let’s not worry about it, or . . .

**Fiona:** My main comment is, well, you could say let’s not worry about it, or celebrate it, do what you feel and don’t worry about other people’s opinions. I’m kind of like that. I change my hair a lot, sometimes it could be in twists, or it could be just natural, and I just got it straightened and now it rained so I’m not too happy about that (laughs), but for me it’s just a variety. And I think that as women, most women like to do different things with our hair, and I’m trying to normalize our experience. It may be a different hairstyle, and kind of taking back the hair, just saying you know, this is how our hair grows, this is what it does, and so I do a lot of different things with that in this series.

This is a close up of this quilt, just showing that I use the sewing machine, and free motion (Figure 19). If you know anything about free motion it’s just drawing with the sewing machine.
Figure 19. Detail of untitled quilt (Figure 18) by study participant Fiona Williams

Figure 20. Cocoon, quilt by study participant Fiona Williams
Sunny: Are these batik fabrics?

Fiona: Yeah, I think I actually did some of them. Some of these I made, some of them I bought. I did some dying but not all of them. Some are African fabrics. And I also embroidered the little necklace.

Fiona: (Advances the Study PowerPoint to the image in Figure 20) Wow, that’s an older one.

Sunny: And I totally put you on the spot by choosing ones from your website. . .

Fiona: No, I just have to think back to when I did this. It’s really a cocoon, it’s a uterine-type cocoon that the woman is in. I deliberately made her heavier, sort of a commentary on how people perceive women who don’t have that perfect shape. And she’s contented, she’s in a very relaxed place.

Erica: Is that her uterus in the middle?

Fiona: It’s not hers, it’s just the thought of being enveloped in comfort. I was really into quilting at that time, and as I recall, the imagery is kind of blood and eggs, so it is fertility images. It’s a really small quilt, only about one foot by one foot.

Sunny: Did you make or dye some of the fabrics here?

Fiona: Yeah, I tie-dyed this fabric and then, well it’s actually only the blue and the red. Everything else is thread.

Sunny: There’s an incredible amount of work in this.

Erica: That’s why it’s small!

Fiona: Yeah that’s why it’s only this big (makes a gesture about in the air)

Fiona: This is another piece in the hair series (Figure 21). This is a comment about being natural, that people should be as natural as they want to be without being judged on that. I tend not to do too much with clothing in my artwork, I usually just put some flowers on or something like that. This is another experiment, it’s clayboard back there and there is some etching. And this piece is just me returning to my artwork and using different materials to see what I could do. I tend to go toward portraits, I don’t know why. I doodle and then that’s what comes out. I think when I was listening to you, Bob, it reminded me that at some point I had this infatuation with Madonnas and I wanted to paint Madonnas, and I never actually painted one. I have one on my wall, but I keep saying, “I’ve gotta do it.” Your image actually started me thinking about children and how we’re really definitely mothers to them in every way in Title I schools. So that sparked something in me. Oh, and this is another small one.
Sunny:  What medium is that? Is that watercolor?

Fiona:  There’s ink, acrylic paint, and some etching just like scratching into the background. It’s clayboard, I don’t think it’s gesso, I think it’s clayboard.
Fiona: So photography is sort of my first love (referring to the images in Figures 22 and 23). I’ve been doing art longer than photography, but it’s one thing I never stopped doing, even when I wasn’t drawing or painting I was always taking photographs. And I just find being out in nature peaceful and I wanted to incorporate that into my other artwork.

Sunny: I really liked your landscape images. That’s stunning. Were you able to work on anything like sketching or coming up with ideas for this project this week?

Fiona: No I really wasn’t. I think I was blanked out and I’ve been overwhelmed with other projects, because I did a quilt for something else, I did some bibs and I’ve been doing some charity sewing work. It’s been helpful listening to you, Bob, you really gave me some ideas.

Sunny: Ok, well that’s totally fine. Bob actually called me on Friday afternoon when I emailed you all to ask if you wouldn’t mind sharing some images of your past artwork and he said, “ok, I’m stuck, I need some help. I’ve been looking at the questions that you sent out and thinking about some of the things that we talked about, but I’m having a hard time thinking about how to move forward and how to wrestle with this stuff.” So I told him that I expect this to be a process that might proceed in fits and starts, and I wanted to tell you all if you are stuck, feel free to call me if you wanna chat. One of the things that I’m doing in between the times that we meet, as part of my own qualitative research process is reviewing the video tapes of these meetings. So, one of the things I said when Bob called me is, “When I was watching the video, you said such and such, and that seemed really meaningful to you” and kind of helped push him over a little bit. I also just wanted to say that I connected personally a lot with several aspects of your
work, particularly the stitching and the landscape photography because I have both of those interests in my own work. My paintings relate to landscape, and then I’ve been doing some stitching stuff too. I also really liked the amount of detail in your work, and the richness of your use of materials in your quilts was really stunning, I thought.

Fiona: Thank you.

Sunny: So, there were several things I thought we might get to in this meeting today, but I’m not sure how many we have time for. Hmmm… eenie menie minie mo… Would you all be willing to try to do a little sketching or brainstorming or doodling on your own here in the group for a couple of minutes in your sketchbooks? I would like to continue to reflect on this concept of deficit thinking and for all of us to think about how we may have encountered this or how you interpret that concept in relation to your work. And again, deficit thinking is sort of a way of attributing the cause of the achievement gap between poor students and more affluent student or between students of color and white students, or attributing educational inequity to the innate failings of the failing students. In other words, the reason why the achievement gap exists is because the poor and minority students either have a lack of educability or intelligence or lack of language ability or questionable morals or their culture. What it really does is mask the kinds of societal level inequities that Erica addressed in her image of the kids on the hamster wheel.

Erica: I can talk about it!

Sunny: (laughing) I don’t want you to talk about it, I want you to write about it and draw about it and then we’ll briefly share about it.

( Participants take about five minutes to draw and write in their sketchbooks.)

Sunny: So I wondered if each of you could take like a minute or so and share what you came up with. It doesn’t have to be profound. It would be nice if it is, but it doesn’t have to be (all laughing).

Erica: So my question is, who is propagating the deficit model? Because as educators, when we’re writing our educational philosophy we always write all kids can learn, but they learn differently at different pace. In America, the cultural trait of America is that we’re very idealistic, but we cannot live up to our ideals. We’re constantly pushing toward our ideals up here, but can never really reach them. So like we say we have democracy but we don’t really have 100 percent democracy. It’s the same thing with education. But in education since educators all say all kids can learn, I think that education is very democratic. So when they put in politicians who want to have control, then education gets attacked, because of all the institutions in America, education is probably the most democratic, because we want to practice that ideal. So, who are we going to shoot down first? Education. And who is on the front line of practicing that democratic ideal? The teacher. So I think that is why our policy right
now is to attack the teachers and the kids because we symbolize democracy, because knowledge is power, so that’s why we’re getting attacked first.

**Fiona:** Well I noticed when I was doing a lot of reading about education in the United States, how the former slaves right after slavery couldn’t wait to start educating themselves and their children. They built schools and other things and some of the other people in their communities, in the white communities nearby, didn’t have these things. I read that in some cases the schools were closed because if the white communities didn’t have it you can’t have it. And then the white people opened up a school and then it was well, you can’t go because you’re black. So that’s what I thought of. You’re sort of darned if you do, darned if you don’t. It doesn’t at that point matter. And so I drew a picture of a kid getting hit on the head with a book (Figure 24).

![Figure 24. Sketchbook drawing by study participant Fiona Williams](image)

**Reflections on Race**

In the third focus group meeting I conducted member checks with the participants. In these member checks, I shared my emerging interpretations of each participant’s experiences and critical perspectives, as expressed in the themes and imagery in their artwork and the topics we discussed in the previous focus group sessions. By this point in the study I had developed working metaphors for each participant as a kind of shorthand characterization of their personalities and relationships with their students. I shared these metaphors with the participants as part of the member checks to see if these rang true and seemed like appropriate
characterizations of them. At this point in the study my metaphors for each participant were: Bob – the Seeker; Erica – the Advocate; and Fiona – the Matriarch. I do not include the member checks in this narrative because they read as redundant, since I summarize information that participants previously shared. The member checks served several purposes. They were a way of continuing to develop rapport with the participants, and communicating my respect for them, in keeping with the democratic, reciprocal ethos of this study. They also allowed us to transition somewhat naturally into a frank and personal discussion of race, which was the main focus of this session.

Prior to this meeting there was a miscommunication between the participants and myself about the next meeting date, and only two of the three participants attended. During this informal “meeting” we had some brief discussion related to the study, which I recounted for Fiona, who was not present at that time.

**Sunny:** What I’d actually like to do today is to talk about race. I’m bringing it up now along with the member checks because each of you has brought up the topic of race in different ways through your work – either in your personal artwork, the work you do for this study, or our conversations about the schools where we work and the contexts where we teach. So today I would really like each of us to talk about how we think our individual racial identity impacts our teaching and our relationships with our students, their parents and our school communities. One bonus of having such a diverse group of participants is getting a diversity of perspectives on teaching in Title I schools. However I want to be very clear that I do not expect any of you to be the spokesperson for your race, either for all white people, or all black people, or all Asian Americans teaching in Title I schools. I think that’s impossible and inappropriate. I’m really just curious about how each of you perceives your race and whether it helps, hinders, or doesn’t impact your work.

**Bob:** So race, you wanna talk about NASCAR?

**Sunny:** Ha, ha (sarcastically). At our last scheduled meeting, Bob and Erica and I talked for 10 minutes or so and we ended up cancelling and rescheduling for today. We ended up talking about race, and well, I’m just gonna go ahead and share what we talked about to catch everyone up. I think this will be a good way to transition into each of us reflecting on and talking about our own race and how it impacts our school and our
work. Bob emailed me this new image last week and we spent a few minutes talking about it. Let me bring it up briefly (Figure 25).

Sunny: So Bob, you talked about creating this image, and how you were looking for colors or patterns that would represent every race and, this is what you said, you had an easy time “finding a stereotype for every race except for white people” (lots of laughter here from me and the participants).

Bob: Yes, I said that, and it was a wonderful moment! And I said I would imagine that if I talked to an African American person they could stereotype me very quickly, or Erica an Asian American very quickly, and I imagined they would have the same problem I have, which is how can I take my race and all the diversity in it and boil it down to one motif?

Figure 25. A New Normal, digital image by study participant Bob Watson

Sunny: But then it also seemed like making this piece caused you to reflect critically on how easy it was to stereotype people of other races. I thought that was really powerful, that even with as much experience as you have as an educator, now being asked to reflect on it consciously, my interpretation is that the process of enlightenment that you described in relation to your work in Title I schools is perhaps still ongoing?
Bob: Yes, I think that’s a fair interpretation. Just to touch bases on this particular piece here, that spiral is really my evolution of thinking. Do you want me to read it?

(Everyone says yes)

Bob: Ok it says, “It’s not ok to act like this. They need to reform. They need to reform, it’s not normal. It’s not normal. I hope it’s not a new normal. It’s real different. It’s real different. Could it be ok? I’m not comfortable! I’m not comfortable with it being ok! Could it be another normal and be ok? It could be another normal and be ok.”

Sunny: Thank you for sharing that with all of us, Bob. So, back to the synopsis of our conversation, after we talked about Bob’s piece, Erica talked about going up to one of the more affluent schools on the north side of town, maybe for professional development or something, and noticing how white the staff is.

Erica: It was the staff webpage, I was looking for the reading coach and I was like, “Wow there are so many white people here!”

Sunny: Oh, ok. And so then we had a mini discussion speculating why that might be. And we wondered is this intentional, is it discrimination, or is it “our kind wanting to hire our kind to work with our kind” in the north side and south side schools. And then we also discussed school choice as something that has resegregated schools in this community. We talked about one of the elementary schools in the center of town that has a math and science magnet program, and how it is drawing some of the natural diversity of residential areas away from schools that are perceived as failing. And then I wondered why we don’t give incentives to National Board Certified Teachers to teach in Title I schools, and Erica said that’s been proposed a million times and it never happens because white people don’t want to give up any privileges. I also talked about my racial experience at the elementary school where I taught as one of the major times in my life where I felt very self-conscious about being white because most of the students, and about half of the staff were black. So I guess this is my little segway into my own discussion of my race in the context of my teaching experience. Pretty quickly after getting there I felt like, hmm, I’m in the minority. And that experience for me, coupled with the fact that I’m an alternative certified teacher, made me realize how much I had to learn about teaching. I might have had some of what Bob described as “what’s wrong with you” but then I immediately thought “well, there’s way more wrong with me because I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing!” And then because I clearly lacked a lot of skills in teaching and classroom management, very quickly I was in a position where I actively sought to learn from my veteran colleagues and observe them and ask for tips from them to find out what they did to work successfully with our students. This led to a mini-discussion of whiteness that started with Bob’s piece. We discussed how white people are not used to thinking of ourselves as having a race even though we basically invented the concept of race to describe other people. And now I guess I’d like to turn it over to you all to reflect on and talk about how you think your own racial identity has impacted your work at your school and in your school community.
Erica: So as you know, Asians in the U.S. are the minority of minorities, probably 5% of population. So I’ve always considered myself the very small minority compared to other minorities because that’s the history of the U.S. But in my childhood experience, when my family immigrated to South Florida in 1973 there were no Asian people in Pompano Beach, at my school. Growing up, my sister and I were the only two Asians at our school. But my experience was that when the white kids picked on us, the black kids defended us. So I think that the African American children saw us as needing protection, and so I’ve always had this feeling like I’m part of the minorities. I’m the minority of minorities, but I’m part of them, I’m part of the African American children, it’s part of my life in school. So I’ve never felt uncomfortable with African American people or anything like that. So when I started working at my current position I felt very comfortable. This was no big deal because this was my experience as a child, growing up in South Florida, being the minority of minorities.

So also, as an immigrant we had to think about, we have the African Americans who are minorities but who historically came here as slaves. That’s a very different kind of immigration than people who came here voluntarily as immigrants. That’s why I try to see all of it and not just my own status or the African American people’s status, but all of it. Also, I grew up in Hong Kong, but I was born in Venezuela, and so that’s also part of my experience, being exposed to the Hispanic culture as a child, and growing up and having Hispanic cousins. I also had the experiences of living in Japan as a young adult and travelling around the world, and also studying ESOL, which requires me to do cross-cultural studies. All that blended together with my own undergraduate education. I took courses in Black Studies, I worked in the Black Studies Union as a work-study student, I was the only Asian, and my roommate was the vice president of the Black Student Union. So I’ve always felt like I’m part of this multicultural world so working at my school was like “well, so what?” You know, it was a mix of people, right?

Then I also worked in a high school for two years, and as an Asian, I was neutral. I did not have to fall into the conflict between white people and black people. The kids did not see me as white, and say like, “Oh you’re white and that’s why you don’t like me.” You know how kids do that, like you’re white and you’re discriminating against them. Well they couldn’t do that because I’m not white! So I was like a neutral character in this world of mostly white and black. I mean there were some Hispanics there, too, but the biggest tension is between blacks and whites because of the history.

The other thing is, Asians are not a subgroup on the achievement measures because we are the “model minority.” Why does white society characterize us as the model minority? Because then they can say to blacks and Hispanics – if they can do it, why can’t you? If the Asians can open restaurants and nail salons, and buy houses – even with ten Vietnamese people living in them - why can’t you? It is a way to pit the ethnic groups against each other. So Asians, because of our culture, always value education, so Asians are overrepresented in Ivy League schools and whatever. But I suspect that is not 100% true. Asian kids have gangs, they have violence, they do not all move up in the world. The reality is contrary to the myth. Like for example the Hmong people
in Minnesota, they’re not all rising up in the world. They still have problems. And the Vietnamese gangs in California they have problems. But the society, the institutions, the media, want you to believe that Asians are doing fine and we don’t need to close the achievement gap or anything like that. Because Jeremy Lin, the NBA player, he went to Harvard. Wow! An NBA player? An Asian one? Of course he had to go to Harvard! He couldn’t just go to a regular state college. But if you notice when you talk about him in the media, he was discriminated against, because people don’t want to see Asians as great athletes. So Asians experience discrimination just like everyone else, but we’re labeled the model minority, I believe, in order to pit us against other ethnic groups.

Sunny: Wow, thank you for sharing all that. I want to ask if you can take that further or in a different direction and ask how do you see your racial identity and immigrant experience informing your work as a teacher? You talked about your childhood and feeling at home in diverse communities and with the diverse staff and students at your school, but I wondered if there was anything different or in addition to that?

Erica: I think it helps the other immigrant children to see that their teacher is an immigrant, and maybe they relate to that, and maybe their parents relate to that. I’m not sure, because I’ve never asked them. So in my situation here, I think this is what they see. But when I taught English in Japan, I wasn’t that exciting because I’m not a white person! I look like one of them! It’s just not as interesting. But hopefully it taught them that in America there aren’t just white people and black people living here, it’s everybody. So, I try to see beyond my race or my experience to what the whole picture is globally. And I think the kids I teach now probably see me as a neutral character and don’t necessarily have all these race connotations other than they might think of Jackie Chan and Chinese restaurants.

Sunny: Do you think that your immigrant experience impacted your decision to become an ESOL teacher?

Erica: Yes, I think so. My sister was already teaching ESOL and so when I came back from Japan and I was trying to figure out what to do, my sister said I should teach ESOL because it’s a great job and you get all the good kids. That’s not true all the time, but maybe you get the immigrant kids whose families want to succeed in America, so maybe they’re a little better behaved than American kids.

Sunny: Thank you. Would you mind talking next, Fiona?

Fiona: Sure. I think I’ll start with a little bit of background, I don’t think I did that before. My mother was divorced and when I was growing up, she was into a lot of new age stuff when I was a child in the 1970s and I was her companion to a lot of these things. I went to yoga retreats and “Dare to Be Great,” one of those big things where if you sell stuff you can earn lots of money and people are running down the aisles with their big checks. I’ve been to a lot of those kinds of things and in most cases we were what integrated these events. Either that or there were a few other black people. So for most
of my life, that’s how it was. I remember I went to one school growing up that was mostly black. It didn’t start out mostly black but we moved into a neighborhood and it became mostly black.

My mom worked as a teacher and guidance counselor in the Philadelphia schools, so she knew what schools she wanted me to go to. For high school she sent me to Girls’ High, which was a big school, but it was a majority white school, and you had to have a certain grade point average to get in. It was a nice mix of people. There were Hispanics, Asians, and I was happy there, but outside of family and friends I had never been immersed in a strong, ethnic, black experience and I decided I wanted to go to a black college. So I had this guidance counselor in high school steered me toward an HBCU (historically black college and university) in the South and I thought that was perfect. And then my whole family freaked out because I was going to the South, where we didn’t know anybody.

So I went to college and it was culture shock. Not so much race, well it was race because I wanted to come to a black school, but a lot of it was cultural because it was the South and getting to know southern black people. And so immediately I kind of joined up with other students from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and other places. The Southerners were here, and then the Midwesterners were here, so there was this big divide.

Also going into the public schools was pretty different. I interned at a university laboratory school that was mixed but mostly white. Then I went to a rural elementary school that was mostly black, but they were sweet, country kids. I went to an extremely affluent public elementary school next, which was very, very white. I remember days would go by sometimes and I wouldn’t see any black people. There were a couple of black teachers and me, but most of the students were white. Then I got to my current school, which I thought was going to be like the rural school where I had interned with sweet kids, but it was not. It wasn’t really a race thing, but more of a culture thing or class, with the things I saw going on. I was like whoa, you know, what’s happening here? So for me, it was a big shock.

Down the road, I felt like the children accepted me more automatically because of my race, even though a lot of times I had no idea what they were talking about. They had terminology that I just didn’t understand, and so I would just gloss over it and be like, “uh huh, go sit down.” (everyone laughing). In the beginning there was a culture shock, but the longer I worked there the more I understood the language and the culture. But later on I had an intern – my second intern, a really good intern, from New Jersey, a white guy. He was really good, good with the lessons, good with the kids, very caring. One day we had this snotty, crying kindergarten kid and he picked him up and hugged him and the kid snotted all over his shirt. And my intern kept saying “Don’t worry about it, don’t worry about it,” in contrast to me, the first thing I would have done is wiped that nose! So he was very nurturing and caring. One day a kid asked me to help him because he said, “He [the intern] won’t help me.” And I said, “Why?” And he said, “Because he’s white.” And I was like, well he’s helping
everybody, why wouldn’t he help you? And that’s when I thought there might be a little more automatic acceptance [of her because of her race] because I’d been there a little while by that time, but not a long time.

**Erica:** Even when they’re so young they notice that.

**Sunny:** So I really appreciate you articulating your individual experience of moving down here and getting used to the culture and language and maybe also the class differences. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that, compared to your own upbringing and background.

**Fiona:** Well, not everybody in a Title I school, at least not at my school, is lower income. We tend to get professors’ kids and executive type kids too. I guess I didn’t have a lot of exposure to lower socioeconomic classes and some of the things that go along with that. I was a little mystified by it. But I think it’s pretty typical that most teachers come from middle class backgrounds, even in Title I schools. I guess I expected different things than what I saw.

**Sunny:** Fair enough. So would you say that adjusting to the social class of your students was more of an issue than race for you?

**Fiona:** Well, racially obviously I would fit in, but a lot of my students kept saying I was mixed. They insisted I was mixed. I still hear that to this day. But in terms of class differences, for example, we’ll hear about stuff like shootings on the news, and then we’ll hear about it in vivid detail from a kindergartener. He had been out in the midst of it while mom was who knows where, and he was out with his older brothers whoever, and he would tell us about how he saw the shooting, and then he ran over here, and then he did this. That’s a five year old.

**Sunny:** Well, thank you, I don’t think I have any more questions. Thank you for sharing that. So Bob, now it’s your turn. I know we already talked about this a little bit with your artwork and stuff, but I would like to hear about any more reflections that you have.

**Bob:** Ok, well I remember when I started teaching in 1974 in a rural environment, and I really can relate to what Fiona was talking about in that there’s a difference between the rural poor and the inner city. I’m not sure how I would describe that, but my first exposure out of my comfort zone was working in rural Georgia. I was teaching a lot of rural blacks and a lot of rural Southern whites.

I grew up in a family where my mother was an artist and she was a liberal and you know, we just didn’t know prejudice in my home. While we weren’t freedom riders for equality, it just wasn’t part of our family. My mother was lame, she was injured and needed care, and she had black maids that she treated with dignity. She wasn’t hesitant to be kind to them, to help them financially, and that’s the kind of family I grew up in. So when I got to southern Georgia, which was really a hotbed for racism and oppression, I was actually shocked when my students’ immediate response was that I
was not trustworthy, that there was a reason not to trust me as a person who would be fair to them in the classroom because I was white. I remember some outbursts by children that were like, “you don’t like me because I’m black!” and I was like, where is this coming from? I pretty much treat children as they come, so that was a big shock for me. But it was an even bigger shock coming to an urban middle school. That was a whole different kind of anger and distrust. I mean it was really deep. When I was there, it was at a time when there was a lot of stuff going on in our community with middle school and high school kids and it was really the pits. We were dealing with a lot of this, and there were many times when I just got to the end of the day and I was like, whew, we made it through without some big thing going down. So it was even deeper there, the prejudice coming at me there was deeper than anything I had ever experienced before. I grew up in a fairly homogenous middle-class, lower middle-class community, where we had some ethnic diversity, I mean we had Jewish people, we had Italian people, but we didn’t have any people of color.

**Sunny:** Can I ask where you grew up?

**Bob:** Orlando. So, I just found that I had to raise my game. In other words, I had to really be aware and look at myself in ways that I had never looked at myself before. When kids would challenge me like that, I wouldn’t respond then, but at the end of the day I would reflect back on that and think, am I giving more time to the white students? Am I being fair to the black kids? Because I was being called out. And middle school kids, they’ll call you out! So I felt like, to some degree as a white male, that identity is kind of an icon for ‘the man,’ the slave owner. And that’s not who I was, but I was being put in that role. I just tried to be introspective to be sure that I was trying to be fair and clear to all my kids.

This is another thing that I encountered that was one of the saddest moments in my middle school tenure. We had some black kids who were high achieving and really seemed interested in getting an education, and there was a whole other set of black kids that accused them of trying to be white. So then the high achieving kids were like, “I’m not gonna do that, I’m not gonna be white.” It’s really troubling for me that somehow for these kids, achieving academically was something they would not aspire to because it was part of the white culture, and they didn’t want to be anywhere tied to that. That was a real challenge.

**Erica:** It still happens. Remember Henry Gathers? Mr. Shonibare said that he was going down the drain because those bad kids in his homeroom were influencing him. [The student and teacher’s names Erica mentions here have both been changed to pseudonyms.]

**Bob:** And I’m sad to hear that because he was an extraordinary kid. I think it starts at that age, because we don’t see as much of that dynamic about being white and academic achievement in younger children, but when they start getting into the fourth grade level, and into that middle school level this dynamic seems to start kicking in.
Sunny: I think that dynamic kicks in around middle school, regardless to some extent.

Bob: What’s that?

Sunny: That achieving academically is uncool. Maybe not to the extent or in the same way as you’re describing, but thinking about my experience as a middle schooler, I felt like I was a big nerd. I was in the gifted program from elementary school, I was taller than everyone by a foot, I was always the smart kid that knew all the answers, and I had weird clothes because I had a single mom and we didn’t have a lot of money. So I felt that I was singled out in a lot of ways, but mainly for my intellect and my academic achievement, and so by middle school, that was horrible. Seventh grade was like the worst year of my life for bullying and hazing, and this was by white kids mostly. I went to middle school in Miami, and my school was about evenly split racially. It was about a third black, a third white, and a third Cuban, and so I sometimes would hear very impersonal taunts and jeers from black and Hispanic kids, but no personal digs. That was from the white kids, and so I combatted that by cultivating an image as a stoner, basically. And hanging out with the stoner crowd and trying to be cool. I have heard that a lot, for black youth, the idea that achieving academically is negatively associated with being white. But it seems like it’s probably a really complex issue that reflects a whole lot of things that are wrong with our society at large. I agree that it is troubling, though. Majorly, deeply troubling.

Bob: It is complex. Of the many things that I encountered, that was a view that was really hard to break down. It was really hard to have a conversation that would convince somebody that was not so. One thing that just occurred to me, a small thing that I just thought of that made a difference for me in connecting with some of the black kids in Georgia. At that time was that I was still young and athletic and I could play some good basketball. I used to play with the students some, and that was a wonderful connection for me to get on an even playing field with them, and that made it easier to have the kind of shepherding role that you can have with kids. Now I’m old, fat, and slow.

Sunny: Well this was really great, it helps to fill in a lot of areas of what I’m interested in. One thing that’s evolving for me in talking with you all as veteran teachers, is finding out why you stayed at your schools and what’s in it for you being at your schools? So hearing more about your backgrounds, your individual experiences and connections and disconnections with your school communities is really interesting and helpful. So thank you all for sharing so much.

Bob: I stayed for the money. (Everyone laughs)

Creative Counter-Narratives

In the fourth meeting the participants and I continued the conversation about our personal and professional experiences, this time with a focus on new artwork that the participants had
made for the study. I began this meeting with an additional member check with Fiona. I include it in this narrative because she reveals a bit more detail about some of her early professional experiences that led her to her current position. I also wanted to check in with her about my metaphor for her – the Matriarch. Although she had been very gracious about it in the earlier member check, it seemed like it didn’t quite fit.

Sunny: After looking back at the video, I had a follow up question for you, Fiona. You talked about moving to the South to attend a black college, and said you wanted to have a strong, ethnic, African American experience. I was thinking about that in relation to your personal artwork that deals with aspects of African American women’s experience, and I had a question about your relationship to the school where you teach now. I understand your school has a kind of historic community significance as an African American school here in this town. So I wondered, is that the kind of school where you wanted to work or was it just circumstance that led you there? Since you had articulated these other aspects of your life experience that involved seeking out an African American experience, I wondered if any of that relates to you being at your school?

Fiona: Well, it was circumstance that got me to my current school. In my first job at a more affluent school on the north side of town, they wanted to integrate the teaching staff since they were up for accreditation. So I was brought in as the second art teacher to introduce multicultural elements to the students, because the first one couldn’t do that somehow. [She says this with a sarcastic tone of voice and the rest of us respond with smirking and laughing.] That’s what I was hired for. So looking back and knowing what I know now, it was just a bunch of bull. But they needed me there for whatever reason, and I needed a job and they hired me on the spot. Really, when I think about it, I got lost on my way to the interview, and I called them and said, “Hey, I’m lost.” It was a back road and I thought I knew where I was but I didn’t. So I got there and the principal gave me a nice spiel about the job. I needed the job, and he said, “Well I can give it to you right now,” and I said “OK!” I did not expect to get that job. When you’re miserably late to an interview you don’t expect to get hired. So anyway, after that happened and I was hired, it was an interesting experience working there. I’ll just leave it at that. It was interesting. It wasn’t necessarily the racial aspect for me, but I think it was the racial aspect for many of the staff members. Because I mean, I had been in mostly white environments before, but not mostly Southern white environments. But there was a lot going on and I was told, a lot, how lucky I was to be there.

Erica: What year was that?

Fiona: 1993. It was my first job, so I felt lucky to be anywhere. But I realized there was something going on, so then at the end it became, “Well, we’re going to go a different
direction, and we’re not going to have a second art teacher.” It turned out I think that one of the staff was certified in art and something else and she wanted to do it, so they decided they didn’t need me anymore. So I sat around for a while but then I got a call from the district asking if I had found a job yet, and I interviewed over the phone with my current school. It was a very nice interview, and it went really smoothly. They were like, “You don’t do this do you?” “No.” “You don’t do this?” “No.” “OK, you’ve got the job.” So that’s how I got here.

Sunny: OK, so it sounds like your path getting there was circumstantial but once you got there, because of your school’s history and significance in the African American community here in town, did you feel like you were a part of that mission?

Fiona: Not initially I wouldn’t say so. I had interned in a rural elementary school with a similar population, but this urban school was really hard discipline-wise. In my first year, it was a major struggle with the discipline. When I got observed, the kids were so good because the principal was there. They didn’t know how to react! They were so good! I was like, great! I can finally get my lesson done without interruptions!

Sunny: OK, well that sounds like the universal first year teacher experience to me.

Fiona: Except it was my second year. My first year was pretty easy because those kids pretty much behaved.

Sunny: OK, thank you for that. I wanted to follow up with you on that, so thank you. So if it’s ok, I’d like to turn now to the two images you brought in. This one is really interesting (Figure 26).

Fiona: Neither is finished, but this one’s closer than the other one. I started on that one first, with the outline (Figure 26) but then moved on to this one for some reason (Figure 27). I practically finished this one, but I need to go back to the second one.

Sunny: Nice! Excellent! OK, more member checking! When I shared my working metaphors for characterizing each of you, the metaphor I was working with for you, Fiona was the “Matriarch.” And I remember you sort of bristled a little bit at that. But then I started looking more at your artwork and listening to you talk more about your experiences, and now I’m thinking of you more as an “Earth Mother.”

Fiona: Yes! That’s me.

Erica: It’s the new age stuff.

Sunny: Yes, it is the new age!

Fiona: Thank you for that, though, I like the new one!
Figure 26. Teacher Tree (version 1), pencil drawing by study participant Fiona Williams

Figure 27. Teacher Tree (version 2), pencil drawing by study participant Fiona Williams
Sunny: Awesome. I’m going to write that in my notes – Fiona says Earth Mother is OK. So since we’ve been talking to you, why don’t you talk to us about your artwork?

Fiona: Well I had an idea about trees in my sketchbook. I didn’t actually do what I thought I would, but I was thinking about students as small trees with underdeveloped roots, being guided by a stake to kind of pull them in so they could get knowledge, love, acceptance. It kind of came from a drawing I did of a teacher, and thinking about the things we give to students: food, art, love, acceptance, and things like that. I have her here as sort of an earth mother.

Sunny: Yes! (making a little cheer)

Fiona: But I hadn’t figured out how to surround her with the children. And then I came up with the tree idea, which I liked a little bit more because it said what I was thinking. So that was the original idea for that, but then I thought well, maybe in the beginning trees are very young looking, their branches are small, they’re slender. But then when teachers are more experienced, they start looking more gnarly. There are a lot more students and they’re more developed, just to show the experience and the impact you have on students’ lives and vice versa. So that’s the first one, and it’s not done. [line drawing]

So now in the second one, and I don’t know why I went to that one, I was hoping for just a plain expression. I didn’t want her to look angry, or happy, just kind of plain. I mean, it’s good, it’s sometimes stressful, but you’re there because you want to be, you feel like you’re making a difference, and you’re interacting. Well, some days you don’t want to interact with them (we chuckle) so that’s kind of the expression. And then there’s the grass. Somehow, the students became grass. They’re not my little trees. And then I was thinking about color. I have a photograph of crabs on the beach and they were all in these little areas. I was playing with the image on the computer and adding color to them, and I hadn’t figured out what each color meant, but I just thought about the different colors and how they come to you, and what you do to them. So I had this idea of just little pockets of color. But then I got frustrated and said, meh. So I went back to that (the tree-teacher drawing).

Sunny: OK, well even just for purposes of this project, I think just talking about color is a really beautiful metaphor, especially the way you talked about it. It’s not a color scheme that is divided according to race and that sort of color metaphor, but the variations of kids that come to us, and the qualities they bring with them. I think the whole thing is a beautiful, Earth Mother-y metaphor for teaching! Yeah, I really like that. It’s so interesting to me that each of you have such different ways of characterizing your relationships to your students and what they give back to you and how you’re going forward with this. Do either of you have any comments about Fiona’s images here?
Bob:  Well, they’re very earthy and I like that.  It’s very solid too.  There’s the solidity of the trunk of the tree and the roots there, and you’re very grounded.  But then there’s also the top of the tree and a part that is very free and open and liberated and all this.  It’s a nice contrast.  The expression is very good, too.  I like that it doesn’t convey really any emotion that you can be influenced by, you just go into her eyes and start to think about what she’s thinking.  It’s a nice piece.

Sunny:  Yeah, I like the metaphor of groundedness for teachers, especially given how long you’ve been there at your school, and how transient many of our students’ lives are.  I think that groundedness is really important.  I was at my last job for six years and I would come back from time to time and do things in the current art teacher’s class, and she told me that the kids would ask about me all the time.  When is Mrs. Spillane coming back?  It was just heartbreaking to me.  In my first couple of years, I think they tested me, you know?  Maybe a lot of people come and go in their lives and they want to test your commitment to them, I don’t know you.  It definitely got easier for me after I’d been there about four years.

Erica:  Yeah, that would be the symbol of constancy, the kids, when they all know your name, all 500 kids know your name.  I would hope they know your name!

Fiona:  Except for in kindergarten, when they come in.  It takes them a minute.

Sunny:  A minute (laughing).  Awesome!  Bob, we talked a little bit about your piece (Figure 21), but I thought we could take a minute to go into it a little more since I feel like we kind of glossed over it a little bit.

Bob:  It wasn’t my sense that we glossed over it.  Basically it was one try at detailing some of the evolution of my relating to behavior in children that I had never seen before.  So I see evolution as a spiral concept as it’s going through the universe, and as it’s going through time it’s also evolving and that’s why I wanted to use the spiral.  And it just kind of starts out going “what the fuck is this” and “who are these people” then ok, “well, maybe they can learn how to behave correctly” and then to where I finally figured out what the new ok was, you know this is ok and this is who they are, this is where they come from, their culture their people.  Right is right and wrong is wrong, but then there’s culture.  It took me a while to differentiate that.  I think you made a really interesting point and I think you’re right that there are students who try to push at you to see how you respond to them.  They’ll try to push you away to see whether you’re really interested in them.  And when you just stick around and there’s that constancy, they begin to trust you.  So that’s kind of what that was about.

Sunny:  I like the spiral as a metaphor.  I think there’s even a specific learning theory, something like hermeneutics or some big crazy word like that, that envisions learning as a spiral, where you’re going through then back, sort of mulling things over, it’s not directly up, it’s not linear, but it’s going to something new, then coming back to something old and then you go a little bit more out of your comfort zone and then you come back and try to reconcile that with what you’ve experienced and where you come
from, and then you go further and kind of go up. And even though this is two-dimensional or digital two-dimensional, I think that’s a really great metaphor for teaching as well, for a teacher’s learning process of learning how to be effective with our students, and learning how to connect with them.

Bob: And the way it’s written. I can’t really do it, but it repeats. It kind of makes a statement, but then it repeats it and changes it a little bit, and each time you go back to that concept, you’re changed a little bit as you go back to that piece. So that’s how it’s written to show that change and that evolution of thinking.

Sunny: Thank you. So moving on to Erica’s work, you have three new images for this week!

Erica: Yes, so this is a continuation of James Crawford’s article, the same article where he talks about the differences between the civil rights cases and the education reforms today (Figure 28). He calls it a shift in terminology. He said research showed that around 1998 the term “achievement gap” started appearing in the media. He said it was probably Carl Rove who coined that term to change the way we talk about education. And then NCLB was introduced to Congress and a lot of people got on the bandwagon. I wanted to use different images and not use Linda Brown again, but I couldn’t find anything else so that’s Linda Brown. The image on the right is Michelle Rhee, who was the chancellor of education in Washington DC. She was a big proponent of testing and merit pay, and DC teachers got like $10,000 bonuses for good test scores. A few
years after she was appointed she lost her position, because the mayor that appointed her did not win re-election. And right after that, the scandal broke that test scores were rising too quickly in certain schools. Nobody was found guilty, but it was hinted that there was cheating.

Sunny: Really? (sarcastically) You mean there’s all this pressure and there are monetary incentives for test scores and they suspect teachers might cheat? Really?

Erica: That case is not the same as the Atlanta school district, where they did find definitively that teachers or administrators cheated. But in Washington, DC they did not. So, Michelle Rhee taught with Teach for America for 3 years after graduating from an Ivy League school. She supposedly taught inner city kids in Baltimore and she raised their test scores and determined that it’s the teacher who makes all the difference. And now she has her own foundation after losing her job in Washington, DC, and she continues to push for that model of NCLB, Race to the Top, that idea that it’s the teacher who can make all this happen, regardless of any other social conditions or whatever.

Sunny: That’s a really interesting concept, and I think the language does shape the way we think about the challenges in Title I schools, thinking about equal educational opportunity and changing the inputs verses all this emphasis on the outputs. This side of your image is like a negative characterization while the other side is a positive. Does that seem right to you?

Erica: Yes, in the left side of the image, Crawford says that after desegregation and the civil rights movement, the government’s job was to provide equal educational opportunity for all. We are a democracy so we’re supposed to do that. But now with NCLB, it’s not about equal educational opportunity, the government’s job is to make the kids and teachers produce something, which is test scores.

Sunny: So it’s the accountability on a fairly narrowly defined output – and you can tell me if you agree with me or not on this – verses the accountability for the system at large for equal input in the system. And this could be what we actually do in the programs we provide and the technology and the resources, and other things that our students have access to. Interesting. Do you all have any comments or does this bring up any thoughts for you?

Bob: The only image that comes to mind at the end of that conversation is that we’re producing test scores, in other words this is a factory. I’ve many times seen my school as a factory.

Sunny: (showing Sara’s next piece Test Prep Factory, Figure 29) Really? (sarcastically) Speaking of factories, that’s a good segway here. Could you talk to us a little bit about this piece?

Erica: Well, basically that’s what we’re doing, like Bob said. We’re training kids to take tests like in this piece based on Diane Ravitch’s (2010) book, *The Death and Life of the
Great American School System. She says that if we train kids to take a test, that test becomes invalid. So I just imagine our kids as those hens, they’re producing eggs, they’re locked in these little cages and we keep feeding them hormones, or hormone ingested for feed. We just keep feeding them and feeding them and they have to produce the egg, which is the higher test scores at the end of the school year. And that’s what we’re doing to the kids, we’re locking them in, imprisoning them.

![Test Prep Factory](image)

*Figure 29. Test Prep Factory, digital image by study participant Erica Wei*

**Bob:** The image that just came up for me, which would have been another great image for that would be the fois gras, that they are force fed to produce the quality meat.

**Erica:** Fattening the geese.

**Erica:** This next image is also from Diane Ravitch’s (2010) book (Figure 30). She was on the news and in the media a lot when the book came out. The interesting thing about her is that she was the undersecretary or assistant secretary of education under George W. Bush, and so obviously she was very pro accountability, pro NCLB, and she supported charter schools, and things like that. But as she was doing her research, she changed her mind, and she realized that this was not good educational policy. Her book was discussed a lot in the media and I read her book recently, and one of her quotes was “going to school is not the same as going shopping.” She also said “the problem with the marketplace is it dissolves communities and replaces them with consumers.” So what’s been happening is we want to apply the market model or business model in government, especially in public education.
Erica: So when I read that I thought maybe I could try to do a satire or something like that, with silly dialogue. And the teacher would say, “How may I help you today?” and the student would say, “I would like some reading with a matching set of math. I’m going to a test prep party tonight,” or something silly like that. And then the teacher would say, “Would you like some art or science with that as an accessory?” And the student would say, “No, I want my curriculum outfit to be very narrow and simple, none of that fluffy stuff.” And then the teacher says, “OK, well let’s get started.” So, the teacher is the sales clerk, the school is the retail store, the student is the consumer, and the curriculum is the product for sale.

This image is just something silly that came to my mind when I read the book and her quotes. But the serious thing is that applying market model to public education, is like Walmart killing off mom and pop stores. What we’re doing by putting schools in a competitive model, the market model, is we’re dissolving communities by making students go to this school and that school. What’s left over are the lower level consumers who are stuck with the bottom level public schools. While the other people have choices, they have means with private schools and charter schools, or voucher money or other things like that.

Sunny: I see how private schools and charter schools facilitate resegregation, in the sense that the families with means have all these choices, and that leaves the rest of us with our neighborhood school that’s been decimated by giving affluent families a “legitimate” way out. Instead of saying “I don’t want my kids to go to school with all these black
kids,” it’s just “These test scores aren’t that great at this school, and my precious darling needs to go over here.” But if you ask the kids, of course they want science and art, that’s all they want in their day! They want to do the experiments, they want to light the Bunsen burner, they want to get their hands dirty, they want to squish clay, you know?

Erica: Of course!

Sunny: Do you all have any comments about that?

Fiona: That reminds me, I’ve heard politicians talking about running schools like a business model, and I think that’s why we have teachers without tenure and now it doesn’t matter if you have an advanced degree or not because you don’t get rewarded for those kind of things.

Sunny: OK, I want to move on to one more area of discussion for today. So we’ve spent some time talking about artwork, and last time we spent some time talking about identity, but mostly in terms of racial identity and how it impacts our relationships with our students. But today, and I think this is really appropriate for some of the things we talked about today, about the accountability and testing, and how the curriculum is limited. So I wondered to what extent and in what ways do you think your artistic identities and experiences influence the way you think about your practices as teachers?

Erica: I got my BFA in undergrad and I’m married to an artist, so I’m always involved in the arts. But I got my masters in teaching ESOL. When I do my mini-grant project each year, it’s always art and literacy. I partner with the art teacher on purpose, and I believe in including art in learning a second language and in learning in general. But we all know that the arts are important to learning, because we’ve heard about music and learning abstract concepts, and gaining skills in observation through art. And then there’s the latest trend with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math education) where the art people say you need to include art in it and change it from STEM to STEAM. We definitely need to include art in learning in general. As an artist myself, and having my own educational background in the arts, I always try to implement it in my classroom, in my teaching.

Sunny: Do you think for your students who are all learning English but speak different home languages, that using art in your teaching practice helps bridge language gaps between students?

Erica: Yes! Definitely. Because kids naturally love art, they naturally enjoy drawing, coloring and creating, so yes, that way they can communicate with each other, they can see the visual aspects of it, yes, definitely it improves learning.

Sunny: OK, anybody else?
Bob: Yeah, two things came up for me. One thing was in my days in the classroom when I did assessments, I came up with an assessment model called “Draw, Label, and Tell.” So if we were studying the camera, I would ask the child to draw the camera, label the parts, and then tell what each part was for. My thinking there was using a lot of different skills and modalities for kids to be able to demonstrate their knowledge. So I had some kids that could draw better than they could tell, so I gave them credit for drawing. And also thinking that some kids might not have strong language skills so if weren’t proficient in describing things they had other ways to show what they learned. So that’s something that came out of my graphic arts background.

Another thing that came up for me is that in my artwork, there’s two terms that come up a lot: mystery and divinity. When I look at children and I look at teaching, I think of them in a broader context than just their academic sphere. We’re human beings, by God, we’re human beings. So my teaching process and my artistic process are both concerned with the human being that’s on the other end and how I interact with them. I want to give them more opportunities than just that very narrow, academic assessment model. Then the divinity part is that we’re all sentient, spiritual beings that are due respect. Part of my way of relating to children is related to my spiritual beliefs and I try to have reverence for each of them. As much as you can have reverence for a child when they’re acting like fourth and fifth graders do, and seventh and eighth graders do, but there has to be a reverence for that. Those are a couple of things that came up for me.

Sunny: OK, so what about you, Fiona?

Fiona: Well, that’s kind of a hard question. I’m thinking about artistic development in my students, and sometimes they get very caught up in “it has to be perfect” and then they rip up their papers. Then they’ll ask me how I learned to draw, and when I think about that, I think of it as having a lot of freedom. My mother just sat me somewhere and off she went. So I was able to experiment and try out these things. So I think about that and I realize that for some of my students, creativity is hard to get to. I sometimes try to have group projects so they can learn from a peer, like maybe a peer can draw this part, so they won’t feel the stress. I don’t know if that answers your question, but that’s something I always think about with some of my students when they get frustrated.

Final Reflections

Due to competing commitments, Fiona was unable to attend the final session. The other participants and I decided to go ahead and meet, since Bob had created some new work and wanted to share. This session was devoted to final reflections on participants’ experiences in the study and their day-to-day teaching practices.
Sunny: Thanks for coming today. This is probably the last group meeting for the study. We’re really just wrapping up with some final reflections and talking about some possible directions for what might come next for any of us, if anything. We’ve spent a lot of time in our meetings looking at artwork and talking about what we’ve made. Erica brought an extraordinary amount of images into the project, maybe five or six images. I love that you had so much to say and so much fire in your belly to speak out about public education and equitable educational opportunity for our students. And Bob, you brought in several new images for us to look at and discuss.

Bob: Yes, it’s a variation of the same image (Figure 31).

Sunny: Well, why don’t I just bring this up and let you take over and tell us about it.

![Figure 31. One Heart, One Spirit, One Classroom (versions 1 and 2), digital images by study participant Bob Watson](image)

Bob: OK, well, in a perfect world it would be one heart, one spirit, one classroom. We would recognize in the children who come to us that we’re all the same, that the container is different, but we all have the same curiosity and the same basic needs according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The schools need to accept the cultural differences and the shallow differences and embrace the fundamental dignity of all children in our community, as well as in our country and the world at large. The classroom is not just the classroom – the world is the classroom. That’s why there’s a picture of the earth is out there. In the connected world today, there is nothing out of reach for us today to learn. Then there’s the spirit, that’s the doves coming down there, and the red hearts represent the humanity in all of us, and the earth represents that we’re all part of this one blue marble, this big blue marble.
Erica: What are they wearing?

Bob: Thanks for bringing that detail out, those are like monastic habits that they’re wearing. I found those and digitally inserted them into them onto those beautiful children.

Sunny: I have a comment, related to when you were talking about the world and the globe image there, the connected world and the digital classroom. In this group we’ve been talking a lot about educational inequity and disparities in this town and maybe in the state and in our country, but we haven’t really talked about economic and educational disparities worldwide. It seems like you’re bringing that up a little bit in this image, and really thinking beyond the local community and looking at global disparities.

Bob: Yes, the ideal vision of education should be equality in your school, your town, your country, and the world.

Sunny: I know that spirituality is a theme that runs through a lot of your personal work. One of your images you initially brought in was this image (Figure 14) and we talked about the significance of “three” and the trinity and the spiritual symbolism there, and that to me related to the three children and the three doves in this image.

Bob: In my mind, it’s kind of the perfect number, both artistically and metaphysically. It is an image of balance and wholeness.

Sunny: You have so many different things in this image that reinforce the one child, one spirit, and the dignity of each child, their humanity, their living spirit, the repeated use of “three.” I’m curious that it doesn’t look like you have any white kids in there! (all laughing)

Bob: It doesn’t!

Sunny: So, could you talk about that?

Bob: Yeah, I originally thought about using these vestments that they have on and I would “ethnitize them” so to speak, with overlays of different ethnic patterns or fabrics. And as we discussed before, I encountered the problem of white folks and what to do with them, and so I thought let’s let go of that statement. So I have three children who are a variety of ethnicities but not necessarily every ethnicity, just representative of the differences in humanity. Tying them to an ethnic identity through fabric or symbol or something like that became really unnecessary, because the real identity is who they are and where they live and their individual identities. I didn’t want them to be sort of representatives of a culture.

Sunny: Tokens of their cultures?

Bob: And I felt like that was, not cheap, but there was something about it that just didn’t ring true, authentic, respectful – that’s it, respectful. I felt like it was the kind of honor and
dignity that I wanted to portray of children of the world and I didn’t want to undignify them by marrying them to a clichéd kind of symbol or anything like that.

**Sunny:** There’s a lot of literature that I encountered in preparing my dissertation proposal that critiques these old fashioned approaches to multicultural education that superficially talk about festivals and food. It’s interesting to me that there’s literature about that, but then you all are speaking as practitioners and coming to similar conclusions and attitudes about your relationships with your students and your school communities.

**Bob:** So this is what I would say is the ideal of my path that I’ve gone down of working in schools with children from backgrounds that I am unfamiliar with. I’ve come to understand that children are children, and they’re all essentially the same, they all have the desire for love and affection and approval, they’re all spiritual beings, and there is something within all of us that is the same universally.

**Erica:** I think racial identity is an obsession with American culture. I don’t think anybody else is like this. On the standardized test booklets we have Native American/Alaskan, Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, and this year you have to check each box with a yes or no. So the teacher has to identify that child, and there is a separate box for ethnicity, which is Latino or Non-Latino, and then the race box. So I’m like America is so obsessed with that! It doesn’t reflect reality. Same thing when I worked in Japan, all the Japanese people liked to say “we’re all homogenous” and I was like, no you’re not! The people living in Hokaido, they’re different from you. The Okinawans are closer to the Chinese than the Japanese. And you’re not homogenous but they all say that and it doesn’t reflect. I saw Japanese kids with curly hair, Japanese kids with light brown eyes, Japanese kids who looked like they were Caucasian, but the society says we’re all homogenous. So it’s the same thing, the same idea that the society says something and it doesn’t reflect reality. It’s good (to Bob) that you wanted to break away from that categorizing or pigeonholing people because it is not a reflection of reality. And why does the US government categorize Middle Eastern people as white? And do I have to judge a kid on whether he’s white or not? When I fill out the test booklet?

**Bob:** Maybe we need a little litmus thing that goes from brown to white and hold it up to the kids’ arms. (everyone laughing)

**Sunny:** There is a whole lot of literature also about the social construction of race in American society historically, through the courts and through immigration law and how that plays out in desegregation and resegregation. But, a couple of things you mentioned about America’s obsession with race and categorization - I think it’s a double-edged sword. I agree that race as a construct is arbitrary and meaningless and invented by people as a way of categorizing and pigeonholing other people and doesn’t reflect the actual genetic makeup of human beings, because we’re all mutts to some extent. But at the same time, it is also very real in in certain respects in terms of how the society is organized in terms of who has more advantages. I think it’s a really tough call to figure out how to talk about the damaging impacts of race as a concept and racism, and to try
and change that and work toward a more just, equitable, humane, and dignifying world – that world (pointing to Bob’s image, Figure 31). Because I also think a lot of white people are just uncomfortable talking about race, period, because we’re immediately on the defensive, we immediately feel under attack, we immediately feel like “oh we’re not privileged in any way” what’s our responsibility? I didn’t own slaves, or whatever it is. So it’s a very difficult conversation to have. I love the idea of working towards that world, but I think in some ways we have to be of two minds about it: recognizing the arbitrariness of race as a way of categorizing people, but at the same time recognizing the ways that those categories are used to stratify our society.

Erica: Exactly, because that’s what the US government did with racism and slavery. Then we had Affirmative Action, but there’s a backlash against it because politicians are claiming we’re all equal, but the reality is we’re not all equal. We’re not even there yet, but they want to get rid of it, and people are saying it’s reverse racism. What happened at University of Michigan when they got rid of race as criteria for admissions? Their enrollment of students of color went down.

Sunny: So, does either of you have any reflections on this project, or anything you feel that you’ve learned or gained or anything like that?

Erica: Well, for me it was good to take the readings I’ve been doing and make them into visual images instead of just standing on my soapbox and telling people what I think, like to university participants or whatever. Now I can represent what I think in a visual image and share it with people.

Sunny: So do you think the artmaking piece of it gave you another outlet for your beliefs?

Erica: Yeah

Sunny: So, what do you think you want to do with your artwork from this point on? Obviously I’m going to be including it in my dissertation study, but outside of my dissertation, where would you like to see your artwork go and what would you like to see it do?

Erica: I don’t know, I want to send it to Arnie Duncan and President Obama, so I’m trying to find a good email address for them!

Sunny: Cool. Do you feel like you learned anything from the other participants in the group, or that your perspective changed? Did you think more deeply or spend more time thinking about stuff that you might not have thought about if you were just on your own reading or standing on your soapbox or with your student participants?

Erica: I think so because I think Bob’s theme reinforced what I think when I’m on campus working with the kids, like when I’m on morning duty, to be conscious of the fact that they are little human beings. I’ve read a lot about what the Dalai Lama teaches, which is that you must connect through humanity and go beyond cultural differences. He organizes or co-sponsors conferences where experts come together and talk about
different things like astrophysics, cultural understanding, and brain research and things like that. I read a book where one presenter talked about cultural differences, like for example Asians may not be outspoken because they believe in harmony, whereas Westerners are more outspoken and believe in individuality. And the Dalai Lama said we need to go beyond that and recognize the humanity in each person, and that’s what he teaches wherever he travels. So how do I practice that every day? When I interact with these kids I’m not going to think, “OK this kid is just bad! His parents are incarcerated, he gets referrals every day,” you know. How do we get through to them to get to their heart, to their humanity? Every day we have to think about that. Or like when I see a bunch of loud, African American kids walking down the hall I think well, that’s a cultural trait, they’re noisier, they’re rambunctious or whatever and then you go to a white school and you’re not going to see the same behavior.

**Sunny:** Oh yeah whatever, white kids can be loud too! Almost every day my white son’s preschool teachers have something to tell me about him and a group of four or five boys in his class who are wrestling during circle time or playing superheroes or shooting each other with sticks as guns. This preschool is not that diverse, either. I think he has one African American friend there, another little boy in this group. I think there’s a perception when white boys are loud and rambunctious that “Oh boys will be boys.” But if it’s black boys that are loud and rambunctious and active then it’s “Oh my God, I’m gonna get mugged!”

**Erica:** Then there is that perception, and we have to be conscious of that perception because we’re taught that. If we follow the Dalai Lama’s teaching, we have to go beyond or below that and say who is that human being over there? How do we connect? So on my end, my artwork is more about political stuff and Bob’s is more about humanity, but I do understand that because I also want to practice that.

**Bob:** It’s a hard practice because we’re working against our own culture and the messages that we get in our culture. I got a lot from Erica’s work and I appreciate her being the rabble-rouser that she is. She is very intelligent and reads a lot of things that I don’t read, and I learned a lot. It’s given me pause to think about some of the socio-political kinds of dynamics that I really wasn’t thinking about, so I got a lot out of that. My artwork really helped to ground my process of coming through my experiences starting in 1974 in the classroom in rural Georgia with poor kids, black kids, farm kids who were very different from my experience, to now trying to forge a vision that is more like this (his image in Figure 31). This is the ideal, this is like God, and Heaven.

I’m personally a believer that the great changes that come about in the world come about through the teachings of people like the Dalai Lama because it really does go beneath culture and access humanity. That’s what we really want to try to do with the kids in the classroom, because when you are able to relate to another human being on that level, you really are just not even affected by their culture. You’re like this is another human being and I need to find a way to relate to this and forget about some of the fluff that gets me riled.
Sunny: One of the phrases you used that I liked is your experience “working with children from backgrounds I am unfamiliar with” because it is very non-judgmental. So when you were talking about the Dalai Lama and going beneath cultural differences and connecting on a human level, you talked about how that’s a difficult practice because it is working against the way that our society encourages us to relate to people. So, it sounds like you’re talking about seeing culture and those backgrounds that you’re unfamiliar with as not something that needs to be fixed but something to learn about and learn from in order to reach that human connection with your students. And that makes me think about that as a practice, like you can think of yoga as a practice or spirituality as a practice. Obviously human beings are not perfect and we’re just trying to find our way, when you’re talking about your practice and improving your practice. You’re really talking about fixing yourself and how you relate to kids.

Bob: One of the things I’ve struggled with a lot in trying to live out this vision is that it’s easier to do when I’m working with a small group, like five kids or less and I can have humanity to humanity contact. But that is hard to do when, like one time in Georgia I had 38 children in one of my classes. So then you can’t relate to that group any way other than “I’m the authority here, and you’ve got to do what I say, dammit!”

Erica: I think it’s important when you have those 38 kids and you say, “You have to sit down now” or whatever, that you’re not thinking racist thoughts, like you need to sit down you bunch of idiots or monkeys or whatever. You are truly sticking to your point, which is you need to sit down because we’re starting the lesson and it’s about behavior and learning. You need to be conscious of your rationale for insisting on this particular behavior at this time.

Sunny: Exactly, you’re not giving in to deficit thinking when you interact with your students. Well. . . I guess that’s it unless anyone has any other comments. I want to thank you so much for your contributions to this study. I have learned so much from talking with each of you. I think we all came together because of a common frame of reference and interest, and artmaking and sense of social justice for our students and connection with our communities where we work. I have been so honored that you’ve shared so much with me about your personal histories and how much of that you bring to your practices as educators and as artists. It has been such a rich, life-affirming experience for me to get to talk with you to develop my thinking, and to find some kindred spirits. Your attitudes and ways of thinking and ways of relating to your students and your school communities seem to have served you well over your career lifetime of practice as educators. I really hope that new teachers working in urban schools who might be intimidated by working with children from backgrounds they are unfamiliar with can learn from you.

Erica: Well, I think our university education is pretty good about training teachers with courses like diverse learning and multicultural education. Education wise I think we’re pretty good about that. But it’s up to each young teacher to practice what they’ve learned in their training.
Sunny: That seems to be the key word for today: practice.

Bob: Yes.

Sunny: I think that idea of practice a really nice metaphor for teaching in urban contexts, the idea of keeping your ideals and reflecting on how to connect with the humanity in your students. I know I talked with each of you about the metaphors I’ve used for each of you, and I’m going to keep this one: practice!

Bob: There’s a website I follow, kind of an online monastery, and one of the monastic practices is “always we begin again.” It’s about practice, its always going back and trying to reconnect with that value, that dignity of that child. Because you get knocked back, and there’s all kinds of circumstances where even on the best days someone gets under your skin. But then you come back the next day and you’re like ok, I over-reacted yesterday so today I’m going to try to be mindful of that and when that comes up again, I’m not going to buy into that like I did last time. I’m going to try to deal with this in a more humane way rather than getting in some kid’s face and yelling at him.

Sunny: I also think that because teaching can be a stressful, and complex, and tiring job and teachers vent to each other all the time, that it’s easy to just bitch about the kids and the parents and this and that. A little bit of venting is fine, but I think that constant bitching can lead to distancing yourself from your students and dehumanizing them.

Erica: And then you don’t look for the answer. We have to be careful about that.

Bob: One of the things I love about being on an elementary campus is the connection between teachers and students because you’re with the kids all day long. I see buy-in and allegiance and commitment to the kids that I didn’t see on the secondary level. The teachers there had buy in, but in elementary school this is their family, especially with the classroom teachers. This is their family and sometimes there’s a family member who’s gets out of line and starts acting like a jerk, but it’s still my family and the teachers want to act in the best interest of the child. It’s really a remarkable thing.

Future Directions

At the end of this session the participants and I discussed possible next steps or future directions for this project. When this study commenced I had envisioned the participants and I collaborating on a public action of some kind, perhaps an exhibition or some other kind of project with students in the community. This idea proved to be something that reflected my interests and agenda but did not resonate with the participants. Each participant stated that
she/he felt strongly about the work they did in the study and the experiences and critical
perspectives they shared. However, none of the participants was interested in going further with
this work in the ways I had envisioned. They did move forward in their own directions, though.
Erica used the images she created in this study to expand her advocacy for her students. She
emailed several images to James Crawford and offered to let him use them in his advocacy
efforts. And as she mentioned in the meeting, she did find good email addresses for Arnie
Duncan and President Obama and sent her images to them as well. Bob continued his spiritual
and artistic journey by starting a group at his church called “Spirit and Creativity.” He
envisioned this group as a supportive context for participants to nurture their creative spirits and
develop a closer relationship with God through their creative practices.
CHAPTER EIGHT

A/R/TOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: CRITICAL RACE A/R/TOGRAPHY

Figure 32. The Property Value of Whiteness, acrylic on street map collaged onto foam board, 27 x 33 inches, by Sunny Spillane, 2013
As part of my analysis of the study data, I reflected on the participants’ stories through the lenses of critical race theory, especially the notion of whiteness as property (Bell, 2000a, 2000b; C. Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and CRT’s interrelated critiques of colorblindness and the myth of meritocracy (Desai, 2010a; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gotanda, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). From this perspective, I questioned whether school accountability grades were reliable measures of school quality or if they simply documented racial and socioeconomic disparities across the city. Based on my experiences as a former public school teacher and a white parent of school aged children it seemed to me that perceptions of school quality contributed to school segregation. School accountability data could conceivably contribute to school re-segregation because affluent parents would then have a legitimate reason – school quality – to take their children out of their neighborhood schools or to move into neighborhoods with higher performing schools.

With this in mind, I began work on the painting and accompanying legend in Figures 32 and 33 as part of a critical race analysis of the relationship between school accountability grades and residential property values in the city where this study was conducted. To facilitate my analysis, I wanted to see the relationship between school accountability grades and residential patterns represented visually. I began this process by gathering data on residential real estate values from the real estate website www.trulia.com, and data on school accountability grades from the school district website in the city where this study was conducted. I also acquired a street map of the city, which I used as the ground for the painting in Figure 32. The background
of the painting is divided into six color-coded sections reflecting the average residential property values in each zip code. Contiguous zip codes with similar average residential property values were combined for simplicity. Color-coded dots indicate the locations and school accountability grades of all the public elementary schools in the district. For the coordination of colors with property values and school grades please refer to the legend (Figure 33). Out of 24 schools, only three achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) as defined in No Child Left Behind. These are indicated with the yellow-orange rings around the dots indicating those particular elementary schools.

It is notable that all but one of the schools receiving accountability grades of “A” are located in neighborhoods with average residential property values above $200,000. All three schools that earned AYP are located in the most affluent neighborhoods in the city, where average residential property values exceed $300,000. By contrast, all of the schools that earned accountability grades of “B” or “C” are located in neighborhoods with average residential property values of less than $150,000 with the largest number of “C” schools located in neighborhoods with average residential property values of less than $110,000. There appears to be one anomaly in this pattern in that the single “D” school in the district is located on the edge of a neighborhood with average residential property values between $200,000 and $250,000.

The painting in Figure 32 compared school grades and property values, but did not look at student data in each school. Because of this study’s use of critical race theory as an analytical lens, I was curious to see how closely students’ race and socioeconomic status mirrored the distribution of school grades in the image above. Using school enrollment data from the National Center for Education Statistics (http://nces.ed.gov) I correlated demographic data on students’ race and socioeconomic status in each school with school accountability grades (see Appendix F). I report this data here using two categories: the percentage of white students enrolled (described hereinafter as “whiteness”); and the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch in each school.

As expected, there was a strong relationship between race, socioeconomic status, and school grades (see Figure 34). For the twelve “A” schools the mean percentage of whiteness was 62%, and the mean percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch was 29%. For the three “A” schools that earned AYP, the mean percentage of whiteness was 72%, and the mean percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch was 14%. For the five “B” schools, the mean percentage of whiteness was 21%, and the mean percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch was 82%. For the six “C” schools, the mean percentage of whiteness was 21%, and the mean percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch was 84%. One of the “C” schools was located in a rural outskirt of the city that enrolled a large number of low-income white students. Because of this, it is also instructive to look at the median values for the “C” schools as well. The median percentage of whiteness in “C” schools was 6.5%, and the median percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch was 89%.
Figure 34. Comparison of mean percentages of whiteness and mean percentages of students receiving free or reduced lunch in relation to elementary school accountability grades.

Figure 35. Comparison of percentages of whiteness and percentages of students receiving free or reduced lunch in “A” schools verses “D” school in a single neighborhood.

At the sole “D” school in the district, the percentage of whiteness was 12%, and the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch was 78%. This school’s percentages of whiteness and students receiving free or reduced lunch differed markedly from those of the three other schools in that section of town (see Figure 35). In those schools, all of which earned
school accountability grades of “A,” the mean percentage of whiteness was 56%, and the mean percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch was 28%.

I began the painting and accompanying legend in Figures 32 and 33 as a way of understanding the relationships between race, socioeconomic status, and school grades in order to ground my analysis of the first research question in this study. I suspected that there would be a correlation between school grades and property values, but I was not prepared for what I saw. As this painting began to take shape and these relationships materialized, I was shocked by the extent of the city’s socioeconomic stratification, and to see how closely the distribution of school grades mirrored that stratification. My critical race analysis of student demographic data in each of the elementary schools included in Figure 32 further revealed the racialized nature of socioeconomic disparity in the city as a whole.

Because school grades are so strongly predictable by race and socioeconomic status, it appears that they may reflect the city’s racial and socioeconomic stratification more than they reflect the quality of any individual school or its teachers and administration. School grades may offer meaningful snapshots of differences in quality among peer schools with similar student demographics. However, the distribution of school grades visualized in Figure 32 literally paints a picture of systemic educational inequity and illustrates the inadequacies of the accountability measures aimed at closing the so-called achievement gap.
CHAPTER NINE
ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter is focused on analysis, interpretations, and implications drawn from the data presented in Chapter Four. I conducted much of the data analysis and interpretation through the processes of facilitating and actively participating in the focus group sessions, by repeatedly viewing the focus group videos between sessions and responding to the stories and experiences the participants shared during the sessions. Because the processes of data analysis, synthesis, and interpretation unfolded in an integrated way over the course of the study, this chapter is not intended to reveal hidden patterns in the data. Rather, my intent is to summarize and further synthesize the data in relation to the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study, and through the lenses of the research questions. I approached data analysis using a combination of methods, many of which emerged as the study progressed. Some of these methods included: repeatedly viewing, transcribing, and annotating the study videos; member checking my emerging analysis with the participants; compiling participants’ images in the Study PowerPoint; integrating participants’ images from the Study PowerPoint with the video transcripts in the multimodal Image Transcript; thematic analyses of the data represented in the Image Transcript through the lenses of each research question; and statistical analysis of student demographic data as it related to school accountability grades and residential real estate values.

As a counterpoint to this highly structured and focused analysis, I used a/r/tography to respond to the study data and emergent themes freely and creatively through my own artistic processes. This allowed me to jump around and play with the data in different ways, connecting it to my ongoing practices as an artist/researcher/teacher, and reflecting on implications for art
education research and practice in urban schools. The analysis and discussion presented in this chapter are organized according to the five research questions that guided this study:

1) In what ways do the experiences and critical perspectives of veteran arts educators in urban schools “counter” deficit-based characterizations of their students, schools, and communities?

2) How do participating arts educators communicate their experiences of multiple and intersecting identities in the context of their practices, and reveal them in their creative counter-narratives?

3) In what ways does their engagement in this process of inquiry alter participants’ perceptions and understandings of their students, schools, communities, and selves?

4) What roles do the participating educators and I take on in relation to one another in the context of this participatory process of inquiry, and how do we negotiate these relationships?

5) How does artistic practice inform this study as a method of inquiry, and suggest possibilities for communicating participants’ counter-stories?

In this study participants had fairly wide latitude to reflect on and pursue whatever aspects of this inquiry were most meaningful to them. As evidenced in the narrative report of our conversations in the focus group sessions (Chapter Four) each participant took a different direction in her/his artmaking and investigation of themes related to their experiences working in urban schools. This created challenges for me as a researcher in that their interests sometimes differed from mine. In some cases I was concerned that I would not have enough of the “right” data to answer the research questions, and in other cases I had more data than I ever anticipated. The presentation of my analysis in relation to each research question bears this out to some
extent. There were differences in the relevance of each participant’s artwork, experiences, and critical perspectives to each research question. Because of this some participants have stronger presences in certain sections than in others. Despite this unevenness in certain respects, the data and analysis in its entirety presents a holistic picture.

This chapter concludes with a discussion of themes that emerged from the study and implications for art education research and practice. In many ways, this study does not truly conclude. Rather, the data opens up possibilities for ongoing practice as artists, researchers, and teachers and the intersections of those roles and identities.

**Analysis, Interpretation, and Implications Related to Research Question One**

*In what ways do the experiences and critical perspectives of veteran arts educators in urban schools “counter” deficit-based characterizations of their students, schools, and communities?*

The most substantial counter-narratives that emerged in this study focused on the relationships between high-stakes school accountability measures, perceptions of school and teacher quality, and re-segregation of neighborhoods and public schools. Participants framed the supposed “failure” of urban schools (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) as a systemic problem that reflected pervasive social inequities rather than simply a failure of individual teachers and schools to meet accountability goals. Participants also described the ways high-stakes accountability became a self-fulfilling prophecy that diminished the quality and richness of educational programming in urban schools. Finally, the participants’ stories and experiences challenged deficit-based characterizations of urban teachers in public discourse about school quality, accountability and teacher effectiveness.
School Performance as a Systemic Problem

Viewed in the context of the distribution of school grades in the city in which this study was conducted, the participants’ stories revealed a strong and troubling relationship between race, socioeconomic status, and school accountability grades. This is particularly true of the artwork that participant Erica Wei created for the study and the critical conversations it engendered. School grades are purported to be fair, neutral, and transparent measures of school quality. However, they are not presented to the public in relation to the bigger picture of racial and socioeconomic disparity across the community at large. This creates several problems. As Valencia (2010) pointed out, the practice of evaluating schools individually views school performance as an endogenous issue that reflects individual school-based factors such as teacher quality. Additionally, public discourse about failing schools and teacher performance seems to place responsibility for closing the achievement gap with individual teachers and schools (Taylor, 2006). Characterizing educational inequity as an individual, school-by-school problem fails to recognize or remedy the societal disparities that contribute to disparities in student academic performance and public perceptions of school quality (Zamudio, et al, 2011). As Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) stated, “urban schools are not broken, they are doing exactly what they are designed to do” (p. 1) by preserving the status quo of racialized socioeconomic and educational inequity.

The artwork that Erica Wei created for this study spoke directly to issues of accountability and school quality and their relationship to school re-segregation. Her images and critical insights informed many of our conversations in the focus group sessions and became part of our ongoing dialogue about the conditions in participants’ schools and the ways those conditions impacted their students and their own working conditions. Throughout the study,
participants discussed the racial and socioeconomic segregation of the public schools in their district. Participant Fiona Williams described her experience as a first year teacher in an affluent, predominantly white public school in which days would go by without seeing another person of color. This experience contrasted sharply with her current teaching context in which 96% of her students are African American and 93% receive free and reduced lunch. Fiona referred to the high concentration of poverty at her school in several ways, from hearing a kindergartner’s first-hand account of a neighborhood shooting to her own experiences of “practice shock” (Hagiwara & Wray, 2009) as someone from a middle class background working in a high-poverty school. Participants Bob Watson and Erica Wei also discussed the segregation of the teaching staff in different schools in their district, noting the overwhelming whiteness of the teaching staff in the more affluent public schools compared to the schools where they taught.

Participant Erica Wei critically examined school re-segregation in one of the first artworks she produced for the study, entitled *De-Segregation, Re-Segregation* (Figure 12). She created this image in response to an article by James Crawford (2007) that described how current educational policies contributed to re-segregation of public schools because low-income students of color were largely forced into programs that were limited to intensive instruction in reading and math. Erica addressed similar issues related to educational policy in the other artworks she created for the study. Her piece entitled *A Shift in Terminology* (Figure 28) discussed the change in educational policy from an emphasis on equal inputs (equal educational opportunity) during the school desegregation movement, to an emphasis on equal outputs (closing the achievement gap) in the era of No Child Left Behind. Erica’s piece entitled *Closing the Achievement Gap* (Figure 13) delved deeper into the impacts of this policy on her students by depicting them running endlessly on a hamster wheel behind “the white kid” who is shown running freely in
front of them. In her discussion of this image during the focus group session, Erica said she believed that the kids in the “subgroups” depicted on the hamster wheel will never be allowed to catch up to their white peers because of the history of racism in the United States. She went on to characterize her students’ educational opportunities and experiences as separate and unequal to those of students at more affluent public schools in her district. As she put it:

You’re not going to stop the white kid from running. He’s always going to be ahead in the race. He’s not going to stop and say “Hey you guys, catch up to me so we can close the gap!” That’s not going to happen. No affluent family is going to give up their privileges and say, you know, my child’s school is not going to have any access to computers or art classes. That’s human nature and that’s America.  

Erica’s image of the hamster wheel (Figure 13) quickly became a touchstone in our conversations in the focus groups, as the participants and I referred to it repeatedly throughout the study as a metaphor for structural educational inequity.

Accountability as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

In the focus group discussions, the participants related school re-segregation to the heavy toll of relentless testing on their students, and discussed ways that preparation for high stakes testing – the cornerstone of school accountability grades – had co-opted the curriculum and limited the educational opportunities available to their students. In the very first focus group session Fiona Williams described the stress on her students from high-stakes testing. Bob Watson later described the feeling among faculty at his school that high-stakes testing created a factory-like atmosphere where everyone was held to a scripted curriculum and rigid schedule, regardless of differences in students’ learning needs. The image in Erica’s piece Test Prep Factory (Figure 29) succinctly captures this.
In the last artwork she created for this study, *The Market Model of Public Education* (Figure 30), Erica created a satire based on Diane Ravitch’s (2010) book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. Erica’s discussion of this piece brought together many of the ideas from her previous artworks and described the impacts of educational policy on the school system at large. Erica compared the competitive market model of public education to “Walmart killing off mom and pop stores” (p. 128 of this text). She also discussed Ravitch’s conclusion that the mania for testing in current educational policy and its relationship to school choice and accountability were decimating neighborhood schools and undermining communities.

The irony of school accountability grading is that it seems to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the participants in this study described, schools in low-income communities of color bear an onerous burden of accountability, which severely restricts the school curriculum and the types of educational experiences students have access to. The schools under the most pressure to meet accountability goals could potentially find the quality of their programs suffering because of the necessity of devoting inordinate instructional time to reading and math at the expense of the arts, sciences, and humanities. The restricted curricula and academic programs in low-income urban schools could possibly contribute to re-segregation of urban schools because they do not reflect the educational values of middle-class and affluent families.

**Teacher Quality in Urban Schools**

As stated above, public discourse about failing schools and teacher performance places responsibility for closing the achievement gap squarely with individual teachers and schools (Taylor, 2006). Because of this, school “failure” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) is often attributed to the failings of individual teachers, rather than to the impacts of systemic educational
inequity. The stories and experiences of the participants in this study paint a different picture of educators in urban schools. As evidenced by the critical engagement and sustained commitment that characterized their participation in this study, their high levels of professional achievement, and strong connections to their school communities, these educators are nothing if not accomplished. And based on my own experiences teaching in public schools with incredibly skilled and insightful colleagues, they are not anomalies. Rather, their stories describe the impacts of educational policies that restrict their ability to exercise professional judgment, curtail their students’ educational experiences, and place teachers and students under attack. As this study progressed, I began to see the participants’ personal stories as counter-narratives that challenged deficit-based characterizations of urban teachers in public discourse about school quality, accountability and teacher effectiveness.

**Analysis, Interpretation, and Implications Related to Research Question Two**

_How do participating arts educators communicate their experiences of multiple and intersecting identities in the context of their practices, and reveal them in their creative counter-narratives?_

I chose to examine participants’ identities in this study primarily because I was interested in the ways they perceived the impacts of different aspects of their identities on their teaching practices and/or their relationships with students and school communities. Because this study is informed by critical race theory (Buendia, 2003; Chapman, 2005; Dixson, 2006; Hylton, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Lee, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Torre, 2009) this includes participants’ perceptions of the salience of their racial identities in relation to their teaching practices and the social contexts in which they work. When I initially conceptualized this study, I purposely sought out participants who differed from me and from one another in terms of age, gender, race, and cultural background. I was concerned that my whiteness and
educational privilege were potential limitations of this study and I thought a diverse group of
participants could push me past the limitations of my racial identity and social position.
However, the participants’ diversity presented different challenges for my analysis. Namely, I
did not want to essentialize their experiences and perspectives along racial lines, or frame the
participants as token representatives of their respective racial groups.

The overarching metaphors I developed for each participant were a way of conceptually
integrating many different aspects of their identities as they informed their relationships with
their students and school communities. These metaphors synthesized several aspects of the study
data, including: the artwork participants created for the study, viewed in the context of their
existing artistic practices; the experiences and critical perspectives they shared in the focus group
meetings; and the participants’ descriptions of their racial identities in relation to the context of
teaching in urban schools as it informed their teaching practices and/or relationships with their
students. I began developing these metaphors while the focus group sessions were still in
progress, and I member checked them with each of the participants during our third and fourth
meetings. As the study and my analysis progressed, however I began to think critically about the
ways I was using the participant metaphors. As with the participants’ racial identities, I did not
want my metaphors for each participant to pigeonhole, essentialize, or stereotype them. This
would be directly antithetical to the participatory nature of this study and to the understandings
of identity in critical race theory and a/r/tography as multiple, intersecting, relational, and
dynamic (O’Donoghue, 2008; Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong, & Bickel, 2006; Pryer,
2004; Spillane, 2012; Suominen, 2003, 2005; 2007; Wilson, 2004). In retrospect, perhaps a
more equitable and participatory approach would have been to ask the participants to come up
with their own metaphors as a way of synthesizing their own identities and experiences. Despite
these reservations, I believe my metaphors for the participants are useful as a shorthand way of
describing their own characterizations of their practices and their relationships with their
students, and as different (and not mutually exclusive) ways of approaching the work of teaching
in urban schools. I also recognize, however that they are only starting points in understanding the
participants’ experiences and represent a beginning, not an end to my analysis and interpretation
in relation to this research question.

**Erica Wei – The Advocate**

I initially developed Erica’s metaphor in response to the outspoken and critical work she
created for this study. At first, I considered several metaphors for her – the Activist, and the
Rabble Rouser were two contenders. While these seemed to capture the critical, activist spirit of
the images she created for the study, these metaphors did not appropriately integrate this work
with her established artistic practice or her discussions of her racial experience. For some time
after the focus group sessions concluded I puzzled over what seemed to be a sharp contrast
between the idyllic images of children and nature that comprised Erica’s established artistic
practice, and the sharply critical and political images she created for the study. A closer look at
her established artistic practice however, reveals another story. Erica’s first image that we
looked at in the focus groups was an image of African American boys from her Celestial
Messenger series (Figure 9). Given the overwhelmingly negative and deficit-based
characterizations of African American boys in public discourse (James, 2012), evidenced most
tragically in the shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida around the same time this study took
pace, the image in Figure 9 is itself a kind of counter-narrative. Furthermore, this image and the
other images of children in her established artistic practice seem compassionate and idealistic,
and convey a sense of beauty and hope in children. In the context of this study, these images
show a more personal side of Erica that contextualizes the outspoken activism in the work she created for the study and grounds it in her connection with children generally speaking.

Erica’s connection with children is also evident in the images she created for the study, many of which incorporate images of children. The first piece she created for the study (Figure 12) juxtaposes childhood portraits of Linda Brown and Sylvia Mendez with official portraits of Karl Rove and George W. Bush. As Erica discussed during the focus group meeting, this juxtaposition is intentional. She contrasted the historic movements to desegregate public schools (represented by Brown and Mendez) that were focused on equity of students’ educational experiences and opportunities, with contemporary educational policies aimed at closing the supposed achievement gap (represented by Rove and Bush) that have resulted in re-segregation of public schools. In her discussion of this image during the focus group meetings, Erica was explicitly critical of contemporary educational policies like No Child Left Behind, and expressed strong support for the ideals of the desegregation court cases represented by Brown and Mendez. Additionally, Erica described her process of creating this image this way: “You know, while I was working on this image I was like ‘ugh! I can’t stand looking at these guys!’ But it has to be a political statement, right? I’m used to working with children’s images and natural images and now I have to look at these guys, and I’m like God, you know?” (p. 95-96 of this text).

This thread of connection with children and concern for their educational opportunities and experiences runs through several of the other images she created for the study. The animal metaphors in Erica’s image of children in the hamster wheel in Closing the Achievement Gap (Figure 13) and her image of urban schoolchildren (and/or teachers) as caged hens in Test Prep Factory (Figure 29) seem to imply that urban students are figuratively and somewhat literally caged and treated like animals. This contrasts with “the white kid” running in front of the
hamster wheel, who has much more freedom to move forward and in any direction he chooses with his learning and by extension, his opportunities in life outside of school. Her image *A Shift in Terminology* (Figure 28) also speaks to the differences between framing educational equity as equality of inputs (programs, curriculum, opportunities, and experiences) as in the early desegregation cases, or equality of outputs (test scores) as in the era of No Child Left Behind (Crawford, 2007).

The images Erica created for the study were consistently focused on macro-level societal and political issues. In this body of work she seemed to be more concerned with the big picture than with her own personal history or experiences. Although she was one of the first participants to explicitly state that educational inequity exists because “America is racist,” she did not discuss her personal experience of race in relation to these images. When I asked her about this in the focus group meetings, she attributed this focus to her experience as an Asian and an immigrant, which placed her outside the contentious racial history between black people and white people in the United States. Her somewhat “neutral” racial status, her studies in multilingual, multicultural education, and her experiences living around the world also contributed to her bird’s eye view of educational inequity and its impacts on her students. However, she also stated that her own childhood experiences as an immigrant and an English language learner contributed to her decision to become an ESOL teacher and helped her to identify personally with the efforts and experiences of her students and their families.

The outward, activist focus of the artwork Erica created for the study, viewed in the context of her established artistic practice, and informed by her description of her own racial experiences, all contributed to my characterization of her as “The Advocate.” The outspoken activism in her images is grounded in her own childhood experiences as an immigrant and
English language learner, which contributed to her connection with her students and her concern for their educational opportunities and potential for success in life beyond school.

**Bob Watson – The Seeker**

I began thinking of Bob as “The Seeker” very early in the focus group sessions for two reasons: the strong spiritual themes in his established artistic practice; and his description of his struggles with cultural and racial dissonance as a white man from a middle-class background teaching in low-income communities of color. His images *Believe* (Figure 14), *Italian Landscape Madonna* (Figure 15), and *Mystic Trumpet* (Figure 16) reveal his artistic interests in “mystery and divinity” as an integral part of his spiritual path. In the focus group sessions Bob described his established artistic practice as being primarily concerned with spiritual consciousness, and he immediately made connections between these images and the themes of this study. For him, this related primarily to his experiences of grappling with racial and/or cultural dissonance in his teaching experience, and his efforts to recognize the innate dignity of the students and school community members that challenged him most. In the artwork he created for the study he continued to reflect on his “personal journey of enlightenment” working with students and families “whose backgrounds [he is] unfamiliar with” (p. 133 of this text) and striving to see the humanity and the commonality between himself and them.

The image *A New Normal* (Figure 25) was both an illustration of his process and an experience of personal enlightenment in and of itself. The image is divided into four quadrants, each containing an image of a child from a different race. When discussing his process of conceptualizing and executing this image, he described having “an easy time finding a [visual] stereotype for every race except white people.” He went on to describe how this unexpected dilemma caused him to reflect critically on how easy it was for him to stereotype people of color,
and this led to a critical discussion of the invisibility of whiteness during the focus group session. The final images he created for the study, *One Heart, One Spirit, One Classroom* (Figure 31) represented his ideal of educational equity that recognized the divine spark in every human being.

In our discussions of race in the focus group sessions, Bob described fairly intense experiences of racial and/or cultural dissonance in relation to his students and school communities. He related this to experience as a white man, growing up in a racially and culturally homogenous environment. In his discussions of his artwork and his personal experiences of race in relation to his teaching practice, his spirituality seemed to inform his desire to overcome the dissonance he experienced. He was forthcoming about his limitations and expressed a desire to learn more about himself and his students and school communities. In his discussions of his experiences, this professional quest for intercultural self-knowledge seemed to be merged with his spiritual quest for enlightenment, generally speaking. The relationship between these two aspects of his experience is the basis for my characterization of Bob as “The Seeker.”

**Fiona Williams – The Earth Mother**

My initial characterization of Fiona had to do with motherhood. This was based on several aspects of her artwork, her discussions of her teaching experiences, and her responses to other participants’ artwork. Many artworks in her established artistic practice included images of women in stable, centralized compositions and used traditional craft mediums such as quilting, dyeing, and stitching, as in the quilts in Figures 18 and 20. She also used fertility imagery (Figure 20) that could be associated with motherhood or womanhood generally. Out of all the participants she has been at her school the longest, a total of 19 years. In the second focus group
session, looking at Bob’s image of the Madonna and Child (Figure 15), she described her own fascination with Madonna images and related this to the themes of the study, reflecting that “we’re really definitely mothers to them in every way in Title I schools” (p. 106 of this text).

The association between motherhood and the longevity of Fiona’s tenure at her school led to my initial metaphor for Fiona as “The Matriarch.” However, this did not feel quite right to me or to her when I member checked this with her in the focus group. Because she hesitated to embrace my characterization of her, I reconsidered this metaphor as the study progressed and in light of new data.

Fiona discussed her own experiences of race very frankly in the focus groups, in relation to her established artistic practice, her life experiences, and her professional experiences. Several images of her established artistic practice were part of an ongoing series on African American women and hair (see the quilt in Figure 18 and the painting in Figure 21 as examples). She described this work as a way of combatting internalized racism and racist standards of beauty, and of normalizing African American women’s experience. Fiona also described her experiences growing up in the Northeastern United States and attending predominantly white schools, and her subsequent desire to attend a historically black college and to be immersed in a strong, black community. This is ultimately what brought her to the Southeast. I was curious as to whether this contributed in any way to her decision to work at her school, in which nearly all of her students are African American. She challenged my facile interpretation however, by explaining that circumstance alone led to her employment there and by describing her experiences of practice shock due to class and cultural differences between her and her students. She attributed this to her experience moving from the Northeast to the Deep South and coming from a middle class background to work in a high-poverty context. Although she may identify
racially with her students (and they with her) she nevertheless faced challenges as a teacher because of cultural and class differences with her students. However, these challenges did not lead her to other her students or to racialize her cultural and/or class differences with them. This is evident in the images Fiona ultimately created for the study.

The drawings in Figures 26 and 27 each depict a teacher as a tree. Like Bob’s image of the spiral in Figure 25, these images can be seen as ways of characterizing teacher growth in the social context of their practices. A notable difference however, is that Fiona did not describe her growth as a teacher in terms of reconciling cognitive dissonance as Bob did in the spiral image (Figure 25). She characterizes growth as a tree, one that is grounded and putting down roots, yet also growing branches that reach and sway freely toward the sky and shelter the blades of grass around her. In her discussion of the more finished image of the teacher/tree (Figure 26) Fiona acknowledged the day-to-day challenges of teaching, but affirmed that “you’re there because you want to be, you feel like you’re making a difference,” (p. 123 of this text). Fiona’s attitude of steady consistency and weathering the challenges of teaching, as well as her motherly inclination toward her students, viewed in relation to the nature and feminine imagery in her established artistic practice and the work that she created for the study led to my characterization of her as “The Earth Mother” – a metaphor she eagerly affirmed.

Synthesis

The metaphors above were my way of conceptualizing the participants’ own characterizations of their practices and relationships with their students, which they communicated through their artwork and conversations in the focus group sessions. These are more than metaphors for each participant however. They are metaphors for different ways of approaching the work of teaching in urban schools: advocating for educational equity that leads
to greater freedom and social mobility for urban students; seeking to interrogate the personal biases that hinder respectful, reciprocal, and dignifying relationships with urban students; committing to urban communities despite the challenges. These dispositions are not mutually exclusive and are certainly not an exhaustive list, but represent attitudes that seemed to serve the participants well in their practices and relationships with their school communities. Indeed, the participants not only affirmed their own metaphors during the repeated member checks, but began thinking of one another in terms of their metaphors as the study progressed. These metaphors became a way for the participants to learn from one another and to apply these different attitudes and dispositions to their thinking about their own ongoing practices.

**Analysis, Interpretation, and Implications Related to Research Question Three**

*In what ways does their engagement in this process of inquiry alter participants’ perceptions and understandings of their students, schools, communities, and selves?*

Out of all the participants, Bob Watson’s learning and growth through his participation in this study, as evidenced in his artwork and his dialogue in the focus group sessions, speaks most directly to this research question. Compared to Fiona and Erica, Bob seemed to learn the most in terms of his own meta-cognitive reflections on race/racism and its role in educational inequity. He acknowledged as much in his discussions of his own ongoing process of enlightenment and learning in relation to his students and school communities. This seemed to inform his decision to reflect on and continue this process of enlightenment through the artwork he created for this study. Beginning in the second focus group meeting, Bob discussed the spiritual themes in his existing artistic practice in relation to the themes of this study, and looked for ways his previous work could inform the direction of his work for this study.
Bob’s first attempt at visualizing his process of enlightenment was the image *A New Normal* (Figure 25). Although he expected to simply represent some of his prior learning experiences, the process of creating this image was a catalyst for self-reflection that led Bob to rethink some of his perceptions and understandings of himself in relation to his students. The process of conceptualizing and executing this piece led to his dilemma over how to represent the white race, and that in turn caused him to reflect critically on how easy it was for him to stereotype people of color. Perhaps as importantly, his frank discussion of this in the focus groups led to a shared dialogue about race and whiteness, which could potentially impact the other participants’ perceptions and understandings of their students, schools, communities, and selves. Bob’s use of the spiral in this image is an apt metaphor for his process of enlightenment. His artistic process provoked learning as he considered what he was trying to represent, and encountered obstacles that served as prompts for reflection and revision of previous assumptions.

In addition to Bob’s learning through the process of creating images for this study, the participants and I learned from one another in several ways. Because the participants had wide latitude to explore the themes and/or personal experiences that were most meaningful to each of them, the work they created for the study and the ideas and experiences they reflected on differed greatly from one another. Using the overarching critical focus of the study as a general guide, the participants each found their own ways to voice their individual perspectives and to look at their experiences through different lenses. This was an especially fruitful way of addressing potentially explosive topics like race and racism. The participants learned from each other’s images and the conversations they engendered in simple ways, such as getting ideas for their own work, or considering the contexts and conditions of urban schooling from a different perspective. They also learned from one another in more expansive and holistic ways.
final focus group session, Erica and Bob each described a desire to adopt the qualities that characterized the other’s participation in the study. Erica admired Bob’s spiritual focus and expressed a desire to live out that practice in the ways she relates to her students. Likewise, Bob admired Erica’s work for inspiring him to think more broadly about the sociopolitical dynamics that create educational inequities and shape public and personal perceptions of urban students, schools, and communities.

**Analysis, Interpretation, and Implications Related to Research Question Four**

*What roles do the participating educators and I take on in relation to one another in the context of this participatory process of inquiry, and how do we negotiate these relationships?*

Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) described focus groups as “unique and important formations of collective inquiry where theory, research, pedagogy, and politics converge” (p. 888). This is an apt description of the dynamic interchange of ideas, experiences, and critical perspectives between the participants and myself in the context of the focus group sessions. In my analysis of this question, I viewed these exchanges in relation to the participatory paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Herron & Reason, 1997) and to the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher in the framework of a/r/tography.

**Roles and Relationships through the Lens of the Participatory Paradigm**

When I initially conceptualized this study I thought of the participants and myself equally as artists, researchers, and teachers. This idea was the inspiration for the second part of my dissertation title, “A Participatory, A/r/tographic Inquiry.” As the study progressed however, it became clear that although the participants had a lot of freedom, they still worked within a structure I designed. As much as I wanted this study to be fully democratic and participatory, I could not characterize the participants as researchers simply by inviting them to participate,
however actively, in a study I conceptualized and designed on my own. And yet in this study, within the structure I designed, participants had a forum to reflect on and engage in their own research into whatever aspects of their practices interested them most. Erica used her readings of critical literature in education as a basis for the work she did for the study. Bob reflected on his spiritual practice and his journey of enlightenment working with low-income students of color. Fiona integrated the artwork she created for the study with the themes and imagery of her existing artistic practice to envision teaching as a grounded practice. Although I clearly had the role of researcher-as-designer, each participant had the opportunity to turn their participation into a kind of artistic action research that was relevant to their own experiences and interests.

In addition my role of researcher-as-designer, I also took on the role of researcher-as-interpreter. Although the participants told their own stories through their artwork and their dialogue in the focus groups, I still played a role in interpreting and synthesizing the experiences they shared, and representing them in this research text. Despite my strong roles as a designer and interpreter, I still locate this study within the participatory paradigm, which emphasizes equitable and reciprocal relationships between researchers and participants. Although I acknowledge the differences between my position as a researcher and the positions of the participants, and believe it is possible even within somewhat traditionally defined roles to strive for equitable, respectful, and reciprocal relationships. I made consistent efforts to do this by member checking my emerging interpretations with the participants during the focus group sessions, and modifying my interpretations based on their feedback.

Where this study most embodied the participatory paradigm, however imperfectly, was in the artwork the participants created for the study. As mentioned above, participants had a great deal of freedom within the loosely defined focus of this study to explore whatever aspects of
their teaching practices, experiences, and/or relationships were most meaningful and relevant to
them, in whatever ways were most comfortable for them. This was risky for me as a researcher
because there were no guarantees that the study would yield enough relevant data for me to
succeed in answering the research questions. When I initially conceptualized this study, I
envisioned creating and sharing my artwork along with the participants in the focus group
sessions. This was part of my vision of the participants and myself as equal a/r/tographers
inquiring together into the themes of the study. Once the study commenced however, the
participants’ interests began to take precedence over my own, and their images, experiences, and
critical perspectives dominated our conversations in the focus group sessions. Because I had
such a strong hand in designing the study and in interpreting the data that emerged from it, this
intuitively felt right. Although I steered some of our conversations in the focus groups, I stepped
back as an artist to make space for the participants to pursue their own inquiries. This was
possible because I also took on the role of researcher-as-facilitator, initiating the participants into
the inquiry process early in the focus groups by sharing my own a/r/tographic work (Names,
Figure 1) and explaining the themes and critical emphasis of the study. In many ways, this was a
lot like teaching. Indeed I used many of my teacher instincts to facilitate the focus group
meetings and develop and maintain rapport between the participants and myself.

**Roles and Relationships through the Lens of A/r/tography**

In my analysis of the data in relation to this research question, a/r/tography proved to be a
useful framework for characterizing the roles that the participants and I took on in relation to one
another, although not in the ways I initially anticipated. We all took on the roles of artist,
researcher, and teacher, though not in the same ways or at the same times. As evidenced in the
analysis in the above section, I clearly occupied the role of researcher in relation to the
participants, although they had a great deal of freedom in the ways they chose to participate in the study. My experience as an artist informed my conceptualization of this study, but did not characterize my primary role in facilitating the focus groups. This came mostly from my experience as a teacher and my instincts to create rapport among the participants, to encourage equitable and active participation from them all, and to keep our inquiry moving into new territory.

Over the course of the study, the participants also took on the roles of artists, researchers, and teachers in a variety of ways. At a basic level, their backgrounds as teachers and artists were the criteria I used to recruit them to participate in this study. Their participation in the study was characterized by their own independent inquiries (research) into the themes, experiences, and/or relationships that were most compelling to them. On a deeper level, however, the participants took on these roles during the focus group sessions in ways that contributed to creating the kind of dynamic interchange that Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) described. Erica’s participation in the study, particularly her incorporation of her own independent reading in critical educational literature (Crawford, 2007; Ravitch, 2010) into her artwork (Figures 12, 13, 28, 29, & 30) functioned as a kind of teaching. She used the forum of the focus group sessions to share her knowledge and critical perspectives with the other participants and with me. Similarly, Fiona’s participation in the study gave her a forum for sharing her knowledge of race/racism and its intersections with gender, based on her lived experiences as an African American woman in both professional and personal contexts. Bob drew on his strong sense of spirituality in a similar way, sharing his disposition towards personal learning and growth with the group through his established artistic practice and the work he created for the study. The participants took on teacher roles in other, perhaps smaller ways, both directly and indirectly. There were several
instances where the participants themselves helped facilitate the focus groups by clarifying the guiding questions for other participants, as Erica did for Bob in the first session. Additionally, the processes of sharing their artwork and experiences in the focus group sessions made the amorphous open-endedness of the artmaking aspect of this study concrete, and inspired other participants to approach their independent artmaking for the study in new ways.

The participants’ roles as teachers and researchers were intimately intertwined with and facilitated by their artistic production, both in the examples of their established practices that they shared with the group and in the artwork they created for the study. Their artwork embodied their independent inquiries and functioned as a communicative forum with/in/through which they shared their stories, experiences, and critical perspectives in relation to the practice of teaching in urban schools.

**Analysis, Interpretation, and Implications Related to Research Question Five**

*How does artistic practice inform this study as a method of inquiry, and suggest possibilities for communicating participants’ counter-stories?*

Artistic practices permeated virtually every aspect of this study, including: my initial conceptualization of the study; the methods used to gather data and facilitate the focus group meetings; and my analysis and synthesis of research data. This study employed three main types of artistic practices: creating artwork; viewing and collaboratively discussing artwork in the context of the focus group sessions; and analyzing artwork in different ways, which are discussed in greater detail below. The participants and I all created artwork as part of the study, albeit at different times and with different emphases. We also viewed and discussed artwork during the focus group sessions, including examples of all of our established artistic practices, and artwork we created for the study. After the focus group sessions concluded, I analyzed the
participants’ artworks (both examples of their established artistic practices and the artwork they created for the study) in a variety of ways through the lenses of each research question and for emergent themes. In addition to my analysis of the participants’ artwork and the ways it functioned in the study, I also used the framework of a/r/tography (Holbrook & Pourchier, 2012; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2012; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008; Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson Kind, 2005) as a creative counterpoint to the structured and focus analysis described above. A/r/tography allowed me to move freely in/around/through/with the research data, and relate it to my ongoing practices as an artist, researcher, and teacher. I explicitly addressed these three roles (artist/researcher/teacher) in a participatory performance/installation piece that I have included as the final a/r/tographic interlude in this research text.

The analysis in relation to this research question is presented in three major sections. The first section, “Getting Started,” discusses the use of artistic practices in the process of conceptualizing and designing the study as well as orienting the participants to the research process. The second section, “Data Collection/Creation” discusses the use of artistic practices within and between the focus group sessions. In the process of preparing this section, I engaged in a focused and structured analysis of the visual and verbal data represented in the Image Transcript. The third section, “A/r/tographic Approaches” discusses my use of a/r/tography as a free-ranging approach to reflecting on, responding to, and synthesizing research data. I divide the analysis this way because these phases of the study were somewhat distinct from one another and the ways artistic practices were employed in each of these phases differed in meaningful ways.
Getting Started

I created the mixed media painting Names (Figure 1) early in my process of conceptualizing this study. It functioned for me as a way of thinking through my relationships with my former students through the lens of critical race theory, and to attempt to frame my experiences as a counter-narrative. It should be noted, however, that this particular piece may unwittingly contribute to stereotyping of urban students by reducing their names to my own interpretations through fonts and fabrics. And yet, my own partial failure with this piece helped to move my thinking forward both by shedding light on my unconscious hubris in summarily representing my students, and by calling attention to the disconnect between my own ways of thinking about this piece and the ways viewers might interpret it. These insights came about through the process of creating art and discussing it with others.

Despite some of the above-mentioned problems with the Names painting, I shared this image with the participants as one possible approach to reflective artmaking using the framework of a/r/tography. Although the participants and I discussed some of the themes and experiences that prompted me to create the Names painting (Figure 1), I primarily shared it with them as a way of explaining the kind of artistic inquiry I had undertaken in the study. This was a way of further explaining the research process. Sharing this image also helped explain my interest in the themes of this study and to establish rapport based on shared experiences as artists and educators who are committed to working in urban schools.

Data Collection/Creation

My analysis in this section was perhaps the most traditional, since I focused on visual and interpretive analyses of participants’ images. During the data collection phase of the study in which the focus group sessions took place, two main types of artistic practices were employed:
creation of artwork by the participants; and viewing and discussion of the participants’ artwork.

In the second focus group session the participants and I all shared examples of our established artistic practices with one another as a way of learning more about each other and establishing rapport. Later in this session and in every subsequent focus group session we also viewed and discussed artwork participants made specifically for the study. In this phase of the study, my artwork functioned differently than the participants’ artwork. Specifically, my own work did not become a part of our ongoing conversations in the ways that the participants’ artwork did. Although I shared examples of my established artistic practice in the second focus group session, I did so primarily to maintain a level of parity with the participants. I wanted to share this aspect of my practice with the participants so they could have an opportunity to get to know me as well as I hoped to get to know them over the course of the study. After sharing these examples of my work, the participants’ artwork became the central focus of the study, and the primary means of reflecting on their experiences and practices teaching in urban schools.

The artistic practices of creating and viewing/discussing artwork were interrelated because of the ways images were shared and discussed in the context of the focus group sessions. In some ways, it is difficult to entirely separate creating from viewing/discussing because these practices informed each other. However, I present them separately in this analysis because there are meaningful ways in which the participants’ individual inquiries through creating images functioned differently than our collaborative viewing and discussion of participants’ artwork.

Creating artwork. In the context of the study, it seemed to me as a researcher that making art caused the participants to slow down and think through the stories they wanted to tell. From my perspective, the participants communicated much more sophisticated, nuanced, in-depth perceptions with/in/through their artwork than they did in their initial verbal responses to
the guiding questions in the first focus group session, some of which seemed almost like platitudes. Artmaking is not the only way to achieve this, but I believe it functioned this way in the context of this study. In the ways some of the participants described the artwork they created for the study, the process of making art seemed akin to a process of creating an extended metaphor, in which they considered the visual elements (motifs, color choices, imagery) of their artwork in relation to the ideas they wanted to express or the experiences they wanted to convey. This was evident in the way Bob described his process of creating the images in Figure 25, *A New Normal*, and Figure 31, *One Heart, One Spirit, One Classroom*, as well as in the way Fiona described her process of creating the images in Figures 26 and 27, the two versions of *Teacher Tree*. This aspect of artmaking also seemed to have the potential to function as a way for the participants to learn about themselves and to incorporate this learning into their stories. This seemed particularly true for Bob, based on his discussion of the ways his process of creating *A New Normal* (Figure 25) revealed his normalization of whiteness. Beyond storytelling though, making art was the primary way for participants to pursue their own interests in the themes of this study in relation to their own interests and experiences.

**Viewing and discussing artwork.** Viewing and discussing artwork in the context of the focus groups served many functions in this study, which are discussed in greater detail below.

**Establishing rapport.** At the beginning of the study, the participants and I viewed and discussed examples of each other’s established artistic practices as a way of getting to know each other. For the participants, sharing artwork gave them a chance to explain their experiences and critical perspectives in what appeared to me as personally meaningful ways. The process of collaboratively viewing and discussing our artwork provided the participants and me with a
common ground for connecting with one another, which continued to grow as the study progressed and the participants created new artwork.

Developing a shared language of mutual interest. Throughout the focus group sessions the participants and I repeatedly referred to the participants’ images, flipping back and forth in the Study PowerPoint. Although I had a schedule of questions that guided our conversations in the focus groups, the participants’ images helped facilitate these conversations in several ways. Each of the images that the participants created for the study introduced new themes that steered our conversations in the directions of their interests. Several of the participants’ images seemed to resonate strongly with the group as ways of expressing complex educational phenomena or ideals. Erica’s image of the hamster wheel in Figure 13, Closing the Achievement Gap, was a prime example of this, as the participants and I referred to the “kids on the hamster wheel” or simply pointed to the image as a way of referring to the structural educational inequities that contribute to the so-called achievement gap. Bob’s final image he created for the study (Figure 31) also functioned this way as we referred to “that world” as an ideal vision of educational equity.

Facilitating difficult conversations. Due to the foci of the study, it was important to talk about race in relation to the context of teaching in urban schools. As a novice researcher, I was not sure how or when to broach the subject of race in the focus group meetings, and I was anxious about the participants’ reactions to discussion of this taboo and politically charged topic. As it happened the participants led the discussion of race, largely through their artwork and the conversations it engendered. Their images helped facilitate, in part made possible, much more complex and nuanced discussions of the participants’ individual experiences of race and the
broader social impacts of race and racism than I believe I could have initiated or facilitated had I relied solely on non-artistic methods.

*Finding common ground, facilitating equitable relationships.* Sharing our artwork, both examples of our established artistic practices and the work we created for the study, helped establish common ground based on our similar experiences as artists and educators who are committed to urban communities. Each of us approached the themes of the study from different angles based on our personal interests and experiences. Rather than creating conflict however, our differences contributed to a rich and nuanced conversation about our practices and relationships with our students and school communities.

**A/r/tographic Approaches**

While the analysis described above was crucial to the study, my artistic inquiry through the framework of a/r/tography helped me to synthesize the research data holistically and freely, without being overly limited by the research questions or theoretical underpinnings of the study. This free-play integrated creative and critical analysis and allowed me to move between different aspects of the data and connect it to different bodies of personal and professional knowledge. I viewed the a/r/tographic interludes included in this research text as sites of radical freedom for me to reflect on, critique, analyze, and synthesize research data in/with/through a range of artistic and analytical methods. This helped me get a richer picture of the study data and draw more relevant and meaningful implications from it.

This study’s focus on countering deficit thinking demands that I continually interrogate my own assumptions about urban students, schools, and communities. Grounding this a/r/tographic study in a participatory paradigm demands that I interrogate the ways I characterize and live out my roles as an artist, researcher, and teacher, and the ways my actions impact the
experiences of viewers, participants, and students. My reflections on this theme are explored more fully in the final a/r/tographic interlude that concludes this research text.

**Conclusions and Implications**

This study was intended to elicit and present the experiences and critical perspectives of veteran arts educators in urban schools, in hopes that their stories might counter deficit-based fears and stereotypes about their students, schools, and communities. The use of arts-based methods was a crucial part of this study, particularly the use of participant-generated imagery as a way of initiating and facilitating the shared reflection and discussion in the focus group sessions that formed the backbone of this study. My decision to ground this study in a participatory paradigm caused me to reflect deeply on the roles the participants and I took on in relation to one another over the course of this study. Using a/r/tography as a framework for conceptualizing the multiple and intersecting creative inquiries that contributed to this study revealed the importance of considering the ways that artists, researchers, and teachers impact the experiences of viewers, participants, and students. Both the stories that emerged from this study and the methods used to elicit them have several implications for art education practice, which are articulated below.

**Understanding the Context of Urban Schools**

This study’s avowed purpose is to counter some of the pervasive, deficit-based characterizations of urban students, schools, and communities that contribute to “white flight” and maintain separate and unequal educational experiences for low-income students of color. Both the theoretical underpinnings of this study in critical race theory (Bell, 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado, 2000a; Delgado & Stephancic, 2001; Espinoza & A. Harris, 2000; Gotanda, 2000; Haney Lopez, 2000, 2006; A. Harris, 2000; C. Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings &
Tate, 1995; Perea, 2000; Wildman, 2000) and the experiences and critical perspectives that the participants shared in the focus group sessions frame the supposed failure of urban schools as a systemic problem that reflects pervasive social inequities rather than simply a failure of individual teachers and schools to meet accountability goals.

Challenging deficit thinking, which blames educational inequity on the individual failings of urban students, teachers, schools, and communities (Valencia, 2010) entails recognition of the ways structural, racialized inequities on a societal level contribute to educational inequities in urban schools. On an individual level, it is also important for arts educators to find ways of recognizing how their characterizations of urban students may be informed by deficit thinking and in turn how this might manifest itself in their teaching practices. This is a first step in moving past deficit thinking toward an equitable and socially just art education practice.

Preparing Art Teachers for Equitable Practice in Diverse Contexts

As part of training future art teachers to work in urban contexts it is important to make them aware of the societal inequities facing urban schools and communities so they understand that as a backdrop for their practices. Understanding some of the ways that society at large is racially and socioeconomically stratified may help pre-service teachers frame their understandings of urban schools, students, and communities more equitably and help them begin to identify and move beyond deficit thinking. I began my own conscious journey toward equitable art education practice through readings and personal engagement with educational literature by critical scholars in art education (Acuff, Hirak, & Nangah, 2012; Anderson, Gussak, Hallmark, & Paul, 2010; Campana, 2011; Cosier, 2012; Cosier & Nemeth, 2010; Darts, 2004; Deniston, Desai, & Check, 1997; Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Dewhurst, 2010; Freedman, 2003; Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002; Gude, 2007, 2008, 2009; Gude & Cosier, 2012; Hutzel, Bastos, &
Cosier, 2012; Knight, 2006a, 2013; Nordlund, Speirs, & Stewart, 2010; Tavin & Ballengee Morris, 2013; Staikidis, 2007) and critical race scholars in education (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2011; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Desai, 2010a, 2010b; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Kohli & Solorzano, 2012; Lopez & Parker, 2003; Lynn, 2004; Milner, 2008; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Preston & Chadderton, 2012; Stovall, 2006; Young, 2011; Whitehead, 2012; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). These theoretical frameworks and their applications in practice were crucial for me in articulating and envisioning socially just art education practice in urban schools. I advocate a similar approach to helping pre-service art teachers connect their personal experiences to some of this scholarship as part of a process of beginning to understand themselves in relation to the diverse contexts where they might someday be teaching.

Since many pre-service teachers are white, middle-class women, artmaking might be a fruitful and minimally-threatening way for them to grapple with understanding white privilege, in terms of how it shapes their personal frameworks for understanding urban students, and how it impacts society at large. Bob Watson’s process of self-discovery through artmaking is a good example of this kind of intense, sustained self-reflection. Artmaking was a form of inquiry-based learning that brought to light some of his previously hidden biases and ways of thinking about urban students. Most importantly perhaps is that he came to many of these realizations on his own through his independent inquiry and did not feel personally attacked or challenged. Based on my experience facilitating this study, conversations about race and social inequity can be difficult to engage, but are essential for achieving educational equity and moving beyond deficit thinking. To be truly transformative, these kinds of conversations involve a high level of
personally reflective engagement on the part of pre-service teachers, which requires fostering a safe, communal environment where they do not fear being judged.

Following are some suggestions I wish to contribute for pre-service art teacher education that have the potential to facilitate a critical understanding of self in relation to race and educational inequity:

- Sharing their interests through art – examples of personal established artistic practices and artists students like and admire
- Assigning readings, learning about contemporary artists, collaborative discussions (possibly online, small groups, as well as large groups), always combined with artistic processing of this information
- Reflecting on their own learning through artmaking – possible topics might include racial identity in relation to their field experiences, supported by critical readings in art education and general education.
- Artmaking activities which may not be directly related to course readings or field experiences, but which might function as constructive, creative counterpoints to academic writing and critical thinking
- Developing diverse metaphors for their own teacher identities, reflecting many possible ways of being and relating to urban students

These suggestions could also be used for art teacher professional development related to diversity pedagogy and social justice art education. Because artmaking is a relatively slow and potentially deliberate, material-intensive process of image-making, it can involve a self-reflective learning process for students. In combination with communal sharing and personal writing
projects, artmaking can create space for students to find their own meanings in within the communal context of their participation in learning activities.

**Choosing Battles for Educational Equity**

Deficit thinking and its relationship to educational inequity do not only affect low-income children of color – they affects all of us. Middle-class and white families are fleeing urban schools in part because of the effects of testing culture on our children’s quality of life, but perhaps we are fighting the wrong battles. I am convinced that we should not be battling for more accountability, but for less restriction of students’ learning experiences and teachers’ exercise of professional judgment in responding creatively to their students’ needs. Children and teachers should not be blamed for the inadequacies of the public education system. The participants in this study demonstrated high levels of professional achievement, and strong connections to their school communities, as evidenced by the critical engagement and sustained commitment that characterized their participation in this study. This leads me to conclude that educational policy should be aimed at reforming the system at large, not forcing families into making the false choice between “better” and “worse” schools.
CHAPTER TEN

A/R/TOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: VIEWERS/PARTICIPANTS/STUDENTS

This final a/r/tographic interlude reflects on the participatory paradigm through the lens of a/r/tography, specifically in terms of the ways the actions and decisions of artists, researchers, and teachers impact the experiences of viewers, participants, and students. I began work on this inquiry through the creation of an interactive performance/installation called *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, which was co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery in Tallahassee, Florida in September of 2012.

*All Tomorrow’s Parties* began as a 2-hour performance during the exhibition opening in which visitors to the gallery were invited to transform the performers’ costumes using materials and tools provided. After the opening performance, the performers’ costumes were suspended in the gallery as an installation for the duration of the exhibition. Gallery visitors were then invited to continue adding to and transforming the dresses as a way of co-creating the installation.

Some of the questions I pondered through the process of conceptualizing and co-creating this artwork were:

- To what extent am I structuring the relationships I could have with viewers, students, and research participants?
- How does my structure determine the relationships I could have with them, and foreclose other kinds of relationships?
- In what ways does it limit my potential to learn from them?
- How can artists/researchers/teachers create opportunities to engage with viewers/participant/students in spaces and situations that they (viewers/participants/students) structure?
- What responsibility do artists/researchers/teacher have to reciprocate and seek out opportunities to move out of our comfort zones into spaces structured by viewers/participants/students?
- Where is the “right” balance between my design/control/power and participants’ autonomy and agency?

I presented this performance/installation in the context of a larger exhibition of my work, which was created during an artist residency at 621 Gallery. Much of the work I created during this period incorporated elements of artworks I completed several years ago, which I cut up, collaged, and sewed into. I viewed this obliteration and re-creation of my artistic past as a way of learning from and building on my earlier work in light of my current explorations of the participatory paradigm in art and research. This performance/installation goes even further by ceding control of the forms, content, and meaning of the piece to gallery visitors. The remainder of this interlude consists of a photo-narrative of the process of co-creating *All Tomorrow’s Parties*.  

178
Figure 36. Performance view (1) of *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, interactive performance/installation co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012. Photo courtesy of Adriane Pereira.

Figure 37. Performance view (2) of *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, interactive performance/installation co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012. Photo courtesy of Adriane Pereira.
Figure 38. Performance view (3) of *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, interactive performance/installation co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012. Photo courtesy of Adriane Pereira.

Figure 39. Performance view (4) of *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, interactive performance/installation co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012. Photo courtesy of Al Hall.
Figure 40. Installation view (1) of All Tomorrow’s Parties, interactive performance/installation co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012. Photo courtesy of Courtney Thayer.

Figure 41. Installation view (2) of All Tomorrow’s Parties, interactive performance/installation co-created with gallery visitors at 621 Gallery, in Tallahassee, Florida, 2012. Photo courtesy of Courtney Thayer.
APPENDIX A

INITIAL HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

Use of Human Subjects in Research - Approval Memorandum
Human Subjects [humansubjects@magnet.fsu.edu]
Sent: Thursday, November 03, 2011 8:09 AM
To: sriddle@ fsu.edu
Cc: asunimenguyas@fsu.edu
Attachments: 7059lCF.pdf (19 KB)

Office of the Vice President for Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 • FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 11/3/2011
To: Sunny Spillane
Address:
Dept.: ART EDUCATION

From: Thomas L. Jacobsen, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Creative Counter-Narratives by Arts Educators in Urban Schools: A Participatory Arts-Based Inquiry

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and one member of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Expedited per per 45 CFR § 46.110(b) and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 10/31/2012 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects

https://exchange.fsu.edu/owa/Terms/vIpmNote&d=9gAAABUlU_j...pN6ORT4vdhbAAAAE0DVXAAAl&x=Print&pspid=1361470058795_184090717 Page 1 of 2

182
involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is FWA0000168/IRB number IRB00000446.

Co: Anniina Guyas, Advisor
HSC No. 2011.7059
APPENDIX B

CHANGE IN PROTOCOL APPROVAL

Use of Human Subjects in Research - Approval Memorandum

Human Subjects [humansubjects@magnet.fsu.edu]

Sent: Friday, March 02, 2012 11:40 AM
To: Spillane, Sunny

Office of the Vice President For Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(950) 644-6673 • FAX (950) 644-6392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM (for change in research protocol)

Date: 3/2/2012
To: Sunny Spillane

Address: 
Dept.: ART EDUCATION

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research (Approval for Change in Protocol)
Project entitled: Creative Counter-Narratives by Arts Educators in Urban Schools: A Participatory ARTHOGRAPHIC Inquiry

The form that you submitted to this office in regard to the requested change/amendment to your research protocol for the above-referenced project has been reviewed and approved.

If the project has not been completed by 10/31/2012, you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is FWA00000168/IRB number IRB00000446.

CC: 
HSC No. 2012.7814
APPENDIX C

RE-APPROVAL OF HUMAN SUBJECTS APPLICATION

Office of the Vice President For Research
Human Subjects Committee
P. O. Box 3062742
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

RE-APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 10/15/2012

To: Sunny Spillane

Address: 

Dept.: ART EDUCATION

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Re-approval of Use of Human subjects in Research:
Creative Counter-Narratives by Arts Educators in Urban Schools: A Participatory Arts-Based Inquiry

Your request to continue the research project listed above involving human subjects has been approved by the Human Subjects Committee. If your project has not been completed by 10/11/2013, you are must request renewed approval by the Committee.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your renewal request, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this re-approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting of research subjects. You are reminded that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report in writing, any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chairman of your department and/or your major professor are reminded of their responsibility for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in their department. They are advised to review the protocols as often as necessary to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

Cc: 
HSC No. 20129137
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT

FSU Behavioral Consent Form
Creative Counter-Narratives by Urban Arts Educators: A Participatory, A/r/tographic Inquiry

You are invited to participate in an arts-based research study that will draw on the shared experiences and perspectives of a culturally diverse group of arts educators in high-poverty, urban schools in order to challenge deficit-based characterizations of urban students, schools and communities. You were selected as a possible participant for several reasons: you have a reputation as a committed, veteran arts educator in a high-poverty urban school; your perspective will contribute to the diversity of the group of research participants; and you have meaningful and substantive personal experience making art. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Sunny Spillane, a doctoral student in the Department of Art Education.

Background Information:

This study draws on the deep connectedness of a diverse group of committed, veteran arts educators in urban public schools in order to challenge deficit-based characterizations of their students, schools, and surrounding communities. The study employs an arts-based educational research methodology called a/r/tography that mines the relationships between participants’ roles as artists, researchers, and teachers, and draws on these identities to create an integrated, living practice.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:
Engage in a guided process of artmaking and reflective writing, and take part in four 90 minute focus group interviews with the principal researcher and the other participants. Focus group interviews may be recorded onto a digital audio recorder, or videotaped, and any artwork you generate for the study may be photographed with a digital camera. The study will last for approximately four months, and will involve approximately five to ten hours of independent artmaking and reflective writing. The focus group interviews will take place at times that are most convenient for you and the other participants.

Risks and benefits of being in the Study:

The study poses no more than the minimal risks encountered in everyday life.

The primary benefits to participation are the opportunities to share your knowledge and insights about your students and school, and increase the group’s sensitivity to racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity among our students, which may allow us to deliver more effective and responsive instruction, and forge equitable and empathetic relationships with our students and school communities.

Possession of Artwork and Journals:

You and the other participants will retain possession of any artwork or reflective writing you generate over the course of this study. For research and data analysis purposes, the principal

FSU Human Subjects Committee Approved on 3/01/2012. Void after 10/31/2012. HSC # 2012.7814
researcher, Sunny Spillane, will document your work using a digital camera or scanner, or by copying files of any such work that exists only in digital format (such as digital artwork or journal entries).

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private and confidential to the extent permitted by law. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Video and/or audio recordings of interviews will be transcribed and then erased. Any photographs or digital files of documents related to your teaching practice (such as student artwork, lesson plans, or any artwork or journal entries you generate during the course of the study) will not include any identifiable personal information.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Sunny Spillane. You may ask any question you have now. If you have a question later, you are encouraged to contact her by phone at or by email at or you may contact her advisor, Dr. Aminina Suominen Guyas, by phone at or by email at

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the FSU IRB at 2010 Levy Street, Research Building B, Suite 276, Tallahassee, FL. 32306-2742, or 850-644-8633, or by email at humansubjects@magnet.fsu.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature Date

Signature of Investigator Date

FSU Human Subjects Committee Approved on 3/01/2012. Void after 10/31/2012. HSC # 2012.7814
Table 1. Excerpt of Image Transcript

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Video Transcript</strong></th>
<th><strong>Images</strong></th>
<th><strong>Notes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Erica:</strong> OK, so what I do is I photograph families and their kids for free, and then in return, they allow me to use images of their kids in my artwork, and that’s how I get my imagery. So I’ve been working with kids in my artwork and naming them either angel series or celestial messenger series. I overlay images of children with images of nature and clouds and I guess I’ve been doing fairies and angels for a while now. I thought about, when we had the BP oil spill, I wanted to do an image where God and angels were looking down on us for spilling all that oil. I never did do that image, but then I continued that angel series and called it “Celestial Messengers” and thought that maybe this is the way that God was telling us that we need to take care of our earth, so this is what I’ve been doing. Angels, clouds, and images from nature. This is one of the images in the series.</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image 1" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So, as I said before, the adoption of my niece really started me on the fairies and angels series, I suspect that my niece is an incarnate of a fairy or something to do with nature. This is old, so I did a lot of nature stuff, again superimposing or layering images of a child with natural imagery.</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image 2" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Then I started using a lot of vintage photographs. This is part of a series called “What Came before Us.” I was scanning photographs of my family and Mark’s family and then a river runs through it. That is, it’s based on the book by the guy who wrote “A River Runs through It.” And also the river of life. The river represents how life goes on from generation to generation. I tried to do this maternal-children theme, kind of like Madonna and Child.

So, the two pieces that I did over the weekend for this project, I got this book by James Crawford who was the former president of the Association for Bilingual Education and so he wrote an essay called “A Diminished View of Civil Rights.” Since we’re talking about education in this project, I did some research and so little is known that in California in 1947, they desegregated the schools in the entire state of California, and it was because Sylvia Mendez’s parents challenged, and they and other Mexican families filed a class action lawsuit. Thurgood Marshall was on that case and later in 1954 when he handled the case for Brown vs. Board of Education, he used the argument from the CA case for the KS case, the national case. This is Linda Brown here, and you know her dad was in the class action lawsuit. So I juxtaposed their images with – you know while I was working on this image I was like “ugh! I can’t stand looking at these guys there, you know” but it has to be a political statement, right? And I’m like, I’m used to working with children’s images and natural images and now I have to look at these guys and I’m like, God, you know?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Transcript</th>
<th>Images</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Then I started using a lot of vintage photographs. This is part of a series called “What Came before Us.” I was scanning photographs of my family and Mark’s family and then a river runs through it. That is, it’s based on the book by the guy who wrote “A River Runs through It.” And also the river of life. The river represents how life goes on from generation to generation. I tried to do this maternal-children theme, kind of like Madonna and Child.</td>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Images" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So, the two pieces that I did over the weekend for this project, I got this book by James Crawford who was the former president of the Association for Bilingual Education and so he wrote an essay called “A Diminished View of Civil Rights.” Since we’re talking about education in this project, I did some research and so little is known that in California in 1947, they desegregated the schools in the entire state of California, and it was because Sylvia Mendez’s parents challenged, and they and other Mexican families filed a class action lawsuit. Thurgood Marshall was on that case and later in 1954 when he handled the case for Brown vs. Board of Education, he used the argument from the CA case for the KS case, the national case. This is Linda Brown here, and you know her dad was in the class action lawsuit. So I juxtaposed their images with – you know while I was working on this image I was like “ugh! I can’t stand looking at these guys there, you know” but it has to be a political statement, right? And I’m like, I’m used to working with children’s images and natural images and now I have to look at these guys and I’m like, God, you know?</td>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Images" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. School Accountability and Student Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary Schools (all names have been changed to numbers)</th>
<th>Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>Percentage of Whiteness</th>
<th>School Grade</th>
<th>AYP Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 7</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 9</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 10</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 12</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 13</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 14</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 15</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 16</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 17</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 18</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 19</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 20</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 21</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 22</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 23</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.S. 24</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Russo, P. (2004). What makes any school an urban school? (Draft position paper by Coordinator of the Center for Urban Schools in the College of Education at SUNY Oswego) retrieved from: http://www.oswego.edu/~prusso1/what_makes_any_school_an_urban_s.htm


Sunny Spillane is an artist and art educator from Miami, Florida, with over ten years of experience as an art educator working with diverse students at the elementary, secondary, and college level in institutional and community settings. Her research interests include two main foci: achieving educational equity for marginalized and underserved students; and investigating the intersections of artistic practices with qualitative research methodology and diversity pedagogy. She is currently an adjunct instructor in the Department of Art at Florida State University. Spillane studied art in New York City and holds a BFA in Drawing from Pratt Institute and an MFA in Painting from Hunter College of the City University of New York and maintains an active artistic practice. She recently completed an artist residency at 621 Gallery, Inc. in Tallahassee, FL, where she presented a major exhibition of new work in September 2012.