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Final Project: Reflective Analysis Paper

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My autobiography and personal history provide insights into my personal, familial, socio-cultural, historical, experiential, and disciplinary (educational and professional) background that has served to influence and shape my ways of knowing. I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan and my heritage is of African-American descent; I am the middle daughter of five children, comprised of four girls and one boy. My (late) Father was a physician, General Practitioner, in private practice, and my Mother, a stay-at-home wife and mother who later started a successful printing company and newspaper. Our family was considered upper-middle class and we lived in a racially mixed neighborhood. I was raised in a strong and supportive family, though like many families, it has its share of dysfunction.

From kindergarten through ninth grade, I attended Detroit Public Schools (DPS) the largest school district in Michigan and, similar to other metropolitan districts, one with a majority population of students of color. At the beginning of my tenth grade year, the DPS teacher union was striking, which prompted my Father's decision to enroll my two older sisters and me into a private, all-girl, Catholic school, Our Lady Star of the Sea (OLSS). My new high school was located in Grosse Pointe Woods, a very affluent community and, at age fifteen, it was my first experience attending a predominately white school. What a definite culture shock this experience was for me and initially rather scary and painful my first year. Personally, this was my first exposure as I reflect on this academic experience with my practitioner's lens that enabled me to gain first-hand knowledge into the funding and educational disparities that exists among schools in suburban and large cities. At OLSS, my largest class had 14 students; the smallest had 5, with a graduating class of 47 girls. This school had new facilities; new books, Advanced Placement course offerings, knowledgeable teachers, lots of resources and many of the

classrooms were carpeted! As compared to my previous high school in Detroit, where the classes averaged 35 students, the books were old and torn and the school building was in ill-repair.

However, my most vivid memories at OLSS were not of the plentiful resources, but of the way that I was treated by my teachers, counselors and peers. My sisters, cousin and I were the only African-American students and it was as if there were many “unspoken” assumptions being held until those assumptions were disproved by grades, daily interactions, communication skills and/or social behavior. I constantly felt as if I was being closely examined, as if under a microscope. Although, at this time, I lacked the sophisticated terminology to ‘name’ my experiences, but, I definitely gained a sense that in this wealthy community, “whites” were the ‘standard bearers’ or the ‘measuring stick’ with which I was being compared to at all times. I recall an occasion that my counselor tried to dissuade me from enrolling into AP science and mathematics courses, however I told her very confidently that I intended to study medicine and needed such courses. Afterward, I went home and told my Father about my meeting, he was up at the school the very next day. That sort of incident never occurred again. I thank my parents for their patience, love and for instilling confidence in me; they set a solid foundation for my future development. Especially my Father, who each morning, before school, stood me before a mirror and spoke words of encouragement and praise into me then he would coach me to articulate, in my own voice, who I was. This frequent practice helped to shape my perception of who I was as an individual and as a knower. I can honestly say that I was never silenced as a child or adolescent. Both, my Mother and Father validated me as a knower. I always felt nurtured, loved and accepted by my parents who I looked up to the most.

Upon graduating high school, I immediately attended the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida, and majored in a dual Bachelor’s degree program called, Marine Affairs

comprised of Marine Biology and Business Administration and graduated with my AB in 1990. Upon completing my bachelor's degree, I returned home to Michigan and encountered life. I gained real-world work experience as a Sales Manager for a national sales company, entered into a committed relationship, which later became increasingly domineering, and gave birth to my son, Jonathon. At the tender age of 24, I was experiencing multiple life changing events simultaneously that I did not feel equipped to handle. This transition period from late adolescent to adulthood was abrupt and painful, this was my first real-encounter with being "silenced", yet there was still reasoning. I found myself in uncharted terrain, I had no voice nor could I rely on my previous knowledge or experiences because there was no precedent for me to follow. I felt alone and trapped, and isolated from my family. The turning point for me that I used as my sole source of inspiration and inner strength was being a mother and being determined to provide for my son. In my renewed quest for knowledge, I found solace in external sources, books, clergy, senior colleagues and prayer (lots of it!). Though, this was a gradual process over the next four years.

Then, literally, almost seeming to occur all at once, I quit my job, broke off my engagement with my son's Father while Jonathon was still in pre-school and started my own sales/marketing business. Reflecting on this period in my personal history, I was transitioning through several phases of knowing, as recounted in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, from Silence, Received, to Subjective and now embarking on Procedural Knowledge. Leading up to this time when my career in education first began, I was Editor-in-Chief of a community paper, extremely active in my community and still operating my own business. I was offered a part-time position as Project Coordinator for the Empty Bowls Project at the Detroit Institute of Arts, working with high school students' after-school to expose them to Science, Technology and Engineering

through Art. Once funding for this pilot project concluded, I was invited to coordinate another after-school program at an elementary school this time involving sixth graders and their Teachers working to design and develop the schools 1st newspaper, The Liberty Lighthouse. This was an eye-opening experience, before this program, my passion has always been to help my community. As a business-owner and editor, I was helping to empower my community by providing relevant news and information. The motto for the paper, Community Network News, Inc. was “the vehicle for positive change”.

Yet, opportunities continued to arise, which kept drawing my attention back to education. That following summer, I was invited to speak at a career fair for the Upward Bound Program at Cranbrook Institute in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. With an educational background in Marine Biology, my Aunt Elana, an educator, repeatedly and emphatically urged me to utilize my degree and go into education. She informed me that a new school was opening in my neighborhood and was hiring. Shortly after inquiring, I was offered a full-time position to work as the only Marine Science Instructor at Sankore Marine Immersion High School & Academy, the first public school in Detroit with an ocean sciences theme. In my familial history, there exists a long line of educators and entrepreneurs; I am a third-generation educator. Both my paternal grandparents (Grandfather, Dr. David McKinney, Jr., a professor emeritus from University of Guelph and wife, my Grandmother, Tyra Kirk (deceased), an elementary teacher) were educators, my Aunt and now me.

The new work with my students and school community was thoroughly consuming. It was both exhausting and exhilarating at the same time and I enjoyed every minute of it! I had found my new niche, helping to prepare students for the 21st Century future workforce. I constantly sought out opportunities for professional and academic growth to further develop

myself as a knower, learner and thinker. I went back to school at Eastern Michigan University to pursue my teaching certification and immediately joined the Metropolitan Detroit Science Teachers Association and served as the President of the executive board in 2003. I also utilized my writing and editing skills to research and secure grant funds to create and implement school programs and afford experiential in-state and out-of-state trips for me and my students. It was not long before my classroom received much attention from the media and a new position became available to me as Director of Education at the newly expanded Detroit Science Center, a regional museum for science and engineering. After much deliberation, I accepted this new, yet 'highly visible' role and challenge. It was at this juncture in my career that my professional experiences helped to broaden and expand my perspective as a practitioner beyond the classroom, to the regional and state level.

My focus now shifted toward creating community partnerships with school districts, academia, county and state agencies and corporations. After eighteen months, I was offered a promotion to State Science Supervisor for the Michigan Department of Education and then later as a Curriculum Supervisor for Science in the Pontiac School District. Throughout my career advancement, it was vital for me to continue my educational advancement and to continue cultivating my ways of knowing, learning and thinking. Over a decade later, I returned to school to pursue a Master's of Arts in Teaching Degree from the University of Michigan. Upon graduating in 2006 that same year, I received the Albert Einstein "Distinguished Educator" Fellowship and moved with my son and Fiancé to Arlington, Virginia to serve an eleven month term at the National Science Foundation, Directorate for Geosciences, and Office of the Assistant Director. This year as an Einstein Fellow was pivotal and another career milestone, it provided me with fundamental understanding that effective and thoughtful policies are necessary

if real change in education is to occur. And, that I need to be at the decision-making table to affect systemic and institutional change. So I reconsidered my career goals and made a life changing decision to permanently relocate here.

Each of these rich and diverse experiences from my familial, socio-cultural, personal, historical and disciplinary that I have carefully outlined has influenced my ways of knowing and served to shape my perspective. My work in various leadership positions has had profound impacts on my personal and professional growth and desire for academic advancement. Each career goal attained has intricately expanded my ways of knowing as a learner and thinker. In January 2009, I began my doctoral program in Educational Administration and Policy at George Mason University. Prior to entering my doctoral studies, there were several courses during my masters program that impacted my philosophy and educational methodologies. Yet, the most notable course was Current Trends in Multicultural Education, which ‘opened my eyes’ to realize that education is one of the single most political fields and is chiefly responsible for the continued economic disparities that exists in this country and across our global community. Education is greatly influenced by peoples’ belief systems, hence, their ways of knowing. One of my favorite quotes by Nelson Mandela affirms, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. I believe that education has the power to transform people and how they see themselves and the world.

In EDUC 800 Ways of Knowing, the course readings that I have encountered and intimately interacted with are novel and have enlightened me to innovative thought, critical practices from new (and familiar, Bruner) scholars, new terminology, frameworks, historical contexts and intellectually stimulating literature. Throughout this semester, I have actively engaged in reading, reflective journaling, class discussions, course projects and presentations that

have transformed me as a practitioner, researcher and emerging scholar in several areas: expanding my sphere of knowledge of scholarly research to further explore, critiquing and synthesizing research to incorporate into my future practice, and generating questions that have implications on my future work and collaborations.

On my journey toward scholarship, the following research has resonated with me. Beginning with *Acts of Meaning* (1990), where Bruner places the focus back to the nature and cultural shaping of meaning making, and the central place it plays in human action. The purpose of this important work is a tremendous shift from how I recall learning psychology in my Master's program. I view Bruner as a living historian and he alone constitutes over 61 years of knowledge production. Bruner personally admits that "Indeed, it [psychology] has been technicalized in a manner that even undermines that original impulse" (pg. 1). I recall references comparing the human brain with that of a computer. Hence, making the field of psychology appear sterile and clinical, far removed from human emotions, feelings, beliefs, and such that it seemed artificial and not at all human. Bruner boldly proposes that "it is culture, not biology that shapes human life and the human mind" (pg. 34). Though, when Bruner talks about a "more interpretive approach" to cognition concerned with "meaning-making", this statement in itself raises many questions for me such as what implications will this "more interpretive approach" have on future research and how research is currently conducted? I look forward to pursuing these questions further as I enter into my research courses in the fall semester.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986), I was astonished with the findings, "Most of the women reported that they had often been treated as if they were stupid" (pg. 193). Early in my career and in my schooling, I have been made to feel this way, but I simply did not realize so many other women feel the same way. I overcame this extremely demoralizing and humiliating

experience by speaking in confidence to trusted family members, friends and mentors. I believe this tactic is designed to control and limit the advancement of certain targeted groups (women, people of color), because once a person is rendered in a position of self-doubt that individual will typically not pose a threat to you. There were numerous narratives from women of all ages that spoke about instances in their lives when they felt silenced or robbed of their voice. An example, "Experts" usually tried to assert dominance over less knowledgeable people either by assaulting them with information or by withholding information" (pg. 194). Information serves as a formidable "weapon" or defense in times of attack. Additionally, the authors frame what they see as problematic with science, "The problem is especially acute with respect to science. Science is usually taught by males and is regarded as the quintessentially masculine intellectual activity..." (pg. 215). As a result, I feel that women and people of color are silently dis-invited to participate in this lucrative field, because there are very few scientists that are made visible to the larger public who are women and of diverse backgrounds

In Harding's book, *Is Science Multicultural?* (1998), she provides a graphically detailed, well documented study that reveals how science historically has been used for dominance and control and a mechanism to silence. The title alone poses a provocative question, which demands a response. Speaking from my practitioner's lens, I answer emphatically "NO!", science, as it stands currently, is not multicultural. I have personally witnessed girls and students of color struggle with science. Students have shared that science is not an endeavor "meant for them" as they fail to see or infrequently see scientists that look like them. Addressing issues of equity and attaining greater diversity in the sciences on all levels is an issue of great importance to me and continues to be an "uphill" challenge. Furthermore, Harding challenges many of the strongly held notions of science that were instilled in me throughout my educational training, among

them, “that all knowledge systems, including those of modern sciences, are local ones” (pg. x). This definitive statement makes a clear and distinct break from the “science is universal”, culturally non-biased, absolute, rational, neutral, and “concept of objectivity”.

Next Harding exposes, “Most obvious since 1492 and the beginnings of five centuries of European Voyages of Discovery, the growth of modern science and technologies in Europe and the relative decline of other cultures’ knowledge systems have been causally related. So-called development processes since World War II continue to “turn the world into a laboratory for European sciences” in many respects” (pg. 126-127). It is evident as Harding so clearly conveys that it has never been about society’s advancement but solely about wealth, control, and total domination for European males. Harding continues to deconstruct current systems at work in today’s society, “Here power is exercised less visibly, less consciously, and not on but through the dominant institutional structures, priorities, research strategies, technologies and languages of the sciences- through the practices and culture that constitute a particular scientific episode” (p,131). The following question is intriguing and I would possibly like to explore further in my future educational research, “How can we block “might makes right” in the realm of knowledge production?” though Harding prefaces this statement with, “of course it is hard for anyone to bring the most rigorous critical examinations to bear on ideals that so powerfully support the legitimacy of one’s favorable circumstances” (pg. 124).

The previous statement provides a relevant segue for Critical Race Theory (CRT), which originated in critical legal scholarship and traditionally argued against the slow pace of racial reform in the United States. CRT provides strategies expose white privilege that employ storytelling to give voice to the oppressed and could prove transformative in education, especially utilizing qualitative research. Its courageous proponents identify and discuss daily

racism in society and deconstruct seemingly “colorblind” or “race-neutral” policies. CRT further purports that racism, a social construct, not a biological concept, was constructed to ensure the prosperity of whites at the detriment of people of color. Additionally, in the article, *real bad arabs*, films have historically been used as an effective vehicle by which damaging stereotypes have been propagated through society to vilify people of color. Hundreds of films have been created using the power of repetition of derogatory stereotypes as a tool for disempowering People of Color through misrepresentation. Further, these insidious and pervasive stereotypes simply do not go away if left unchallenged or unchecked.

This provocative quote by Martin Luther King, Jr. frames the 21st Century challenge that lies before us, “The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people. Therefore, no longer can whites or others possessing cultural capital stand silent in the face of injustices, to do so essentially supports and maintains white privilege. Thus, it is the moral responsibility and civic duty of whites, in particular, but each one of us, in general, to speak out. As a University Supervisor for GMU, I witnessed an intern, Radhakrishnan Sivaramapillai, who was being discriminated against due to his accent, I did not remain silent but spoke out and successfully advocated for his rights. I was able to immediately place him in another classroom and facilitate his successful completion of the course. With this said, CRT has profound implications for education as it relates to tracking, funding disparities, curriculum development, student assessment, research and educational policy. Key issues being to legitimize voices of people of color, to critically examine current “race-neutral” policies, practices and behaviors and to deconstruct the institutionalization of white supremacy in our global society. EDUC 800 has sharpened my critical lens as a practitioner and researcher as I seek to frame bold new questions for my future research and policy development.

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