POWERFUL VOICES: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES & LITERACIES OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

By

ThedaMarie Gibbs

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ABSTRACT

POWERFUL VOICES: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES & LITERACIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

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The voices of all youth have power, value and meaning. However, many spaces in and beyond school struggle to honor the voices and literacy practices of African American youth who live and learn in urban communities. The current case-study explores the lived experiences and literacies of African American high school students in a GEAR-UP pre-college college program. Three questions frame the research study: (1) In what ways, if at all, does GEAR-UP foster African American students' navigation of school and the college preparation process (2) What do we learn about African American students' lived experiences and literacies through their participation in GEAR-UP? (3) More specifically, what do we learn about students' lived experiences through their engagement in multiple literacies?

Data from the study include program observations captured in both video-recordings and fieldnotes; interviews with student participants and staff; students' writing samples and presentations; and program curricula. Three major theoretical frameworks shape study analysis: *Third Space*, *Community Cultural Wealth* and *Multiple Worlds Typology* and *Critical Race Theory*. *Third Space Theory* helps to contextualize the importance of beyond school spaces that honor the voices of culturally and linguistically diverse youth. *Community Cultural Wealth* acknowledges the significant forms of capital that communities of color possess. *Multiple Worlds Typology* provides a framework for understanding how students' multiple worlds impact their academic success and preparation for college. *Critical Race Theory* provides a framework for providing a space to illuminate the voices, lived experiences and literacies of African

American youth. Findings from the study speak to the ways in which GEAR-UP and students'

families formed communities of possibility for students' academic success. Additional findings

illuminate how African American youth utilized literacy as a means for self-exploration and

representation and engaging in community change. The findings from the study reinforce the

importance of spaces both in and beyond school that allow African American youth to speak and

write about their lived experiences, and deem these opportunities as valuable and necessary to

their success.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"We can learn many things in school and out!" (Rochelle-8th Grade Scholar)

Rochelle was one of four hundred eighth-grade students who participated in a college campus visit program sponsored by *GEAR-UP*, a pre-college program that is the focus of my research. Prior to writing this quote, she participated in a workshop where students had the opportunity to critically discuss what an education meant to them. Students had also been exposed to and explored the significance of three proverbs from various cultures that spoke to many topics including their beliefs about the purpose of education and its relevance in their lives. Students were specifically asked to choose one of four quotes and write their interpretation of what the proverb was teaching. Rochelle chose the following proverb, from the Kikuyu tribe, which is the largest tribe and ethnic group in Kenya: "To come out of one's house means learning". The proverb provided her with the inspiration to then write about the multiple spaces in which students can learn. Through her words, Rochelle emphatically informed her reader of the significance of both in and out-of-school spaces in students' lives. Her words connect to an important issue in education regarding the possibilities of out-of-school spaces in contributing to the academic and personal growth of all youth, particularly African American youth.

While schools represent meaningful spaces that can contribute to students' academic and social development, it is important to recognize the multiple supportive spaces within students' communities. As multicultural educator James Banks states, "Learning takes place not only in school but also in the multiple contexts and valued practices of everyday lives across the life span" (Banks et al., 2006, p. 15). As researchers and practitioners it is important that we build communities where we recognize these valued practices that are present in a range of spaces including students' home environments, neighborhoods, schools, churches, community-based

organizations and other out-of-school spaces. Furthermore, we must cultivate spaces in all of these environments where African American youth are able to GEAR-UP and are provided with the tools to actualize success.

While it is not my intent to characterize all schools as failing to meet the needs of African American youth, it is important to acknowledge that far too many schools are indeed unable to provide African American youth with the resources and skills needed to obtain academic success. Instead of placing the blame on African American youth and the communities in which they live and learn, I believe that it is much more productive to focus our attention on better understanding their experiences. Additionally, it is pertinent that we understand both the educational conditions that contribute to the success of African American youth and the actions that we can take to ensure these conditions are created. Our educational efforts should focus on how to improve schools in ways that support the development of African American youth, and how to increase our understanding of additional supportive resources such as pre-college programs. Through my dissertation work, I am interested in exploring the role of out-of-school, pre-college programs in the lives of high school African American youth. It is important to engage in research that helps us to understand the dimensions of both in and out-of-school spaces. I am not only interested in how such programs influence African American students' preparation for college, but I am also interested in the type of literacy activities that students participate in and how their participation in these activities influences them.

In order to gain admittance and succeed in college it is important that students possess the academic skills that will help them reach success. While it is important that students are equipped with academic skills in all subject areas, I am particularly interested in the type of literacy instruction and support students receive. In an effort to meet the literacy needs of African

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American youth, we must ensure that students receive adequate literacy support both in and outside of the classroom. Out-of-school, pre-college programs can be seen as additional sites of possibility through which educators can help African American youth "to acknowledge themselves as thriving, literate, intelligent human beings with important contributions to make" (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p. 4). Thus, it is particularly important for support programs that work with African American youth to consider the role they serve in improving their educational and literacy outcomes. It is important to note that in exploring the significance of out-of-school spaces in the lives of youth, it can be easy to dichotomize or privilege in and out-of-school spaces over each other (Hull & Schultz, 2002). Truly, our youth need spaces both in and out of school that nurture their healthy development. We can benefit from forming alliances between in and out-of-school spaces, rather than separating the two to create such spaces. Before doing so, it is crucial to consider the characteristics of each space that contribute to the successful development of youth.

Research focused on evaluating the significance of out-of-school programs among youth has revealed that participating in such programs can benefit youth "in a number of interrelated outcome areas- academic, social/emotional, prevention, and health and wellness" (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008, p. 2). While pre-college programs can be very useful in providing and connecting students to important college preparatory resources, we must increase both qualitative and quantitative research that speaks to the significance of such programs (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). This lack of quantitative and qualitative data and metrics for best practices can limit the type of progress programs are able to make (Noam, 2003). Consequently, research that contributes to what is known about the design, implementation and influence of pre-college programs on the social and academic development of African American youth is crucial. This is

particularly important given the importance of programs that take into account students' culture and are culturally relevant, however there is a paucity of research on such culturally relevant programs (Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003; Gandara & Bial, 2001). Increasing our understanding of pre-college programs can serve multiple purposes that include strengthening and improving curricula that positively impact students' academic success and fostering stronger alliances between in and out-of-school spaces serving African American youth. It is also important since the future of such programs is often questioned and funders look to data that speak to the effectiveness of pre-college programs.

Research Questions

Through the research I engaged in, I sought to better understand the role that pre-college programs can and do serve in providing academic and social support for African American youth. In order to gain a better understanding of the role that this particular program served and its effectiveness, it was paramount to the study that I understood the various components of the program as well as the experiences of students who participate in the program. The three research questions guiding my research were:

1) In what ways, if at all, does the GEAR-UP foster students' navigation of school and the college preparation process?

2) What do we learn about African American students' lived experiences and literacies through their participation in GEAR-UP?

3) More specifically, what do we learn about students lived experiences through their engagement in multiple literacies?

Both in this section and throughout my study, I utilized several key constructs such as academic success, literacy, and literacy support. It is important to note that each of these constructs are dynamic and are defined by researchers and educators in myriad ways.

Consequently, I unpacked and operationalized each construct in the context of my research. Defining academic success has proven to be quite difficult. Although "academic success" is a commonly used construct in educational research, it is neither commonly defined nor easy to define, which contributes to the difficulty in also measuring it as a construct (York, Gibson & Rankin, 2015). York, Gibson and Rankin (2015) conducted a meta-analysis through which they examined the myriad ways that researchers both operationalize and measure academic success. Success of any kind and more specifically academic success are also constructs that are subjective in nature and must take into account students' understanding and definitions of success. In retrospect, explicitly asking the students in the study to talk about and define what success meant to them would have been useful. This is particularly important for African American youth, given the lack of consideration of their thoughts and lived experiences when constructs such as academic success are defined.

Additionally, dominant definitions of academic success often omit critical considerations of the relationship between identity and more specifically, racial identity. In the absence of their explicit definitions, I acknowledge that my operationalization of academic success might not fully reflect students' own definitions. All of the students in the study expressed their understanding of the importance of graduating from high school and attending college for their future academic and career success. Consequently, acknowledgement of the importance of high school graduation in the definition. In the context of my study academic success is a combination of many factors including but not limited to: students' acquisition of the academic knowledge and tools necessary for mastering academic content, students' meeting their own academic goals, students' matriculation through high school and graduation from high school, and students' maintenance of positive identities as African American youth.

Furthermore, a singular focus on the outcome or the attainment of academic success would be limited. Consequently, it is necessary to equally focus on the factors that both contribute to and inhibit African American students' success. While the students in the study and all students for that matter are accountable for their academic success, they are not responsible alone. Students' schools, school staff, teacher educators, teacher education programs, school boards, parents, communities, and local and federal legislative bodies that make decisions about education are among the long list of people who are also responsible for students' academic success. Consequently, throughout the study my analysis of students' experiences will include discussions of GEAR-UP, school, community, familial and societal factors that influence students' academic success.

Similarly, dominant constructions of literacy and literacies do not often account for the lived experiences of African American youth. Collins and Blot (2003) remind us of the socially contested nature of literacy and literacies. They shed light on the ways in which historical and contemporary notions of what literacy is can be restricting. In my study I take up a definition of literacy meant to intentionally disrupt dominant notions of what literacy is. Throughout my study I define literacy as students' oral and written engagement with any type of written text including but not limited to poetry, journal entries, personal statements, PowerPoint presentations, essays, books and their own writing. Additionally, literacy as I have conceptualized it throughout the study, focuses intently on the reasons behind students' engagement in literacy activities.

Sociocultural Lens

Throughout my dissertation I have adopted a sociocultural approach to both understanding and analyzing GEAR-UP students' literacies and lived experiences. When discussing how to better meet the academic needs of any student, researchers remind us how

essential it is to consider and explore students' social context and social influences on their academic development. In utilizing a sociocultural lens I engage in critical discussions related to the implications of race, racism on students' academic experiences, success as well as their identities as African American youth. It is impossible to critically discuss the academic success of African American youth absent of a critical discussion about the ways in which race and racism impact their success.

Tatum (2000) asserts "the problem of how to increase the literacy achievement of African Americans is embedded in social, cultural, economic, and historical dynamics" (p. 53). Utilizing a sociocultural approach to literacy specifically has been useful in examining "the intersection of social, cultural, historical, mental, physical, and more recently, political aspects of people's sense-making, interaction, and learning around texts" (Lewis, Encisco & Moje, 2007, p. 2). These aspects of students' lives certainly influence their access, engagement with and interpretation of and response to particular texts. Researchers continue to examine how students' multiple worlds including their family, school, peers and community impact their academic development. According to Gee (1990), people are socialized into literacy-learning practices and consequently it is important for us to examine both the practices and the spaces that engage students in these practices (p. 45).

Furthermore, when exploring the literacies that African American youth in the study engaged in it was also essential to draw upon the sociocultural elements of Black literacies both historically and contemporarily. Black literacies are inclusive of language and literacies that draw upon for example Black preacher traditions, that illuminate the collective experiences of African Americans and that acknowledge the importance of Black English. I return to a more in

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depth discussion of Black literacies in the analysis sections as I more specifically unpack students' verbal and written language use.

My Connection to the Research

It was not until I began working with middle and high school students in a pre-college program that I recognized that a significant focus of my professional and academic career would be centered on supporting the literacy development of young people. For ten years of my career I had the pleasure of working with amazingly brilliant middle and high school students, full of potential who were participants in a pre-college program hosted by Jordan University, the Midwestern public university that is the focus of my research. The program provided primarily African American youth with exposure to college campuses and college life, connected them with college students and adults who served as mentors and walked them through the college application process, which are all important elements of college preparation. In working with students as they developed their personal statements and other pieces of writing, our staff recognized that while our students clearly had important thoughts and experiences to share with the world, many of them struggled with expressing themselves in written form. Since literacy is an important element of students' success at every stage in their academic lives and beyond (Biancarosa and Snow, 2003), they deserved and needed additional assistance. It is important to note that while acquiring reading and writing skills is a key element of obtaining academic success, it is also limiting to conceptualize the benefits of literacy only for academic reasons, since literacy is significant in all aspects of students' lives. Equipped with meaningful reading skills, students can support and strengthen their interests, gain exposure to new ideas, read more about their cultural history, read about places and people and use what they are reading as a means to engage in conversation with others and also inform their writing. Equipped with

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powerful writing skills, students can use writing as a means to creatively express their thoughts and to inform, persuade and advocate for issues that personally impact them. Essentially, the power and possibility of utilizing literacy in their lives is endless. With this understanding it became clear that in spite of our efforts to motivate and expose our students to the benefits of a post-secondary education, without possessing necessary reading and writing skills, gaining college admittance and successfully obtaining a college degree would present major challenges for students. Furthermore, our students' struggles with reading and writing within the pre-college program were unfortunately an example of a larger issue within our educational system regarding the challenges that schools face in providing urban African American youth with necessary academic tools to achieve academic success.

In response to our students' needs, I led our team's efforts with providing more effective and rigorous writing support for our students. We began by intentionally increasing the number of reading and writing activities that our students engaged in during all of our programs both in and outside of their schools. I also helped to spearhead a pilot program that provided reading support to some of our students whose teachers identified them as needing extra support. Additionally, I designed and implemented writing courses into our yearly summer program. Ultimately, together our team developed a philosophy of practice to meaningfully integrate reading and writing activities in the majority of our programming. While we were certainly progressing with programming designed to meet the literacy needs of our students, we also understood that many of our students needed far more support both in and beyond school. My commitment to providing literacy support for our students and drawing more attention to their academic needs continued past my time at Jordan University and became the impetus for my pursuit of doctoral studies as well as the focus of this study. I include more specific details

regarding my role as a researcher, curriculum developer and former program coordinator in the

"Researcher Positionality" section at the end of chapter two.

Review of Relevant Literature

In this chapter, I review scholarly literature connected to the themes embedded in my research questions and connected to the findings of the study. My review of the literature includes research that is integral to understanding the following topics: the history and significance of pre-college programs, pre-college programs that serve African American youth, significance of literacy in the African American community and pre-college and additional beyond school programs that focus on literacy and African American Youth.

Since the context for my research study is within a pre-college program, I begin by providing background information related to the history, purpose of pre-college programs, and details of how such programs operate. Within this discussion, I also speak to the significance of pre-college programs that serve African American Youth since the subjects of my research are African American Youth. My review of the literature regarding the significance of literacy in the African American community helps to situate why I investigated the literacy activities and the themes that emerge from students' writing. Additionally, in my discussion of out-of-school spaces I acknowledge that the category "out-of-school" is broad and encompasses a vast array of spaces including students' homes, neighborhoods, churches and community organizations. While my literature review does not focus on each of these domains comprehensively, I include literature that speaks to the broad significance of these spaces when considering the role of any out-of-school program.

History & Significance of Pre-College Programs

While myriad out-of-school programs for students exist, in the context of this study, I focus on a national federally-funded pre-college program that provides supportive services for primarily African American youth. Federally and state-funded programs providing support for

pre-kindergarten through high school students both in and out of school increased significantly in the mid 1960's with the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 (Ward, 2006). One of the purposes of the act was to provide increased opportunities for educational advancement for students who were economically disadvantaged. Head Start, one of the programs that resulted from the Economic Opportunity Act, provided funds to increase educational resources for children before they entered pre-school. The Higher Education Act soon followed and was signed into legislation in 1965 and resulted in federal Trio Programs, such as Upward Bound and Talent Search, which continue to provide college preparatory support for middle and high school students in an effort to increase the number of underrepresented students in post-secondary education.

While the programs were created to increase college preparation and access for primarily low-income White students and African American students, the social climate in the United States was cold and restricting to say the least for the African American Community and many other Communities of Color. The Economic Opportunity Act emerged from President Lyndon Johnson's efforts to reduce poverty in the United States, which was known as the *War on Poverty* (Andrews, 2001). Monumental legislation was also passed during this time which significantly impacted the rights of African Americans such as the passage of the Civil Rights act in 1964 and the voting rights act in 1965 (Andrews, 2001). The Economic Opportunity Act emerged during a time when education separated by race was constitutionally legal. Consequently, one of the markedly devastating outcomes was the restriction of were legally denied the right to equal access to the same educational institutions and academic resources as Whites. In May of 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled separation of educational institutions based on race unconstitutional. While this resulted in the racial integration of many

educational institutions, eleven years later when the Higher Education Act passed, many institutions still restricted access to African Americans. In the midst of increased governmental efforts to increase access to higher education for communities of color, systemic issues such as racism and classism impacted African Americans' access to higher education.

In spite of enhanced efforts to increase the number of underrepresented students in college, a need for programs that were able to reach larger numbers of Students of Color and students from families with low-incomes remained. In 1998, the seventh reauthorization of the act by President Clinton led to the creation of another national pre-college program, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP) (Fields, 2001). Chaka Fattah, a United States Congressional Representative from Philadelphia led early initiatives to implement GEAR-UP, which became a national cohort-based program that provided supportive services to students before they entered high school. GEAR-UP differed from federal Trio Programs since it began working with students during their middle school years through college while most TRIO programs began working with students in high school through college. In its inception, GEAR-UP was designed to increase the number of underrepresented students in post-secondary education and provide support services for students from seventh through twelfth grade. In order to do so the grant required host colleges to focus on establishing partnerships with schools, parents and other community resources (Ward, Strambler & Linke, 2013). GEAR-UP works with schools where at least fifty percent of the student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch.

Although GEAR-UP, Upward Bound and Talent Search are among myriad federally-funded programs designed to increase educational access for students along the K-University spectrum, additional national programs exist with the same mission. Puente is a California-based

non-profit pre-college program designed to increase the number of underrepresented students in college. I Have a Dream (IHAD) is also a non-profit pre-college program providing supportive services to students across 11 states and Washington D.C. Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is also a non-profit pre-college program present is 44 states and 16 countries. College Track operates in six cities across California, Colorado, and Louisiana.

Function & Operation of Pre-College Programs

Pre-college programs typically share the same overarching goals to assist underrepresented students to "prepare for, access and succeed in postsecondary education" (Pathways to College, 2002). While pre-college programs often share these same overarching goals, program structures are likely to vary across programs due to a number of factors including variation in the needs of the students who are being served, variation in funding and variation in program staff. Host institutions can serve students of color and White students depending on the For example, while the participants in the study GEAR-UP program were predominantly African American, not all GEAR-UP or pre-college programs serve predominately African American youth. The student population served is largely reflective of the population of students that attend schools in the cities in which the host institutions are located.

To varying degrees, pre-college programs also offer a range of services including: college counseling and awareness, academic support, personal and social enrichment, parental support, mentorship, career-based outreach, and financial assistance (Pathways to College, 2002). According to Tierney (2002), pre-college program services can typically be categorized in two primary domains: non-academic services and academic services. Academic services include programs where students are gaining skills related to a particular subject but are not limited to ACT preparation, and courses or workshops that focus on developing students' math, science,

reading and writing skills. Non-academic services also vary and can include trips to college campuses, workshops that focus on developing students' study skills and motivation, knowledge about college and the college application process. In addition to academic support, it is important to recognize that academic success in high school and after high school not only rests upon students' academic preparation, but also on other factors. Researchers have asserted that academic achievement and college persistence are predicated on a number of variables including those that are non-cognitive and cognitive (Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003). In addition to being academically prepared, students must also understand the benefits of a college education, aspire to attend and succeed in college, and have access to information about the college application process and how to successfully navigate college curricula. Additionally, students' motivation for learning, self-efficacy related to academic achievement and college persistence, are three important factors to consider.

GEAR-UP Specific Research

The research specifically focused on GEAR-UP programs that are included in the literature review to inform my research. However, the small number of research studies that shed light on the structures of GEAR-UP programs, the experiences of student participants and their effectiveness or success are small. The number of research studies that specifically focus on the experiences of youth of color is smaller, which speaks to the importance of research that both explores GEAR-UP's programmatic features and the experiences of youth of color who are GEAR-UP participants. Although small numbers of GEAR-UP research studies exist, it is important to note that all GEAR-UP programs are required by the GEAR-UP grant to submit annual progress during each year of the six year cycles. Since the annual evaluations are not often transformed into research studies, this information is not as easily accessible.

Watt, Huerta and Lozano (2007) analyzed the outcomes of high school student participants in two pre-college programs, GEAR-UP and AVID compared to high school students not enrolled in pre-college programs. They were specifically interested in understanding how participation in GEAR-UP and AVID impacted students' "academic preparation, educational aspirations, educational anticipations and expectations, and college knowledge" (p. 110). While the researchers noted that the study results were inconclusive due in part to the small sample size, their study provided baseline information useful for their analysis of the progression of the same students at the end of their participation in GEAR-UP and AVID. Ward, Stramber and Linke (2013) engaged in a longitudinal case study that focused on the partnership between Yale University and their partnership with GEAR-UP. They developed a protocol to measure students' educational aspirations and knowledge about college. They found that participation in the program was positively linked to higher educational aspirations.

Bausmith and France (2012) explored whether or not GEAR-UP participation impacted students' participation and performance on the PSAT/NMSQT and SAT as well as in Advanced Placement courses. The data from the study were obtained from the College Board for 173 GEAR-UP schools. The researchers compared data from GEAR-UP students' outcomes to matched data from students and schools sharing similar characteristics as GEAR-UP students and partner schools. While Yampolskaya, Massey and Greenbaum (2006) engaged in a study that examined the impact of program participation on students' grade point averages and disciplinary referrals.

In 2001 the United States Department of Education conducted an early evaluation of the first two years of the GEAR-UP program from site visits to 20 GEAR-UP partnership programs. The evaluation provided information regarding demographic information for students and their

parents, partnership school characteristics, funding information and information regarding the type of services that had been provided. In 2003, Finch and Cowley conducted a study that reported on the experiences of seventh and tenth grade participants in the Fairmont State College GEAR-UP, one the largest GEAR-UP grantees at the time. They primarily relied upon surveys administered to seventh and tenth grade students as well as to parents to gather programmatic information. Among many of the findings of the study, the researchers determined that over a third of the tenth-grade participants noted that they believed that participating in GEAR-UP was contributing to changes in their plans for college. Cates and Schaefle (2011) engaged in a research study that examined GEAR-UP participants' experiences at the end of their six years of program participation. GEAR-UP participants reported that being connected to information about college was one of the strongest factors influencing their decisions to pursue college attendance.

In response to the lack of research studies and pre-college program models that focused specifically on meeting the needs of African American and Latino students, researchers Caldwell and Siwatu (2003) developed a model, The Educational Navigational Skills Seminar (TENSS), a navigational skills summer seminar for African American and Latino high school students in an Upward Bound program. The model was designed in an attempt to acknowledge the educational experiences of youth of color. Researchers continue to assert that programs, which account for students' culture and are culturally relevant are a key factor in student and program success (Caldwell & Siwatu; Gandara & Bial, 2001).

The available research literature on pre-college programs, especially GEAR-UP reveal a trend of both longitudinal studies and studies that compare GEAR-UP students and their performance to a control group. Longitudinal studies have allowed researchers and GEAR-UP

programs to often evaluate students' academic progress, their knowledge about college and their intentions of attending college. GEAR-UP studies that implement control groups have focused on understanding whether or not the support that GEAR-UP provides to its students leads to different outcomes among non-GEAR-UP students. While the methodologies that are used in both types of studies are useful, they are not the only methodologies available for gathering and analyzing meaningful data about the effectiveness of GEAR-UP programs. In addition to longitudinal studies, it is important that studies rely both on qualitative and quantitative data and speak more to students' narratives and personalized experiences as a result of their participation.

Significance of Focusing on Literacy in the African American Community

In discussing the significance of literacy in the African American community it is important that I acknowledge the historical significance of literacy in the African American community. In order to effectively discuss why literacy matters for African American Youth and is important to explore in the context of my dissertation, acknowledging the historical power of literacy is pertinent. In their scholarship, in discussing the contemporary significance of education and literacy in the African American community, illuminate the history of literacy in the African American community (Anderson, 1988; Edwards, McMillon & Turner, 2010; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003). Despite laws dating back to slavery that denied African Americans the right to learn to read and write, they often risked their lives to become literate. "To be able to read and write was an intrinsic good, as well as a mighty weapon in the slave's struggle for freedom." (Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003, p. 13). Historically, the attainment of literacy in the African American community served as a symbol of freedom and a beacon of hope. The power of literacy was not only visible among enslaved African Americans but also among writers, scholars, and activists such as Ida B. Wells, Sojourner Truth and Fredrick Douglass. Through

their written and spoken words, they addressed and spoke out against social issues impacting their communities such as the legal emancipation of African Americans, eradication of lynching and equal rights for women. It was also visible in literary societies dating back to the 1800s formed by and for African Americans that not only functioned as communal spaces for the engagement of reading and writing but for addressing societal issues (Muhammad, 2012). During the Harlem Renaissance folklorists, poets and novelists including Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes used their writing platforms to illuminate the lived experiences of African Americans. Poets such as June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baracka tapped into the power of poetry during the civil rights and Black Power Movements. Musicians, activists, scholars and students have used literacy to voice the collective concerns of the African American community. Historically and contemporarily, literacy in the African American community has been used to shed light on social issues, speak truth to power on social issues, affirm the identities of African Americans, heal wounds, encourage and inspire.

Beyond School Literacy-Focused Programs for African American Youth

In considering the type of educational environments that are conducive to successfully contributing to students' academic development, many scholars have noted the importance of culturally relevant instruction inside the classroom (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). I would extend this notion of culturally relevant spaces to include out-of-school spaces such as pre-college programs. Researchers continue to note the need for not only increased culturally relevant pre-college programs, but also research that illuminates how such programs operate and impact Students of Color (Knight & Marciano, 2013; Villalpando & Solorzano, 2005).

Researchers have also increasingly focused their attention on examining meaningful literacy practices that take place in various out-of-school spaces. While schools represent

important spaces where literacy learning occur, "out of school spaces can contribute substantively to learning, literacy practices, and the accumulation of literacy experience and expertise, including reading" (Kirkland & Hull, 2010, p. 711). In addition to contributing to students' literacy learning and development, spaces that connect students to literacy practices can also be sites for identity development, exploration, and representation through literacy engagement (Blackburn, 2002; Muhammad, 2012; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). Furthermore, scholars such as Li (2009) remind us of the importance of acknowledging the valuable ways that migrant youth and youth of color engage in literacy practices outside of school that are not always honored in school. In looking to the significance of out-of-school spaces, researchers have also begun to expand definitions of what literacy is and explore the function of particular types of literate practices in the lives of African American youth. In considering how pre-college programs can meet the needs of African American youth, it is also essential that they acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds and view their cultural backgrounds as an asset in providing supportive programming (Dyce, Albold, & Long, 2013; Gandara, 2002). Many scholars assert that it is essential that we also focus on the meaningful literacy practices that African American youth engage in and the spaces in which youth engage in these practices which are often found outside of school (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012; Jocson, 2006; Kirkland, 2009; Mahiri, 2004, McMcillon & Edwards, 2000).

In their study of literacy in the lives of African American Youth, Mahiri and Sablo (1996) illuminate the writing practices of two high school students in their study. Their study revealed the significant literacy practices such as writing poems, raps and plays outside of school that were largely undervalued and unaccepted within their school spaces.

Furthermore, it is essential to understand how school-university partnerships engage in culturally relevant programming that is connected to students' lives. Through Hall and Damico's (2007) study of a school-university partnership, they explored the significance of a culturally relevant, pre-college summer program designed for African American youth. The researchers specifically examined the significance of digital texts students created that revealed an important usage of four features of African American Vernacular English. While the summer program did not specifically focus on providing students with explicit information about college, it provided students with the opportunity to engage in meaningful, culturally relevant learning activities, which can function to increase their academic engagement and preparation for college. Duncan-Andrade's (2007) research is not only centered in students' schools, but also in a university led partnership with UCLA. In an ongoing six-week summer seminar, Duncan-Andrade, along with local high school teachers, engaged eleventh grade students in critical readings and discussions, provided opportunities for students to create projects intended to create social change in their communities. Since reading and writing activities were central to the program, students not only learned how to engage in formal research projects, but also developed their critical literacy skills in the process. While engaging students in literacy-focused activities was not the sole function of the program, it was utilized as a vehicle through which students could connect engage in research and civic engagement.

In considering relevant research surrounding out-of-school programs, it is necessary to include programs that are community initiated within communities of color and serve as supportive resources for youth. One such example is the Young Black Scholars (YBS) program, created to increase the number of African American youth, particularly African American youth who are prepared for college admittance (Jayakumar, Vue & Allen, 2013). Through participating

in the program, students had the opportunity to visit college campuses. In their analysis of the YBS program and student participants' experiences, (Jayakumar et al., 2013) found that the program strengthened and also confirmed students' aspirations to attend college.

It is also important to acknowledge out-of-school spaces that are not necessarily school-university partnerships, which connect students to culturally relevant spaces. Winn's (2011) work with formerly incarcerated girls also exemplifies the importance of alternative or out-of-school support programs in supporting students both academically and emotionally. In the *Girl Time* program, which is the focus of Winn's research, young African American women who were formerly incarcerated engaged in writing and performing plays about topics that were relevant to their lives and also had the opportunity to perform in these plays. In creating supportive programs that are intended to in many ways support the healthy development of youth, many program developers understand the importance of providing spaces where the voices of youth can be heard in affirming ways. In their scholarly work on Youth Radio, Soep & Chávez (2010) explored the significance of Youth Radio in students' lives. Youth Radio is another powerful example of an out-of-school space in which youth are able to utilize their voices as critical thinkers to explore and critique what is happening in their communities and beyond. It also provided the space for youth to develop a sense of community with their peer participants and adult allies. Understanding these spaces helps us to acknowledge the multiple ways that out-of-school spaces can provide support for African American youth. Acknowledging the significance of these spaces in the lives of African American youth also illuminates what is possible.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

In discussing any form of support in students' lives, as I have briefly discussed in my literature review, it is necessary to consider the multiple places from which students receive support including their family, community, peers, schools, religious organizations, etc. A major focus of the research I engaged in centered on understanding more about the dimensions of the GEAR-UP program, students' experiences as participants. Consequently, it was important to draw upon theories that facilitated my analysis of the spaces that students occupied and how participating in these spaces helped them navigate across spaces. In discussing the program and students' experiences as participants, I have chosen to draw upon elements of *Community Cultural Wealth, Multiple Worlds Typology, Third Space Theory* & *Critical Race Theory*.

Community Cultural Wealth

The GEAR-UP program's primary goals were to provide students with resources to help them experience academic success and successfully pursue post-secondary education. GEAR-UP attempted to meet this goal in myriad ways including, but not limited to, connecting students to mentors and role-models, exposing students to college campuses, providing assistance with the college selection and application process and providing students with academic support. These forms of support and resources essentially served as social capital since students were connected to "networks of people and community resources" (Yosso, 2005, p.79). Eliciting students' feedback regarding their experience in the program, allowed me to explore how the networks of support and resources that students had access to through GEAR-UP were beneficial or influential resources in their lives.

In order to better understand the network of resources that students had access to, I drew upon community cultural wealth in my theoretical framework. According to Yosso (2005), community cultural wealth consists of six forms of social capital: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. One of GEAR-UP's intents is to provide students with experiences that will sustain and build upon their existing educational aspirations. Navigational capital is characterized by skills and strategies that assist students in operating through and across social institutions. Focusing on navigational capital assisted me in exploring the potential navigational skills that students gain or strengthen as a result of participating in the program. Additionally, aspirational capital is characterized by "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). Since GEAR-UP also operates as a program that seeks to help students to sustain their existing hopes and dreams for their futures as well as build new ones, understanding how participating in the program helped students to do so was essential. Scholars such as Jayakumar, Vue and Allen (2013) have also utilized community cultural wealth as a framework to acknowledge the multiple forms of capital that African American Youth possess and gain through their participation in community-based college preparatory programs. Liou, Antrop-Gonzalez, and Cooper (2009) also assert that it is essential to consider asset-based frameworks such as community cultural wealth to acknowledge the valuable forms of capital that exist in Latino students' communities.

Furthermore, while community cultural wealth accounts for different forms of capital that communities of color possess, these forms of capital can and do intersect which is visible in the context of the study. I further detail the interconnectedness of the forms of community cultural wealth in the discussion section of the findings chapters.

Multiple Worlds Typology

Multiple Worlds Typology is a second theoretical framework that is helping to shape my research questions and also connects to the navigational focus found in questions two and three. Multiple Worlds Typology acknowledges the significance in understanding how students are able to function within and across spaces including home, school, larger society (Phelan, Davidson and Cao, 1991) and for the purposes of my study, out of school spaces. According to Phelan et al. (1991), "we need to identify institutional structures that operate to facilitate boundary crossing strategies and that do not require students to give up or hide important features of their lives"(p. 246). Utilizing this theory helped to focus my attention on students' experiences within the program and also on programmatic structures that influence their movement in spaces outside of the program.

In Multiple Worlds Typology as Phelan, Davidson, & Cao (1991) have theorized it, there are four major domains in which students transition from and include the self, family, peers/friends, school and the larger socioeconomic community. In considering the role that pre-college programs serve in the lives of African American youth and their experiences within these programs, it is important to also understand how their experiences compare in relation to these other domains. Furthermore, it is useful to consider, for example, how the messages they receive across domains work in concert with each other to strengthen their academic and social support. Identifying these boundary-crossing structures can help us determine how to sustain the practices that help students successfully cross boundaries and how to eliminate or strengthen the unsupportive practices. Phelan et al., have identified four common patterns related to students' as they navigate across worlds: Type I: Congruent Worlds/Smooth Transitions, Type II: Different

Worlds/Boundary Crossings Managed, Type III: Different Worlds/Boundary Crossings Hazardous, Type IV: Borders Impenetrable/Boundary Crossings Insurmountable.

While this model has been necessary in understanding how students navigate within and across these very important domains, the model does not provide room for theorizing how and where out-of-school spaces fit. The realm of out of school is also not one-dimensional and includes a range of various spaces. Consequently, I added another domain in the model for beyond school spaces to more specifically explore how academic and social support programs such as GEAR-UP operate in students' lives. I have included this adapted model in Figure 3, which can be found in the Appendices. While academic and social support programs such as pre-college programs can and often do include family, peers/friends and the school, it is difficult to neatly fit them into these categories or the larger socioeconomic community.

Secondly, while the model importantly identifies school as a distinct domain I also realized that this domain represents smaller sub-domains. For example, in the context of my study high school and college are both important yet distinctly different examples of schools or educational institutions. Students make important transitions across these different levels of school. In the context of my study I primarily focused on students' preparation and support for transitioning from high school to college. More specifically, it was important to understand how GEAR-UP, which operated as an important structure in students' lives, was able to provide students with strategies that facilitated boundary crossing. These strategies not only include resources to assist students successfully navigate their current academic situations, but also those that assisted students in preparing for future transitions into college. Consequently, in my analysis I primarily focus on students' experiences as they relate to the beyond school world. In chapter two I also include a discussion of how students' families impact their transitions in

school. While students' relationships with their peers and friends significantly impact their transitions across multiple worlds, the details of these relationships were not illuminated as clearly as the other relationships. Consequently, my analysis does not include an extensive discussion of peer influence on students' academic success.

Third Space

Additionally, the GEAR-UP program represents a beyond school space that in part seeks to provide students with instrumental academic and social support resources that are in many cases absent within their schools and communities. In GEAR-UP's mission statement, it also acknowledges the significance of connecting program curricula to the lived experiences and cultural backgrounds of students. In this way, the program serves as a space that seeks to counter the experiences of student participants, who are often learning in educational spaces that struggle to affirm their identities as academically successful, urban, African American youth. Gutierrez (2008) asserts that there are particular elements of spaces that help to shape them as third spaces and these elements can include curricula that provide the space for students to engage in critical discussions about their multilayered identities as youth of color who live and learn in urban settings. In my previous research with GEAR-UP, several themes emerged from the data. One of the themes spoke to students' ability to construct and enact counternarratives through their participation in GEAR-UP. Through my dissertation study, I explored whether or not students in the program felt affirmed about their identities as urban, African American youth and how the literacy activities they engaged in contributed to this affirmation.

Utilizing third space was important within the context of my study because of my interest in furthering my understanding of the characteristics of out-of-school spaces and how they impact African American students. Consequently, it was important to draw upon components of

a theoretical framework that illuminated the importance of understanding the dimensions of spaces and particularly of hybrid spaces that function as third spaces. According to Soja (1996), "the spatial dimension of our lives has never been of greater practical and political relevance that it is today" (p. 1). It is through understanding elements of particular spaces and how they function in students' lives that help us to gain a better sense of their significance. Thus, understanding the dimensions or characteristics of various spaces, particularly out-of-school spaces in the context of this study, and how they benefit African American students personally, socially and academically is essential.

Furthermore, Bhabha (1994) contends that we must understand the complexity of spaces given the interconnectedness of the social, historical and spatial. It is through understanding how spaces operate individually and together, that we can gain a better sense of the significance and impact of these spaces in students' lives. According to Piazza (2009), "working toward a third space that helps all children negotiate new understandings of themselves and others is the goal" (p. 19). While this work should certainly happen in schools, out-of-school spaces including pre-college programs also represent spaces where students can and should be encouraged to envision or re-envision themselves as students who are capable of achieving academic success.

When discussing the Third Space, it is important to acknowledge the various ways that theories of Third Space have been conceptualized (Moje et al., 2004). One of the views of third space specifically refers to the ways that school spaces merge traditional ways of knowing with the experiences of students who are marginalized to form a third or hybrid space. Another view more specifically focuses on how third spaces are navigational spaces that help students navigate or cross the boundaries of multiple settings. A third view refers to spaces that challenge and seek to transform dominant school discourses. In my analysis of the study data, I drew upon the latter

two views of third space, as they were more applicable to the ways in which GEAR-UP operated as an out of school program or space.

Critical Race Theory

Integrating a theoretical framework that provided a lens for understanding the experiences of African American youth was paramount. Consequently, I drew upon *Critical Race Theory (*CRT) as a framework rooted in illuminating the experiences of Communities of Color. CRT is characterized by five tenets: the ordinariness of racism, interest convergence, the social construction thesis, anti-essentialism, and unique voice of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The CRT focus on unique voice of color also referred to as counternarratives, was central to the framework and analysis of the study. According to Solorzano & Yosso (2009), the counternarrative or counter-story is "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)…and is a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (p. 138). Consequently, counternarratives in research are useful in illuminating the lived experiences of people of color whose voices are often absent in dominant discourses. Furthermore, counternarratives seek to dispel myths about people of color that are often present in dominant, majoritarian narratives. As Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) assert, without listening to and including the very important voices that reveal the lived experiences of people of color, we are unable to accurately and effectively understand or discuss their educational experiences. Historically and contemporarily, much of the dominant discourse describes people of color through perceived deficiencies (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). Particularly as it relates to students of color and educational achievement, students are often positioned as void of cultures that support academic achievement or as "dangerous others" who contribute to the ills of society. Throughout my study, my goal was

to utilize students' voices and their written words to tell a story that is often not told in dominant narratives about their literacies, lived experiences and what is possible in their lives as African American youth.

Research Methods

Case Study Design: Single Case Study

When selecting the research methods for any study within and across disciplines, it is essential that researchers choose methods carefully and implement these methods in the study in order to appropriately explore the guiding questions (Mallette & Duke, 2004; Shavelson, & Towne, 2002). In an effort to explore my research questions, I designed a single, qualitative case study. In my particular study the larger unit of analysis was a single Midwestern GEAR-UP pre-college program. The smaller units of analysis were four initiatives within the GEAR-UP program and students' experiences in the program. Through engaging in this case study, I focused on better understanding the type of programming that GEAR-UP offered and how these initiatives influenced the experiences of student participants. In order to develop a rich understanding of the GEAR-UP program, I relied upon data that collected from interviews with student participants and staff, observations of GEAR-UP initiatives, program curricula and student participants' written work.

Context of Study: Study Site

I explored the answers to my research questions within the GEAR-UP program, which was a federally funded, pre-college program designed to increase the number of underrepresented students in post-secondary education through concentrated in and beyond school efforts. The site of my study was one GEAR-UP program hosted by Jordan University. Jordan University was a public, Midwestern university and was one of fifteen post-secondary institutions within the state that hosted the GEAR-UP program. I chose this particular program because of its commitment to providing academic and social support for student participants who were primarily African American youth. I am connected to the program because of my previous

experience as a GEAR-UP program coordinator. It was my experience as a staff member in the GEAR-UP program that in part led to my interest in engaging in research that focused on exploring the significance of programs such as GEAR-UP in the lives of middle and high school youth of color. I also conducted a smaller study with Jordan University's GEAR-UP which has grown into this larger dissertation study.

The GEAR-UP program's grant cycle began in 2011 when student participants were in the seventh grade. At the time of the research study during the spring and summer of 2014, the program was in its third year of the grant cycle and student participants were in the ninth grade. GEAR-UP worked in partnership with six public schools across three school districts and three cities. The schools and cities in which they were located included: Westgrove Central, Westgrove Collegiate Academy, Westgrove High School, and Westgrove Preparatory High School located in the city of Westgrove; Oakbridge high school located in the city of Oakbridge; and Baker High School located in Baker city. The six schools varied in proximity to Jordan's campus and were located between fifteen and forty-five miles away from the University. Oakbridge and Baker were considered urban cities and Westgrove city was classified as a former suburban school district. While the demographics of student participants varied across all of the schools, the majority of GEAR-UP students were African American. Eligible program schools were schools in which at least 50% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Eligibility requirements for students were that they must be students at the partnering school and must have been in the current focus-grade of the program. All students in the focus-grade of partnering GEAR-UP schools were automatically considered program participants. Students who transferred into any of the GEAR-UP partnering schools could have participated in programming as long as they were in the GEAR-UP focus-grade at their time of entry into the school.

Participation in the program was optional and students and their families could choose not to participate without penalty.

The study took place between March and August of 2014, which was during the time that four of the most significant initiatives offered by GEAR-UP occurred. These initiatives included: (1) Campus Visitation Program (2) College Seminar, (3) Summer Institute and (4) Growing & Empowering Youth through Storytelling Summer Program. I have included below a brief description of each program and the time I spent collecting data in each initiative.

Campus Visitation. The campus visitation initiative was one of the core GEAR-UP initiatives that had taken place each year for the past ten years. The program standardly took place between April and May of each year and was designed for a group of 50 GEAR-UP students to visit Jordan's campus on a school day from 9am until 1:30pm. Each day over the course of nine days a different group of GEAR-UP students visited Jordan's campus with their school. During the day, students engaged in workshops facilitated by undergraduate student leaders, toured campus and ate lunch in the residence halls.

During the spring of 2014 the theme of the campus visitation initiative was "Each one teach one". Denise Washington served as the program coordinator and curriculum developer for the campus visitation. Denise had been working as a GEAR-UP program coordinator with Jordan University for nine years as also had a master's degree in social work. While Denise designed the curriculum, she hired and trained twelve undergraduate Jordan University students to serve as student leaders. One of the standard models of the majority of GEAR-UP programming was to hire and train undergraduate and graduate student leaders to serve as program facilitators for the GEAR-UP initiatives. The student leaders facilitated two workshops over the course of the day. The first workshop was a team-building workshop designed to expose and increase students'

understanding of the engineering design process. The goal of the workshop was for GEAR-UP students to work as a team to build a tower constructed out of index cards and tape, sturdy enough to hold a stuffed animal without collapsing. Through the second workshop, student leaders engaged in a discussion with GEAR-UP students about the significance of being connected to mentors. GEAR-UP students also had the opportunity to write down people who they identified as their personal mentors. Students then shared who their mentors were with the group. Following the two workshops, student leaders conducted tours of campus and ate lunch with the students in the residence hall. The visits culminated with a discussion about students' experiences during the campus visitation program.

My goal for data collection was to attend as many visits as my schedule would allow. Due to my teaching obligations, I was able to conduct observations of seven of the nine campus visits.

College Seminar. The college seminar took place at Oakbridge high school in May and June of 2014 and was the sole in-school program out of the four initiatives. GEAR-UP had a very unique partnership with Oakbridge in the sense that the administration worked very closely with GEAR-UP to ensure that students received as much support as possible. The college seminar was designed by one of the teachers at Oakbridge, Mr. Lewis. Since Mr. Lewis was still designing the course he welcomed GEAR-UP and their willingness to design a curriculum that in part exposed students to information about preparing for college.

The college seminar was largely facilitated by the program director, Dr. Malcolm, the AmeriCorps Vista, Michelle Day and a student leader, Adam Lee. The college seminar took place twice per week for 45 minutes each session over the course of four weeks. The number of GEAR-UP participants changed across each session. At times we had as many as twenty-seven

students in the classroom and as few as fifteen. However, we had at least ten students who would consistently show up and participate in class. A large part of the curriculum was centered on utilizing culturally relevant mentor texts that could spark students' interest in writing. Four of the mentor texts that were used during the program included "The Rose that Grew From Concrete" by Tupac Shakur, "Put on the Sleeves of Love" by Sonia Sanchez, "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou and "As I Grew Older" by Langston Hughes. We were intentional about selecting texts authored by African American poets, given the lack of exposure that many of the students in GEAR-UP had to African American authors. This lack of exposure was not only experienced by the students in the study, but scholars such as Tatum (2008) reminds us that African American youth are disenfranchised in many school spaces due in part to the lack of exposure and connection to texts authored by African Americans. In selecting the above mentioned texts, we were intentionally disrupting a dominant narrative and pattern which privileges text written by White authors and also texts that are not integrated in ways that connect with the experiences of African American youth. These four poems were also selected because they represented a range of emotions and stories as told through poetry by African American authors.

Summer Institute. The third GEAR-UP initiative that took place in June and July of 2014 was the annual summer institute. The summer institute typically served approximately seventy-five students over the course of two weeks. Each week a different group of approximately thirty-seven students participated in the program and had the opportunity to live and learn in residence halls on Jordan University's campus over the course of five days. Through the institute students participated in several courses over the span of five days. The summer institute was designed so that over the course of the five days, students could attend three core workshops: My Personal Narrative, Conflict Resolution and College Knowledge. Each summer

for the past three years, the GEAR-UP program asked me to assist with developing the workshops focused on engaging students in reading and writing. Given our experience with the number of students who struggled in the past with writing personal statements for college and even foregoing completing applications requiring college essays, I constructed a personal statement workshop. Since my major focus during the summer was to collect data for the study, I developed a curriculum for the majority of the workshop and left space for the student leaders who facilitated the workshop to have input. I worked with the GEAR-UP staff to train twelve student leaders, six of whom actually facilitated the workshops. Over the course of the two weeks, a different group of three student leaders led the My Personal Narrative workshop.

The College Knowledge workshop was designed to increase students' knowledge about the components of a college application, provide the space for students to practice completing a college application and allow students the opportunity to practice for the ACT. Justin Barber, a master's student in Jordan University's School of social work facilitated the College Knowledge workshop. The Conflict Resolution workshop was designed to help students explore how to effectively resolve conflicts. Through interactive simulations, discussions and viewing video-clips students discussed and utilized strategies for engaging in conflict resolution. Staff members at Jordan University's Conflict Resolution office facilitated the workshop.

In addition to the three major workshops previously described, GEAR-UP structured mini-workshops entitled "Girl Talk" and "Guy Talk". The purpose of the workshops was to provide a space where the young women and men could have private spaces to engage in discussions related to their identities as young women and men. Student leaders created the curricula and facilitated the sessions.

Growing & Empowering Minds through Storytelling. The Growing and Empowering Youth through Storytelling (GEMS) program took place from July to August of 2014. It originated as a pilot program with the GEAR-UP participants from Oakbridge High School. One of the purposes of the program was to specifically engage the students from Oakbridge High School since many of the Oakbridge students had not participated in the summer residential program. GEMS was led by one of the program coordinators, Diego Lawrence. Diego had worked with the GEAR-UP program as a program coordinator for three years and had over ten years of experience developing and implementing curricula for mentoring initiatives for African American youth. Diego was supported by a GEAR-UP Vista who was placed to work specifically with Oakbridge High School and myself.

Since we suspected that traveling to Jordan University's campus was challenging for many of the Oakbridge students, we hosted the GEMS program at Jordan University's satellite location, which was located very close to Oakbridge high school. To ensure that students could participate in the program, GEAR-UP provided all students with bus passes for the duration of the program. Each week was dedicated to four different themes including self-exploration, understanding the importance of school, understanding the importance of community and engaging in community change. One of the major goals of the program was to allow students the opportunity to develop community change proposals and to share their proposals during a culminating presentation at the end of the program to parents, GEAR-UP staff and school leaders.

Data Collection & Participants

Gaining Access

Although I previously worked with the GEAR-UP program and also engaged in my practicum research with this particular program, it was still important for me to continue building rapport and sustaining relationships with the program staff. I maintained contact with the program after I completed my practicum research and also shared some of my initial findings with the team during in-person meetings. In-person meetings can often help researchers to establish and maintain mutual respect with research participants and provide the space to discuss and review details of the study (Seidman, 2006). I began the process of meeting with the director of this particular GEAR-UP program related to my potential dissertation research in October and December of 2013. During these meetings, I discussed some of the themes that resonated from my research in 2012. Through this conversation the director also shared his plans to revitalize and strengthen the program's focus on literacy. I shared some of my ideas for additional research with the program's literacy efforts and gained the approval of the director. I also met with most of the GEAR-UP staff in January to discuss with them some of my preliminary research findings and to gain a clearer sense of the direction of future programming. During this time I also obtained the permission of the program staff to interview them about their respective initiatives and to also observe some of their program sessions. In addition to gaining approval from the GEAR-UP director and program staff to engage in a second phase of research, I also obtained the approval from school administrators at Oakbridge high school, the site of the college seminar.

Overview of Study Participants

Participants in my study included GEAR-UP students and staff. In total I conducted 28 interviews with students and staff between August and January of 2014. Of the 28 interviews,

seventeen interviews were conducted with students, six were conducted with GEAR-UP student leaders, and five were conducted with four GEAR-UP staff members. I conducted observations across all four of the GEAR-UP initiatives and collected samples of students' written work from the College Seminar, Summer Institute and GEMS initiatives.

Student Participants. Since understating students' experiences and capturing students' voices were central to the study, I heavily relied upon the students' participation. Initially, my goal was to follow a cohort of students across their participation in all four of the initiatives. However, given how the initiatives were structured and due to irregular student participation, I was unable to follow a large group of students across their participation. Since two of the four initiatives were designed specifically for students at Oakbridge High School, I anticipated that a significant number of participants would be Oakbridge students. The breakdown of student participation according to the number of initiatives they participated is listed in the appendices.

For student participation in each of the four initiatives, I ensured that I informed parents and sent permission slips home. On each occasion that I contacted students and their parents, I reminded them that they would receive ten dollars for completing each interview. For the interviews during the Oakbridge College Seminar, two of the counselors at Oakbridge helped to collect the permission slips from students who returned them and also facilitated scheduling the interviews during the school day, which would not interfere with students' academic schedule. I conducted the interviews in an empty office space in the counseling department. The initial interviews lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes. The interviews with the remaining GEAR-UP students at the end of the summer took place at libraries close to their houses or at Jordan University's satellite location.

In order to obtain permission to observe students in the Campus Visitation program, I emailed a copy of the consent form for the GEAR-UP staff to then provide to the teachers and counselors at each of the schools. During the orientation for the Summer Program, I spent about five minutes explaining the purpose of my study to the parents. I also answered any questions allotted time to answer any questions that parents had regarding their students' participation in the study.

Staff Participants. In an effort to obtain information about the structure and function of each individual program I interviewed GEAR-UP staff members. Six full-time staff members worked together in the program at Jordan University and included the program director, assistant director, a budget analyst, parent liaison and two program coordinators. All staff members except for the budget analyst developed and implemented curricula for the program throughout the year. Consequently, the five program staff included the program director, program coordinator for the Campus Visitation program, program coordinator for the Summer Institute, program coordinator for the GEMS program, and the parent liaison.

Data Collection Methods

When engaging in qualitative case-study research it is important to gather data from multiple sources in an effort to build an accurate and rich case for what is being explored (Yin, 2003). In order to ensure that I collected data that assisted me in effectively exploring my research questions, I relied on several data collection methods. The data collection methods included interviewing program staff members and student participants, observing program sessions and staff training, and collecting program curricula and writing samples from student participants.

Interviews

Interviewing can assist researchers "in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). I engaged in interviews with both staff and student participants. The interviews helped me to gain a sense of both students' experiences as participants in the program and to gain an understanding of the various components of GEAR-UP programming. Consequently, it was useful for me to interview four of the program coordinators to gather additional information about the goals and structure of their respective initiatives and how they fit in with the larger GEAR-UP objectives. The interviews with staff occurred after their respective initiatives were completed. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. Preliminary questions, which are listed in the appendix, helped to add structure to the interviews. While I developed preliminary questions, I anticipated that program participants would likely bring up other important topics that would be useful to explore. As a result, I remained flexible and allowed the conversations to move in different directions.

Observations

Engaging in observations was a useful data collection tool for this study because it allowed me to gather more information about each of the specific initiatives in which students participated. In conducting the observations, I focused on the delivery or implementation of the curriculum, the content of the curriculum and engagement between students and between students and facilitators.

Fieldnotes

In an effort to capture as much information on the GEAR-UP initiatives, I took field-notes during my observations. According to Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (1995), through taking field-notes researchers can gain a better understanding of the lives and experiences of the people who they are observing or studying. Since one of the primary interests of the study was to better understand the experiences of students who participated in the GEAR-UP program, field-notes were quite useful in capturing the details of their experiences during my observations. In an effort to ensure the accuracy of my notes from my observations, I organized my notes and wrote additional reflections almost immediately after I left the research sites.

Artifact collection

I utilized artifact collection as a research method to further contribute to my understanding of the curriculum and the artifacts that students created while participating in the program. In total, I collected samples of students' writing samples from three of the four initiatives: College Seminar, Summer Program, and the GEMS Summer Program.

College Seminar. In total I collected writing samples from 33 students in the College Seminar. The number of poems that students' submitted individually varied between one and four. Consequently, I collected 54 writing samples in total. At the end of the four weeks of the

program I collected students' writing in an effort to copy their original work and return it to them. The 54 samples that I collected are only representative of the students' work that was submitted. Many students lost their poems or forgot to turn them in. Consequently, I was not able to include these additional poems in my analysis.

Summer Institute. Over the course of students' participation in the five-day summer institute at Jordan University students participated in three recurring workshops. One of the workshops, My Personal Narrative, was specifically designed to help students think about and construct rough drafts of their personal statements for college. Students were also given journals to use for writing at their leisure or for also responding to prompts about their participation in the GEAR-UP program. Both the young men and women participated in Girl Talk and Guy Talk sessions, however, the young men had structured time in their sessions to write about manhood. Consequently the journals for the young men include their poems and thoughts about what it means to be a man.

In an effort to keep track of their personal statements, I created an email account and had students both email themselves and the email account to ensure that GEAR-UP would have access to their drafts. During the last day of the program when students had a few hours of structured activities that did not require the use of their journals, GEAR-UP staff worked with me to gather students' journals. During this time, the student leaders collected their journals and I copied all of their journals in the GEAR-UP office to ensure that I could return students their journal before they returned home. In my discussion I have included resonant themes from 75 students' journals, 65 poems about their dreams for their futures and 73 drafts of their personal statement.

Growing & Empowering Minds through Storytelling. During the GEMS program I also collected journals from seven of the student participants, rough drafts of their community change proposals, and PowerPoint presentations. Students submitted their journals at the end of the program, which I will return to them when we meet again this summer. Students kept track of their community change proposals and PowerPoint presentations via Google documents that were shared with the GEAR-UP group. Consequently, I accessed their proposals and presentations from Google docs during my analysis.

Data Analyses

While I engaged in data analysis after all of the data was collected, I committed to analyzing the data as I collected it throughout the study. Researchers caution against waiting until the end of data collection and assert that by analyzing throughout data collection researchers can build upon their understandings of data which will make fully analyzing the data less challenging (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Weiss, 1995). Additionally, according to Bloomberg & Volpe (2012), engaging in data analysis is multilayered and often includes analyzing both within and across data sources and research participants. They encourage researchers to develop a story line based on the research findings and to think on three different levels when analyzing each finding including Level one: analysis of individual findings, Level two: analysis across findings and Level three: analysis across cases. Engaging in an analysis on these three levels added to the depth of my analysis as well as assisted me in potentially making connections across data sources. Additionally, engaging in an analysis on these three levels assisted me in developing a coherent story and also one that was consistent with the research data, which is an integral part of analysis (Weiss, 1995).

During the analysis of my data I utilized some of my theoretical frameworks to help develop themes and codes. For example, my use of community cultural wealth as a framework guided the types of questions that I asked during my interviews. Consequently, I was able to categorize some of the interview responses according to their theoretical connections. However, I was unable to do this for all of my data sources. During my analysis of students' writing samples, I also relied upon grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory methods are useful in data analysis as they allow researchers to "construct theories from the data themselves" (p. 2).

Analysis of Observations

During the study I conducted observations of the Campus Visitation program, College Seminar, Summer Institute and GEMS program. I relied upon both typing notes on my computer as well as handwriting notes in notebooks that I designated for data collection. Emerson et al., (1995) discuss the significance of writing initial memos soon after field notes have been taken. After I wrote field-notes from my observations, I read through the individual notes and created memos related to any significant ideas and themes that arose and were related to my theoretical framework.

Coding was useful and applied during the analysis of all observations. During the observations I took notes on the type of curriculum that was implemented, students' and teachers' engagement with the curriculum, and interactions between students and student and teachers. According to Emerson et al., (1995), coding for qualitative data typically occurs in two phases: open coding and focused coding. During open coding researchers tend to read through their notes line-by-line in search of relevant themes and ideas. During focused coding researchers still engage in the line-by-line analysis that occurs during open coding but do so with a set of

pre-established, focused categories. As I analyzed my field-notes, I engaged in both open and focused coding. I initially formulated categories I thought would be relevant to the data that was collected based on preliminary data that I collected in the pilot research project. Since much of my analysis focused on what I gleaned from students' interviews and their writing, I utilized my observation notes as a means of supporting themes that resonated from the interviews and the writing.

Analysis of Interviews

After each of the interviews was conducted, I uploaded them from my audio-recorder to an online dropbox. With the support of a research grant I was able to hire a transcriptionist who transcribed all of the study interviews. Once the interviews were uploaded to the dropbox the transcriptionist accessed them for transcription. After they were transcribed, I printed them out and made adjustments as needed. I also read through them and took notes on each of the transcripts included in the study and developed initial codes and themes.

During my coding efforts, I focused on both making sense of words, phrases and ideas and also generally making sense of what I gleaned from each individual interview and across the interviews. (Weiss, 1995). I then returned to the transcriptions again to engage in a more focused analysis of the details of the interview. I also revisited the transcriptions as I engaged in analyses both across study findings and across study participants. In order to ensure that I effectively developed themes that were relevant to the study data, I provided at least three examples that spoke to and supported each of the codes.

Analysis of Students' Writing

I first organized students' writing samples according to the initiatives they were associated with. Since I primarily focused on students' writing across three initiatives: the

college seminar, summer institute and GEMS program, I organized students' samples according to each of the three initiatives. Throughout their participation in the college seminar GEAR-UP students primarily created poetry and most of these poems were written in response to a particular theme. I initially organized and coded the poems based on their corresponding themes. In addition to coding individual cases or individual students' poems, I also analyzed across students' writing samples. For students who created multiple poems I compared their poems and analyzed them for connections and common themes.

Through the Summer Institute, GEAR-UP students primarily created two pieces of writing that I analyzed including their poems about their dreams and drafts of their personal statements. For students' dream narratives, I initially grouped and analyzed their poems based on common words or ideas that were expressed across the poems. Since most students applying for colleges will do so through completing the common application, we pulled the five prompts from the common application for students to choose from. During the workshop the student leaders provided students with the option of choosing one of five prompts for their draft. The five prompts are included below:

1. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
2. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
3. Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?
4. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.
5. Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

I initially categorized the personal statement drafts according to their accompanying prompts. Some of the themes that resonated from students' drafts of their personal statements

include: overcoming obstacles, recovering from failure, and persevering through major life transitions. I also categorized students writing within each of these themes. I created subcategories for each of the themes listed above. For example, for the writing samples that I categorized under "overcoming obstacles", I further analyzed and grouped them according to the type of obstacles that students' discussed. Examples of the types of obstacles that students wrote about include losing a family member, receiving a low grade in class, and coping with an illness or injury. I also created subcategories for the additional themes that were mentioned above.

Additionally, my goal was to proceed with thoughtfulness and caution as I interpreted the verbal and written words expressed by participants as well as my observations. In many cases, I was unable to ask follow up questions from interviews or ask students to interpret their writings that are included in the study. Glesne (2011) encourages researchers to consider the "trustworthiness of their interpretations" (p. 212) by continuously asking questions of interpretations, utilizing multiple forms of data sources to confirm or refute interpretations, memberchecking and obtaining feedback from others. I relied on checking my interpretations against multiple sources of data when they were available. I also shared my interpretations with members of my committee and outside colleagues. In an effort to ensure that I was adequately capturing participants' stories, I member-checked my interpretation of interview data with student participants when possible. Due to time constraints, I did not have the opportunity to member check my interpretation of students' interviews and writing samples, but I do plan to follow up with as many of the GEAR-UP students as possible this summer to share with them the ways in which their narratives have guided the study and my interpretation and analysis of their stories.

Researcher Positionality

In any research study it is crucial that researchers thoughtfully consider how they position themselves and are also positioned by their research participants. My role as a former program coordinator with GEAR-UP provided me with rich experience and insight into developing initiatives for GEAR-UP students. I assisted with the curriculum development for three of the four initiatives that are included in the study: the College Seminar, Knowledge is Power Summer Program, and the Growing and Empowering Minds Through Storytelling (GEMS) program. During the fourth program that is included in my study, the Campus Visitation Program, I did not function as a curriculum developer. I functioned as an observer and at times participated in program activities.

Engaging in work that in many ways contributes to the success of African American youth has been a commitment for me since an early age. I grew up in one of the cities, Dunbar that many of the students in the study are also from. I was able to succeed in the sense that I attended college due to my parent's encouragement and commitment to ensuring that I attended schools that fostered and nurtured academic excellence. My parents possessed a steadfast commitment to ensuring that my brother and I would have access to educations that would help us to succeed in life. This meant that they sacrificed a tremendous amount to ensure that we attended schools in Dunbar that would successfully prepare us academically. I was also embraced by family and community members who formed and strengthened my community of possibility who made my academic success as a college student a reality. My own lived experience is very much connected to my research in the sense that it certainly encouraged my commitment to helping other African American youth to also make it to college.

In many aspects I felt like an outsider and an insider. I felt like an insider to some degree since I had worked very closely with Jordan University's GEAR-UP in my previous role as a program coordinator. In my role I had established relationships with most of the program staff and many of the GEAR-UP students who are included in the study. Consequently, I did not enter the GEAR-UP spaces as a complete outsider. Many of the GEAR-UP students were from Dunbar and neighboring urban cities similar to Dunbar. I was also from Dunbar, grew up in Dunbar, attended school in Dunbar from kindergarten until 8$^{\text{th}}$ grade and have been living in Dunbar for the past six years. It is also important for me to acknowledge that just because I shared these common experiences with students, did not make me an insider. I was an insider to a certain degree. I believe that I could understand and relate to students' experiences as an African American student who grew up in Dunbar, however, I had not experienced growing up and attending school in an urban city in the same ways that many students in the study experienced. Understanding the ways in which my experience was both parallel and distant from the students in the study helped me to proceed with care especially when interpreting and making sense of schooling experiences that differed from my own.

CHAPTER 3: BUILDING & SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES OF POSSIBILITY

The notion of possibility has significant historical and contemporary meaning within the African American community. It is much more than a word but it is the embodiment of believing in the seemingly impossible. Examples abound throughout every era of American history. For example, many African Americans risked their lives to become literate for the possibility of freedom and access to education (Anderson, 1988; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003). Millions of African Americans journeyed from the south to the north during the Great Migration and did so hoping for economic stability, educational opportunity and freedom from racial hostility (Wilkerson, 2010). During the civil rights movement, African Americans protested for the possibility of laws that would grant them the right to vote, and access to educational institutions whose doors were closed to Students of Color. According to Carter (2001), "it is in this context of hope for a liberated future, despite a history of oppression, that the current educational aspirations and attainments of African Americans need to be understood" (p. 2). In spite of the many gains and progress that has been made, much work remains. Scholars such as Ladson-Billings (2006) remind us that inequitable schooling conditions and the marginalization of African American youth are reflective of an educational debt that is owed to African American students. Consequently, African American youth are in need of educational spaces that allow them to understand that academic success is possible and also provide them with the skills to transform what is possible into what is their reality.

Communities of Possibility

In order to do so it is necessary that students are embraced in communities of teachers, parents, and community members that serve as communities of possibility and provide them with the resources for academic success. According to Rogoff (2003), our development is

significantly influenced and understood through our participation in communities. My inspiration for utilizing the term communities of possibilities stemmed from several places. In describing the significance of community cultural wealth and more specifically, aspirational capital, Yosso (2005) posits that providing youth of color with stories and resources meant to inspire their academic success, cumulatively create "cultures of possibility" (p. 78). As I continued to analyze important components of cultures of possibility, I understood that for the GEAR-UP students, GEAR-UP staff and their families were among a community of people and resources meant to encourage and aspire them.

Additionally, I was also reminded of the powerful African Proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child". This proverb conveys a powerful message regarding the significance of parents, teachers, family members and the greater community in supporting the positive development of African American youth. Although not explicitly stated, inherent in this proverb is the notion that it takes a community to help students to grow and succeed. As I analyzed the ways in which the GEAR-UP program and students' families represented valuable forms of capital, I understood that what students discussed and I observed is not adequately captured in the word "raise". Instead, examples of encouraging, inspiring, uplifting, affirming, and reaffirming more effectively captured the role of parents, GEAR-UP staff and community members who students met through their participation in GEAR-UP. While the power of the proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" remains, it takes a village or a community to uplift, affirm, and remind African American Youth of what is possible. Furthermore, it takes a village or a community to provide students with the tools to turn what is possible into their realities.

Within our villages and communities, it is important that we acknowledge the significant role that village and community members play. Billingsley (1988), acknowledges the historical

significance of African American community members in supporting young people's

development:

> In every aspect of the child's life a trusted elder, neighbor, Sunday school teacher, school teacher, or other community member might instruct, discipline, assist, or otherwise guide the young of a given family. Second, as role models, community members show an example to and interest in the young people. Third, as advocates, they actively intercede with major segments of society (a responsibility assumed by professional educators) to help young members of particular families find opportunities that might otherwise be closed to them. Fourth, as supportive figures, they simply inquire about the progress of the young, take special interest in them. Fifth, in the formal roles of teacher, leader, elder, they serve youth generally as part of the general role or occupation (p. 99).

Adults in the community served many roles as advocates, teachers, leaders and supportive

resources. They essentially worked together to ensure that students were embraced in multiple

ways. The power and significance of these same community members in African American

communities still remains.

One of the purposes of engaging in this study was to better understand students'

experiences in the program and how students benefitted from their participation. Throughout this

chapter, I illuminate the ways in which students articulated how GEAR-UP staff members and

their families provided valuable forms of encouragement. While the chapter focuses significantly

on the capital that students' gained as a result of their participation in GEAR-UP, it is important

to acknowledge the capital that students' possessed prior to participating in the program.

Toward the later part of the chapter, I include discussions about how students' family members

contributed to students' communities of support. While my research questions do not specifically

focus on parent's roles in supporting students' academic success, GEAR-UP students'

overwhelmingly talked about the significance of their families. My choice to include their

families in the discussion is meant to honor the people that students recognize as valuable forms

of support in their lives. It is also meant to disrupt and counter implicit and explicit messages that

claim African American families are void of valuable capital that supports their students' academic success.

"If They Can Do It, I Can Do It Too": Role Models in Communities of Possibility

In considering the type of spaces that support the academic success of African American youth, it is necessary to consider the type of relationships that youth are able to form with adults who are teachers, role models and mentors. Throughout this chapter I specifically highlight the ways in which GEAR-UP participants illuminated the significance of GEAR-UP staff in my interviews with them. Participants in this chapter include seven current GEAR-UP students (Che, Fatima, Jocelyn, Keisha, Lena, Noah, and Nathan) and two current GEAR-UP student leaders (Serena and William). Che, Lena and Noah were students at Oakbridge High School and Fatima, Keisha, Jocelyn, and Nathan were students at Westgrove High School. Serena and William were GEAR-UP student leaders who had also attended Oakbridge High School.

Across all of the interviews I asked students whether or not meeting and connecting with the student leaders impacted their future academic and career aspirations in any way. For Fatima, a ninth-grade student at Westgrove High School, the student leaders provided her with confidence that her future plans for college would materialize.

> Yeah. I like to see some of the people that are either my gender or in my area that want to go into the same career fields that I want to go into, so it makes me think like if ***they can do it, I can do it, too***. (Fatima's Interview, December 2014).

As Fatima shared, it was important for her to see student leaders who were women and who shared similar career interests as she did. Connecting with the student leaders helped to strengthen her future aspirations as a college student, which was evident in her words "if they can do it, I can do it, too". However, this notion of having her future self affirmed was not specific to Fatima's story, but was overwhelmingly present in many of the student participants'

responses. For Jocelyn, a ninth-grade student at Westgrove High School, the student leaders encouraged her, however, as she made clear in her response below, she had no doubts about her future academic success.

> For me, I think ***it's a positive thing to see, for me, just to know that like especially women in like a good, top role or something and also people of color***. I think it's a good assertion that I can become successful. I can do this. And me personally, it helps me. It's not necessary for me to want to be successful cuz I think about it like, I mean, it's me, on my own. I'm not on my own but I think of it like I have to do what I have to do, no matter what I look like or who it is, I'm gonna become successful no matter the circumstances. So seeing them, it's actually just like reasserts, kinda another reassertion that I can do what I want to do and be successful amongst other people. (Jocelyn's Interview, December 2014).

Jocelyn articulated that it was important to see African American young women who were student leaders and that they served as reinforcing examples of what was possible. She shared that even without these images, she was determined to be successful. For Jocelyn, the student leaders as she shared, "affirmed" and supported her already formed and firm ideas of her academic success. For some of the GEAR-UP students seeing and interacting with the student leaders helped them to begin to form their ideas of what was academically possible in their lives. While Jocelyn provided an example of a GEAR-UP student who was confident in the possibilities of her academic success and college attendance, not all students possessed this same level of confidence.

Role Models Representing the Possibility of Making It to College

For students who attended Oakbridge high school this was even more powerful because two of the twelve student leaders were from their community and attended their high school before coming to college. Seeing students who looked like them reminded and reaffirmed the GEAR-UP students from Oakbridge of what was possible for their lives. The power of the role

models and mentors that students were connected to was also illuminated most significantly among the students from Oakbridge. This was particularly significant for Lena, a faithfully committed GEAR-UP student. Her words below were in response to my question about what it felt like to see and meet students who were graduates of Oakbridge High School at Jordan University.

> …So meaning that we see two people, it's two people at Jordan University, **reppin'** Oakbridge High School, **representing** Oakbridge like period, it must make it seem like if two **made it up there**, we all can. (Lena's Interview, August 2014)

Lena's narrative illuminated quite a few important elements. The significance of seeing two college students who were successful from her community gave her a sense of hope and empowerment. To be clear, it was not that they were simply from Oakbridge. Instead, Lena's use of the words *"reppin"* and *"representing"* suggested that it was something much more apparent about how they identified with being from Oakbridge. The student leaders who they spoke about were proud to be from Oakbridge and still claimed their city, acknowledging its benefits and challenges. This was also significant given the number of GEAR-UP students from Oakbridge who struggled with naming themselves as students from Oakbridge. I return to and more extensively take this notion up of students' "claiming" where they were from in the discussion included in chapter six of Oakbridge students' participation in the GEMS community engagement program.

Similar to Lena, Nyla discussed the significance in seeing student leaders from Oakbridge:

> Yeah, it does help me in a big way and also encourages me to keep going, to keep moving forward. To know that even though you're from a certain place, it doesn't matter. That you can still make it in life (Nyla's Interview, September 2014).

In Nyla's response, she also mentioned the connection between students' communities associated with their future success. For Nyla, the student leaders provided a sense of encouragement to

continue to pursue her academic aspirations. They also represented for her the possibilities in making it out of Oakbridge and to college. While Nyla and Lena discussed the level of difficulty students from Oakbridge experienced in "making it out" or attending college, Che and Glenn discussed why they believed some of their peers struggled to "make it out".

> Yeah, she actually made me think like, oh, because I seen a lot of people in Oakbridge that actually like, they don't, like I can't explain it but, yeah…Like they have a choice but some people did like follow after other people and do bad stuff like they do, to try to fit in and stuff…It makes me feel like I can ***rise above them*** and show them if I do good, they can do good, too. (Che's Interview, September 2014)

As Che shared, she found it challenging to fully express all of her thoughts about what happens to many young people who live in Oakbridge. She felt as if students did have a choice but due to the pressure of fitting in, students "do bad stuff" as she said or made decisions that had negative consequences for their lives both in and out of school. However, in her saying that students' made bad choices, she saw herself as a person with the potential to positively influence them. Che shared that seeing college students from Oakbridge at Jordan University made her feel like she could "rise above". In her rising above the challenges, she still imagined herself staying connected to her peers by modeling for them the possibilities of successfully making it out of Oakbridge. Similar to Che, Glenn also a ninth-grade student at Oakbridge believed that students struggled to make it to college from Oakbridge.

> G: It influenced me, like that mean if I try, I can do anything if I keep putting my mind to it. Like most people ***don't get to go to college*** from Oakbridge.
> T: Say more about that. What makes you say that most people from Oakbridge don't get a chance to go to college?
> G: Well, some of them drop out. Some of them are bad. Some of them get suspended at 18, don't even have a chance.
> T: Okay. Why do you think that is the case? Why do you think so many, that happens to so many students?
> G: Because the environment they're raised in.

T: Okay. Do you think that it's challenging for a lot of students? Like this environment, being in Oakbridge is challenging for a lot of students?

G: Yes

T: Why? Name some of the things that you think make it challenging.

G: Because some could have come from areas where there were like better schools and there weren't arguments or fights. Like it was packed tight, like they followed the rules. You come to Oakbridge, they're trying to make it better but there's still fights and arguments. (Glenn's Interview, May 2014).

While he shared that some students were "bad" and dropped out, Glenn also shared that he felt as if environmental factors contributed to their choices including school environments with uncontrolled arguments and fights. In retrospect, I would have liked to ask Glenn more about his reflections on the reasons why a significant number of students from Oakbridge were unable to attend college. In his response, Glenn demonstrated a critical awareness of the differences between his neighborhood and school environment and other neighborhoods and school environments. In parts of his response, he pointed to both internal and external factors that contributed to students' inability to make it out of Oakbridge. They "don't get to go to college", or "don't even have a chance", signaled his acknowledgment of students being acted upon by external forces.

While Glenn demonstrated a keen awareness of issues in his school and community, it is important to complicate his points. Glenn commented that some students "are bad" and "drop out". These notions that the students in the study or African American students who are learning in similar learning environments are bad and that it is simply their fault that they leave school, are reflective of deficit perspectives. Critical scholars such as Tuck (2011) illuminate the importance of acknowledging the factors that contribute to "pushing" many students of color out of school spaces. She compels us to acknowledge the ways in which many school spaces are

unwelcoming for students of color and either intentionally or unintentionally foster environments that push them out.

Role Models Disrupting Dominant Narratives About Academic Success for African American, Urban Youth

It was not only student leaders presence that resonated with many of the GEAR-UP students, but their stories and the ways in which they connected with student leaders. Student leaders utilized their song lyrics as another means for affirmation of the GEAR-UP students. During both the campus visitation and summer institute, student leaders introduced themselves in a unique way. They utilized poetry and song to say more about their majors, where they were from and their career aspirations. The student leaders were essentially reinforcing that it was cool to be smart, to value learning and to have aspirations to attend college. They essentially utilized their song lyrics as another means for affirmation of the GEAR-UP students. They discussed their college majors, career goals, academic accomplishments and highlighted where they were from through their songs. Below are two examples of their introductions:

> Yo, what's up it's ya boy J.C, here teachin' Futures how to raise their currency, started from the D, but I ***made it*** to the U, never stop believin' cause you know that you can do it too… it once was a dream but you see it came true, catch me out on campus screamin' out Go Blue! (Video recorded observation, May 2014)

> A degree is what I strive for, that's my end goal. I can talk all day but in my actions I will show. From the D, they call me Jamie, knowledge is power in your future you will see. Coming to your block…you can ***make it to the top***. (Video recorded observation, May 2014).

In J.C's introduction he mentioned growing up in Dunbar, "but" making it to Jordan University. In J.C's narrative growing up in Dunbar was placed before and in contrast to his attendance at Jordan University. In this way in these lines he acknowledged that many students from Dunbar were faced with the challenge of making it to college. However, he used himself as a source of inspiration for students. J.C wanted students to understand that in spite of the challenges he

faced, he was able to actualize his dream of attending college at Jordan University. He also talked about how he was able to realize his dream of attending college and that it was very much possible for the GEAR-UP students to do the same. For Jamie, mentioning and representing Dunbar was a significant part of her narrative. She was also reinforcing the power in education through her line "knowledge is power".

In my interview with Noah as I did with all students, I asked him whether or not seeing and engaging with student leaders such as J.C. impacted him in any way.

> Yeah, it means a lot because like in the world that we live in today, most of the people think that African Americans can't really do anything so…I mean, most of the messages come from TV, like any little program that's coming on and they talk about how African Americans were sent off to be in jail because of the, because of the way that we're learning in school. I thought it would be a little bit different and then when I saw that it was actually an African American (student) standing up doing the rap, saying that he was doing good, it kinda inspired me a little. (Noah's Interview, May 2014)

For Noah in particular, seeing African American GEAR-UP student leaders countered negative messages that he felt society reinforced. His awareness of deficit-based stereotypes about African Americans as perpetuated through the media as well as inequitable and inadequate schooling conditions was clear. He expressed that he thought that it would be different in the sense that he did not expect to see as many African American college students during the visit. Furthermore, he did not expect to see and hear about their academic success in college. His comments also signaled that to some degree he had internalized these messages. He did not expect to meet students like Jacob based on what the media conveyed about who makes it college and succeeds. For Noah, Jacob's mere presence and his story of making it to college from Dunbar disrupted narratives on three different levels. He disrupted narratives about what was possible for African American students, African American males, and African American students from Dunbar and other similar urban cities.

In addition to Noah, other GEAR-UP participants demonstrated their complex understanding of educational inequities within the African American community. Keisha was a ninth-grade student at Westgrove High School. While she did not mention the media narratives about African Americans that Noah did, she acknowledged her awareness of a racialized history of who attends college and why. I led the conversation below by asking the same question I had asked every GEAR-UP participant about whether or not the student leaders had any impact on them.

> K: A big impact cuz like, yeah, I do kinda have that, like seeing them up there and then they came from the same high school I came from and then just our history, like *I can get to college*
>
> T: Okay, and say more, when you just say our history, what does that mean? So I can, I think I know what you mean but say a little bit more about what that means.
>
> K: Blacks, they like, in our history, it was basically saying that Blacks wouldn't make it to college because there was, like it's supposed to be just all Caucasian people but now, like our history is changing, President Obama and stuff, and like Black, we are actually getting into college and they are like encouraging other kids, like oh, you can go to college, too. (Keisha's Interview, December 2014)

In her response, Keisha acknowledged that seeing the student leaders disrupted a historical and contemporary narrative about who makes it to college. More specifically, a history that was inclusive of historical narratives claiming "blacks wouldn't make it to college". Keisha's comment: "like it's supposed to be just all Caucasian people, but now, like our history is changing…" is an example of her awareness of a dominant narrative about racial disparities regarding college success. Seeing African American students at Jordan University who were highlighting their success served as a confirmation for Keisha that things were changing for African Americans. Her mentioning of President Obama also signaled for her that since an African American person could become president, this served as an additional confirmation that things were changing. While Keisha talked more specifically about racialized divisions of

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college access, Nathan, also a student at Westgrove High School spoke to the significance of connecting with people who shared a similar racial history.

> I think it makes a difference, like because you can kinda connect to like your, like ethnicity or race. You can *connect* more because they had the same past so it's kinda similar cuz we're all one group of people and we need to help each other. So hearing from someone else of your race can really help influence you to do things (Nathan's Interview, December 2014).

For Nathan, connecting with the GEAR-UP student leaders and staff meant that he could connect with people who had a similar past and understood history. He also shared that he believed that "we need to help other". The act of helping students to succeed was quite apparent among all of the student leaders, but particularly among those who were previous GEAR-UP participants and from Dunbar and Oakbridge.

Role Models Connecting & Reaching Back to Propel Students Forward

This notion of connecting with people who in some way had a shared experience as the GEAR-UP students was also visible in the narratives of the GEAR-UP student leaders who were former GEAR-UP high school students and also from the same or similar communities as the GEAR-UP students. Serena was a GEAR-UP student leader and a former GEAR-UP high school student at Oakbridge High School. Serena and I were also connected because she became one of my mentees during the time that I worked with Jordan University GEAR-UP. At the time of the interview, she was preparing for her junior year at Jordan University, which was a significant accomplishment, given the small number of students from Oakbridge who apply, are accepted and successfully matriculate through Jordan University.

> …Like I didn't know much, I didn't have a role model in Oakbridge, like, oh, yeah, like he's doing this, this and that or CEO of this. It wasn't that. And Gear-UP provided that for us, for sure. Like that's why, I think the idea of student leaders altogether is just wonderful because it gives us the opportunity to *make connections* with people who, who have struggled, who have faced the same struggles that we face, come from the same areas we come from and like look like

us, you know. Just like having someone who I can connect with and be like, yeah, you know, I feel like, I don't remember what I talked about with my student leaders but I just remember saying, like, can I take, can I take them home? Like can we have them back at the high school? I do remember, I talked to somebody about it, I forgot, but just saying how like it's great that Gear-UP provides them for us but it's like, like can we have them in the school? (Serena's Interview, August 2014).

Through her response Serena detailed why having access to the GEAR-UP student leaders was critical to her academic success. While earlier in our interview she named teachers and counselors who offered her critical support, the student leaders differed in the sense that they were close in age to Serena and were also from similar urban communities. She felt that since they possessed shared identities they could understand many of the struggles she faced as a student at Oakbridge High School. Her questions "can I take them home?" and "can we have them in school?" signaled how necessary she felt the student leaders were. As Serena continued to talk about the role that GEAR-UP served in her life, she questioned where she would have been without GEAR-UP's influence.

I just feel like I can't, I cannot stress enough about how Gear-UP has just… Okay, I'll say this. Like I feel like if I didn't, like if Gear-UP didn't come to our school that day, you know, and, and introduce themselves to us, I really feel like that my process of getting to college or even my outlook on even going to college would've been like deterred or like, it would've been harder for me personally, academically, to even, to even have the drive that I had.

In her narrative, Serena remembered and reflected on the first day that GEAR-UP began at her school during her seventh grade year, nine years earlier. GEAR-UP staff not only helped her with the process of preparing for and applying to college, but also to believe in the possibility of attending and succeeding in college. William, a GEAR-UP student leader functioned as a member of Serena's community of possibility both during her high school years and at Jordan University. Although William did not participate in GEAR-UP as a high school student, he grew up in Oakbridge and attended Oakbridge High School. At the time of our interview, William was

finishing his first year of a joint masters program in Public Health and Social Work. He was also

disrupting the narratives about what is possible in the lives of African American youth from

Oakbridge. He had spent four of six years at Jordan University working with the GEAR-UP

program as a student leader. He worked as a student leader with two cohorts of GEAR-UP

students and became a mentor to Serena both while she was in high school and at Jordan

University. William's response was a part of a longer conversation about his feelings regarding

the significance of GEAR-UP and more specifically, GEAR-UP staff as well as the relationships

he had formed. Below he shared more regarding his relationship with Serena:

> ***It's me connected to other people*** and it's me doing this. I oftentimes say my
> education, believe it or not, I know people, you know, it could be cliché as well
> but my education is not for me. My education is for those, for my family, for my
> community and for people like Serena, people like Lee…there's a way you sort of
> learn and you learn from those who are similar to you ***who've navigated that***.
> And so one of the biggest things was, you know, I told her, I said I don't know if
> you want to go abroad but like I really love going abroad. Been to Ghana, been to
> South Africa, Jamaica, all of that and so I want you to get exposed…And she was
> afraid and she was like my family and I was like that sounds like me. It sounds
> like me. I can't go anywhere else. I can't do anything. What about my family?
> What about… and she was able to build up the confidence and build up, you
> know, the motivation to say I'm gonna apply…I didn't know that cuz I didn't
> have a person below me who could tell me about Oakbridge and, or talk about
> how to ***make it through Jordan University*** coming from Oakbridge. But I felt
> like I could do that for her and that relationship in the first year was crucial…
> (William's Interview, November 2014).

In his response, William touched on several significant points. Similar to Jeremy and Serena, he

reiterated the significance of maintaining connections with people in his family and community.

Through fostering connections with students such as Serena, he was able to share wisdom about

how to navigate college as a first-generation student. He also understood the challenges of doing

so as he reflected on he and Serena's conflicted feelings about participating in opportunities such

as study abroad that would physically take them further away from their families.

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William's presence in GEAR-UP not only impacted Serena, but also other GEAR-UP students from Oakbridge such as Brandon and Lena. During my interview with Brandon, I asked him if he had connected with Serena and William and if meeting them resonated with him in any way.

> B: Yeah. It makes me feel more comfortable cuz when I was talking to William, he from Oakbridge, and the things he was saying compares to my situation so I was like, yeah, and he was telling me how, he had, he wasn't like a straight A student all throughout high school or nothing like that. He actually worked for it and he had a bad temper, things like that, too
>
> T: Okay.
>
> B: so I was thinking like, that's kinda what goes on right now with me. And he was telling me how sometimes the kids will be a distraction, things like that and that you have to like take time out of your day to study and stuff like that. So he was telling me that a lot about college is it's not hard, it's that you have to divide your time wisely

Brandon indicated that meeting and engaging with William resonated with him because they had similar experiences as Oakbridge High School students. On one of the first days of the GEMS Summer Program, William and Serena came to talk with the students about their experiences transitioning from Oakbridge High School to Jordan University. It was clear that Brandon "clicked" with William because during his free time he sat with William and asked him a list of questions about college and growing up in Oakbridge. When William shared his story with Brandon, it resonated with him. While Brandon did not go into detail about his own experience, over the course of the summer he shared many of his experiences with the GEAR-UP staff (Fieldnotes, August 2014). The staff would often commend Brandon on his level of maturity, leadership skills and his willingness to always support his peers. He often humbly responded to our praises and shared that he was a work in progress and was continuing to grow and change as a person and a student. For Brandon, knowing that William had also experienced some of the same challenges with managing his temper and improving his grades validated his experience.

William helped to demystify the notion that college was hard beyond Brandon's reach. Additionally, William provided Brandon with advice that resonated with him specific to managing his time and avoiding people who served as distractions to his success.

Earlier in my discussion Lena entered the conversation as a student for whom William and Serena's presence helped her to realize that she could make it out of Oakbridge. During my interview with William, I asked him to talk about the relationships he had formed with the current cohort of GEAR-UP students from Oakbridge. He was connected to Lena not only from her participation in GEAR-UP, but also because he knew her older sister from high school and maintained contact with her.

> And so it's always important to sort of see how, over time, like her sister didn't go to college and her mom didn't go to college. Her mom is from, you know, from here to there trying to find jobs and it's important for her to have this exposure and for her to come to me during the end of this summer. Most summers, she'll always speak to me, she'll call her sister, I'll talk to her sister, things like that. But this summer she came and she said, you know what? I think that I have a chance. And I was like, what do you mean, you have a chance? She was like, I have a chance to do something different. I know, this had me all in tears, too. She's like ***I think that I have a chance that I didn't think I had when I started Gear-UP***… (William's Interview, November 2014)

As William recounted Lena sharing that she finally believed she had a chance, tears welled in both of our eyes. Her statement was extremely powerful because it signaled that she really did not believe that she would have the chance to make it out of Oakbridge. She did not believe that college was possible in her life. While Lena did cite her mother and sister as role models during our interview, as William mentioned, they were unable to provide her with detailed information about applying to college, given that they had not yet had the experience of being college students. Participating in GEAR-UP was helping Lena to actually connect with the possibility of going to college.

African American Parents' Roles in Communities of Possibilities

For many of the GEAR-UP students, the words of encouragement that their parents and family members shared with them were quite valuable. For other students, their parents and family members' courage and tenacity as visible in their quest for education, served as encouragement or as sources of *familial capital*. According to Yosso (2005), "familial capital refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (p. 79). In her conceptualization of familial capital, Yosso discusses the knowledge passed between family and extended family that serve to maintain community connections. She also acknowledges that familial networks can "…model lessons of caring, coping and providing (*educacion*), which inform our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness" (p. 79).

It is important to understand the ways in which researchers have studied the significant role of parents, particularly among youth of color. My discussion of the GEAR-UP parents' roles is also meant to disrupt narratives of African American parents values and participation specific to the education of their children. In the current study, students overwhelmingly mentioned the encouragement they received explicitly or implicitly from their parents. In terms of explicit encouragement, I am referring to conversations that parents had with their children where they explicitly shared encouraging messages about the importance of education. Students also mentioned feeling encouraged by their parents not only through their words, but also through their very being. Parents in multiple ways as I illuminate in the following section not only served as familial capital for students, but also as navigational and aspirational capital.

Students' Perspectives

Through this particular section I illuminate the voices of five students: Amara, Che, Jocelyn, Nyla, and Omar. Amara, Che, Jocelyn and Nyla were all members of the GEAR-UP cohort and Omar became an honorary member of GEAR-UP from his participation in the GEMS Summer Program. His cousin Brandon was a GEAR-UP student at Oakbridge who participated in the college visits, the college seminar and the GEMS Program. Due to Omar's eagerness to participate and because there was an open space, GEAR-UP welcomed his participation. During my interview with Omar and Brandon, Omar talked about the significant influence that his father had on his academic aspirations and achievement.

> Mine's is my dad. My dad always told me hard work and dedication is the thing to get you where you want to be in life. So my dad, he really pushes me to the limit even though I get irritated and want to give up. So he push me, he like, this year, he want me to get at least a 3.8 this year…Yeah, so he pushes me to the limits so I can be better in life. And he is a really strong person mentally and physically. So he will do anything to help me to get to my point (Omar's Interview, August 2014)

As Omar expressed, his dad encouraged his academic success. His dad provided regular motivation that helped him to stay focused even when he wanted to give up. Omar's relationship with his dad represented a nurturing relationship that he significantly valued.

Jocelyn was a GEAR-UP participant who attended Westgrove High School. During the conversation Jocelyn and I were talking about her experience of staying overnight on campus with her cousin in college. I then transitioned into asking her about the support she received from her parents and our conversation is below:

> T: …Can you talk about like how your mom and dad and other people in your family are encouraging of you in terms of school and college and what you want to do?
>
> J: well, in my family, college is definitely like in my path so I mean, like in my family, grades, all that are really important and like doing what you're supposed to do and like also being involved…

T: Okay
J: They just say like, like half the time, mom, can I do this program? She looks at it, she's like seems good, seems good. You go do it. Just tell me when it is
T: Okay.
J: So they're really supporting it, of it and like they're always looking for like scholarship opportunities. Like sometimes my dad will just like send me stuff, like maybe you can apply for this, apply for that, and then I'll show them stuff I'll apply for. So it's kinda like we both work together (Jocelyn's Interview, December 2014).

Through Jocelyn's response she acknowledged how supportive her parents were in working with her to find scholarships and supportive programs. Even without Jocelyn sharing how supportive her parents were, I inferred this was the case. I not only worked with Jocelyn during the GEAR-UP program, but I was also her course instructor at another Summer Institute at a neighboring University. On the first day of the course Jocelyn and I were delighted to see each other. She reminded me that was continuing to work on her personal statement and was looking forward to the summer camp. Seeing her and working with her through two summer programs in one summer demonstrated not only her commitment to her education and to preparing for college, but also her parents' commitment.

Additionally, I had the opportunity to meet Jocelyn's father on the day of our interview. We met a library close to their home and Jocelyn's father decided to wait at the library until we were finished. When we walked to meet him, we began what turned into a twenty-minute conversation about how important education was and how he and Jocelyn's mother were committed to supporting Jocelyn's college admittance. He also shared that they understood that they could not afford to pay for college for she and her younger sisters and hoped that her participation in multiple programs would increase her likelihood of scholarships; it did. At the end of our conversation, Jocelyn was excited to share with me her recent receipt of a competitive merit-based scholarship that would cover the cost of four years of college tuition at any in-state

institution. Jocelyn's perseverance and commitment to her education as well as her parents'
support of her academic success was already paying off.

Amara was a GEAR-UP student at Oakbridge who had participated in all for GEAR-UP
initiatives. During our interview, she discussed the significance of the encouraging messages that
she received from her mother, Natasha, which are included below:

> Because even not in school, they still want you to be the best that you can be…my mom
> say she want me to be better than, than her… Basically, like because she didn't go to
> college, she want me to go to college and achieve more than she did (Amara's Interview,
> September 2014)

Through her words, Natasha expressed to Amara that while college had not been possible for her
as a high school graduate, that it was a possibility for Amara. Natasha's belief in what was
possible for her daughter, despite her own educational past functioned to create a culture a
possibility for Amara. Scholars such as Yosso (2005) posit that cultures of possibility are
created when parents seek to write a new history and unravel the connection between their job
and economic status and their children's education. Natasha's creation of a college-going
culture of possibility for Amara was not only visible in her encouraging words, but also in her
actions. For example, Natasha was excited about Amara's acceptance into the Summer Institute,
but she did not have a car to transport her to Jordan University. Consequently, she planned to
purchase six bus tickets (the number of tickets necessary for her to accompany Amara to and
from Jordan University) and travel four hours. By car, the round trip would normally take three
hours, but it did not bother Natasha that she would be traveling an additional hour. When the
GEAR-UP staff found out about her plans and realized that I lived close to their home, we made
arrangements for Amara to ride with me. Natasha and her entire family expressed their gratitude
to the program for ensuring that Amara would not miss out on GEAR-UP. Natasha's
commitment to supporting Amara's academic success was also apparent during Amara's

participation in the GEMS program. Many of the student participants traveled on the city bus. To ensure Amara's safety, Natasha rerouted her bus schedule from work to ensure that she could meet Amara and ride home with her on the bus.

Nyla, a ninth-grade student at Oakbridge high school and a long-time GEAR-UP participant reflected on the significance of simply watching her mother over time and seeing how she persevered in the face of obstacles:

> Well, my mom is one of my mentors because even though like she's struggling with lupus and stuff, she still goes to college. She still makes sure she has all of her work done and everything. (Nyla's Interview, September 2014).

For Nyla, watching her mother's tenacity in the face of significant health challenges provided her with a boost of academic inspiration. Through her perseverance, Nyla's mom was modeling lessons of coping. Nyla's mother also demonstrated her commitment to Nyla's education through her involvement in the GEAR-UP program and her involvement at Oakbridge. During the GEMS program, Nyla's mother rearranged her schedule to ensure that she could participate as well as drop her off and pick her up. During the school year, she also navigated a hectic class schedule and traveled at least thirty minutes from their home to ensure that she could take Nyla to school and pick her up. Her mother's actions demonstrated to Nyla the value that she placed on education for both of them. Nyla's mom was working to create a college-going culture of possibility for Nyla. In this way, Nyla's mother not only provided a source of navigational capital in terms of demonstrating to Nyla how to successfully navigate through school and life amidst challenges, but she also provided her with aspirational capital regarding her college trajectory.

Similarly, Che mentioned how seeing her mother's commitment to returning to college impacted her own understandings of what was possible in her life.

…I didn't think that she'd be able to like start school and she had, like she had five kids but she has shown me that no matter what happens, you can still follow your dreams and everything." (Che's Interview, September 2014)

As Che shared, she questioned whether or not her mother would have been able to attend college given her focus on taking care of her of family. However, her mother's actions of returning to college proved to her the value that she placed on education and her commitment to college. For both Che and Nyla, their mothers returns to college in the face of life events including illness and taking care of their families, represented not only the importance of a college education, but also that it is possible in spite of some of the obstacles they have endured in their own lives.

Parents' Participation in GEAR-UP

The ways in which GEAR-UP students' parents were also visible as participants in GEAR-UP programming was paramount. The GEAR-UP program committed itself to Dana not only adopted a philosophy of practice that valued parents' contributions. In their mission statement, GEAR-UP expresses a commitment to working with families to support GEAR-UP students as is visible below.

> In partnership with other institutions we work with school communities (futures, peers, families, and school staff) to provide the best academic, social and personal skills for post-secondary readiness. (GEAR-UP Mission Statement)

One of the ways that GEAR-UP honored the voices of parents was through their development of a parent ambassadors program. More specifically, Dana Gold, the GEAR-UP parent liaison created the program to ensure that the experiential capital of parents was honored. This was particularly evident in her integration of a parent orientation led mostly by parents during the orientation day for the Summer Institute at Jordan University. Typically, parents and family members accompanied their students to the first day of camp, attended orientation, assisted students as they set up their rooms and then departed. During the orientation, parents were

broken up into seven groups and one to two parent ambassadors facilitated each group. In concert with Dana, the parent ambassadors developed topics of interest that would spark meaningful conversations between the parents. Some of the topics included parents sharing tips on how they navigated difficult conversations with their students and how they maintained open lines of communication with their students.

Dana acknowledged that like all parents, GEAR-UP parents possessed valuable knowledge that could contribute to the program also seen as *funds of knowledge*. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) theorize funds of knowledge as the knowledge and expertise that parents possess. Utilizing a funds of knowledge framework intentionally counters notions that families of color and working-class families are void of cultural, intellectual and social capital. Furthermore, tapping into funds of knowledge is not only significant in making connections between homes and schools but also between beyond school spaces such as GEAR-UP and homes.

Discussion

The GEAR-UP student leaders and staff functioned as forms of social, aspirational and navigational capital. According to Yosso, "social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources" (p. 79). GEAR-UP served as a network of staff and student leaders who modeled what was possible for African American Youth, encouraged their success, and provided resources to facilitate their success. The physical representation of seeing students who were successful in college, particularly African American students, resonated with GEAR-UP students. Connecting with the GEAR-UP student leaders was multilayered for many of the GEAR-UP students. The student leaders presence also impacted their racial identities as African American youth aspiring to attend college. To be clear, I did not ask specific questions about

their individual racial identities and how they connected to their educational aspirations. However, their responses to my question about whether or not connecting with African American GEAR-UP staff impacted them, revealed pertinent information about race. Scholars have illuminated the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement (Carter, 2008; Chavous et al, 2003; O'Connor, 1999; Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 2003).

For some of the GEAR-UP students, the student leaders' presence represented the possibilities of attending college in spite of stereotypes that claimed that college was not a place for African American youth from urban cities such as Dunbar and Oakbridge. In this way the GEAR-UP program and its particular commitment to acknowledging and affirming students' identities as African American youth functioned as what Paris (2012) has conceptualized as a *culturally sustaining pedagogy*. According to Paris, culturally sustaining pedagogies are those that "support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (p. 95). GEAR-UP fostered an environment that connected African American students to African American student leaders who modeled that it was possible to achieve academic success while also maintaining positive racial identities. Furthermore, as is revealed in students' narratives, being connected to GEAR-UP as a community of possibility was particularly significant due in part to the negative messages many of the students were well aware of regarding their academic success. This is particularly important given the impact that these stereotypes about what is possible in their lives can have and has had in many of the GEAR-UP students' lives.

Impact of Stereotype Threat

In order to more accurately make the connection between the significance of communities of possibility and stereotypes about African American Youth and GEAR-UP, I

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draw upon Steele's (1997) concept of *stereotype threat.* According to Steele, "where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening" (p. 614). In the context of this study, the stereotypes that apply are those that claim African American Youth from particular urban communities are not capable of academic and college success. Students were aware of the stereotypes about their likelihood of obtaining academic success and college admittance as African American youth. For the students from Oakbridge, these stereotypes resonated even louder given the compounded and multilayered stereotypes about what was possible for them not only as African American youth, but also as students from Oakbridge.

Among the many solutions that Steele provides for countering or preventing stereotype threat is to alter students' schooling conditions or the conditions that perpetuate the threat. Two of the more specific solutions are to affirm that students belong in the particular domain for which there is a stereotype and to increase the presence of role models who have successfully navigated the domain in spite of the stereotypes. GEAR-UP as a community of possibility affirmed and reinforced students' "belongingness" in college. In discussing their identities as African American youth and college, it is important to acknowledge the significance of their racialized identities.

African American Students' Sense of Belongingness in College

The notion of belonging in college also manifested in Keisha's comment "it was basically saying that blacks wouldn't make it to college because there was, like it's supposed to be just all Caucasian people…" Her comment connects to historical and contemporary issues regarding racialized disparities of not only college attendance, but of college admittance. Harris' (1993)

conception of "whiteness as property" is useful in unpacking Keisha's thoughts. One of the tenets of "whiteness as property" is the act of excluding others from obtaining particular forms of property and in this case, a college education. As a result, the property is constructed to only belong to Whites. This construction of college belonging to Whites is evidenced in the historical exclusion of students of color in many educational spaces. Historically, HBCU's or Historically Black Colleges and Universities were many of the only institutions that provided African Americans students in the United States the opportunity to obtain a college degree. The first HBCU was founded in 1837 (Brown & Davis, 2001) during a time in history when slavery still existed and when laws made it illegal and often life threatening for enslaved African Americans to learn to read and write or attend any form of school (Anderson, 1988). These laws and rules of exclusion made it glaringly clear that education was not meant to be the property of African Americans. Historically Black Colleges and Universities were constructed to disrupt this painful and inequitable reality, embrace African American students and provide them with access to postsecondary education (Brown & Davis, 2001).

Furthermore, for decades to follow, even after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865 and the Civil Rights Act in 1964, many predominately White institutions denied access to or made it challenging for African Americans to gain college admittance. While Keisha is not living in this same historical context, she is living in a contemporary time and space where African American students are among many students of color who are still largely underrepresented in many colleges and universities. In fact, GEAR-UP exists because of this reality since its primary mission is to increase the number of underrepresented students in postsecondary education. Many African American youth still experience significant academic

borders and boundaries that make it challenging and sometimes impossible for them to make it to college.

While I do not wish to undermine the value in Omar's father's words of encouragement, it is necessary to acknowledge the problematic ways in which dominant society conceives of the relationship between "hard work" and "success" or meritocracy. Scholars such as McIntosh (1989) refer to this notion as the *myth of meritocracy* or the belief that hard work results in success for everyone and that when people do not achieve success, it is necessarily a result of a lack of hard work. In the context of student achievement, dominant social constructions reinforce and perpetuate a belief that if students work hard, they will necessarily achieve success. Indeed it is important that we encourage students to put forth effort and work hard in school, however, hard work does not always result in success for all members of society. We must consider the ways in which mediating factors such as racism and classism directly and indirectly impact whether or not hard work does indeed result in success. In the context of this study, many of the GEAR-UP students were working hard in the sense that they were focused on doing well in their classes and preparing for college. However, failing school systems that are under-resourced or the barrier that the cost of college presents to many of the students whose families can and does undermine their hard work. Unfortunately, these and other factors serve as borders and boundaries and can negatively impact the outcome of students' hard work and academic success and achievement.

Navigating Multiple Worlds in Spite of Stereotypes & Histories of Exclusion

According to Multiple Worlds Typology, it is important to identify and understand the types of borders and boundaries that students experience when making transitions across their multiple words. While not all students perceive or experience the transition from high school to

college as a border or boundary that is challenging or seemingly impossible to cross, many students do. Many of the GEAR-UP students identified stereotypes or dominant narratives about African American youth and making it to college that in some way impacted their beliefs about transitioning from high school to college. These stereotypes functioned as challenges or boundaries that have the potential to threaten students' ability to successfully transition from high school to college. While students' transition according to the model is not indicative of a transition across two completely separate worlds, it does represent a transition with the particular world or realm of school and more broadly educational institutions. Before students can successfully cross the border of transitioning from high school to college, it is important that they at least believe in the possibility of crossing the border. The student leaders and staff in the GEAR-UP program, which operated as a beyond school world according to the adapted Multiple Worlds Typology, sought to make their transition to college a possibility. Connecting with and seeing successful college students, some of whom were African American and from students' communities, functioned as a border crossing mechanism. GEAR-UP helped them to "see" and connect with first-generation college students who shared similar experiences of growing up in their communities. In this way the student leaders provided them with advice about how to successfully navigate being a student at Oakbridge and at Jordan University. The stereotype threat specific to African American students academic success in college was indeed in the air, but the student leaders, their personal stories of success and their affirming messages for students', were functioning to disrupt and re-write a narrative about college success.

While the relationships students were able to form with GEAR-UP student leaders were important, their very being served as visual representations that African American youth from urban communities can and do make it to college and succeed. The GEAR-UP student leaders

helped students such as Lena and Glenn understand that they had an opportunity to make it out of Oakbridge despite the difficulty that many other Oakbridge students' experienced in doing so and despite stereotypes that said it was not possible for them.

Community Cultural Wealth in the Community of Possibility

As is supported in the literature that focuses on the influence of parents on students' academic aspirations, African American parents provide valuable familial capital that supports students' academic success. Through their study that examines parental support related to the college-going process, Knight and Marciano (2013) also confirm the necessity of honoring the stories and forms of encouragement that African American and Latino parents pass down to their children. Scholars have reported on the positive relationship between first-generation students' academic aspirations and the various forms of support they receive from their parents (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006). These positive relationships not only demonstrate the strength and importance of familial capital, but also aspirational capital and navigational capital. For students such as Amara, her support from her mother served to reinforce her aspirations and provided her with aspirational capital to attend college and become the first person in her immediate family to do so. Jocelyn's parents were committed to helping her find resources to support her academic development and ensure that she could attend college. They understood that they would not be able to financially contribute to the cost of her college education, but they did everything they could to help her secure additional support. By also working with Jocelyn to find college preparatory opportunities they were providing a form of navigational capital, demonstrating to Jocelyn how to find resources to successfully navigate her pathway to college.

According to Yosso (2005), familial capital is also visible in the ways in which family or kin demonstrate to students how to cope and persevere. For students such as Che and Nyla, their

mothers modeled how they were coping and balancing multiple responsibilities to pursue college educations. Collectively, the ways in which GEAR-UP students discussed their parents, demonstrates the multiple ways that African American parents support their students that are not often acknowledged in dominant discourses. GEAR-UP parents and their representation of familial capital that also served as aspirational and navigational capital functioned to disrupt these negative messages. Through their encouraging words, their very being, their adjusting their work schedules, transporting students to GEAR-UP initiatives, parents in the program were active in their students' lives. They were providing support that served to embrace the possibilities of their children succeeding in school and making it to college.

CHAPTER 4: WRITING AS A MEANS FOR SELF-EXPLORATION & REPRESENTATION

"…Whether I lose or win I'll pray and not sin, when there is nothing else I have paper and a pen." Jerry, 9th grade Oakbridge Student

A common thread woven throughout students' participation in the College Seminar, Summer Institute and GEMS program was their engagement in literacy activities that allowed them to engage in self-reflection. While all students' writing samples were noteworthy, many of them told rich and powerful stories about GEAR-UP students' lives and provided glimpses into their thoughts, feelings, goals for their futures and experiences. During my analysis of students' individual writing samples, I was reminded of the above words that were embedded in one of Jerry's writing samples. I selected this excerpt from his writing sample because it speaks to the significance of writing in his life, which is one of the major points that is explored throughout this chapter. Jerry was a ninth-grade GEAR-UP student from Oakbridge high school who participated in both the Campus Visitation and College Seminar initiatives. Jerry was very reserved and also very observant of his surroundings. He loved laughing with his friends and told powerful stories through his writing. In this particular writing sample, Jerry wrote about many of the struggles that he had faced throughout his life. He ended his piece with the words above that spoke to the significance of writing in his life. For Jerry, writing provided the space for him to talk about his thoughts, feelings and experiences that were difficult for him to articulate in person. Through his writing he provided a window into who he was, what he was experiencing and his feelings.

Similar to Jerry, many of the students in the GEAR-UP program utilized writing as a means to explore and share their personal narratives. Students' writing illuminated their triumphs, joys, struggles and pain. Throughout this chapter I explore and describe what is

illuminated about the valuable lives of the students in the study through their writing. While students engaged in a range of literacy activities, students were commonly able to engage in self-exploration and self-representation through their writing.

Self-Exploration & Representation

One of my goals during my analysis of students' writing samples was to search for themes that spanned across students' writings from the three major initiatives where writing took place. Across the writing samples from each of the three initiatives, students in different ways wrote about their lived experiences and their dreams for the future. Self-exploration and self-representation are the two broader themes that capture the essence of what I gleaned from GEAR-UP students' writing. I operationalize self-exploration as the act of students using writing to grapple with or work through their thoughts and emotions relative to their life experiences and identities. I am operationalizing self-representation as the act of students using writing to demonstrate or represent salient parts of their identities, thoughts and lived experiences. In addition to the two broader themes, I have highlighted sub-themes that speak to more specific categories of self-exploration and self-representation.

While understanding the literacy practices that any student engages in is crucial, this is particularly important for the African American youth who are the focus of the study. Mahiri and Sablo (1996) are among many scholars who remind us why this type of writing is significant, particularly in the lives of urban youth of color. Through their research they discussed the insight they gained into the lived experiences of the two focal students from their writing. "Engaging in literacy practices helped them make sense of both their lives and social worlds, and provided them with a partial refuge from the harsh realities of their everyday experiences" (p. 174). Blackburn (2002) through her scholarship illuminates the ways in which queer youth utilize

literacy to engage in what she calls "identity work". More specifically, she examines how

students engage in literacy practices that allow them to examine their positionality in particular

spaces and how they write themselves into these spaces. Paris (2010), in his scholarship that

honors the literacies of youth of color refers to "identity texts". He describes the types of identity

texts that youth in his study created as "youth-space texts inscribing ethnic, linguistic, local, and

transnational affiliations on clothing, binders, backpacks, public spaces, rap lyrics, and electronic

media" (p. 279). Through his study, Paris acknowledges the ways in which students of color

engage utilize literacy across multiple mediums for multiple purposes. In the context of my

study, I sought to acknowledge the multiple ways that students engaged in various forms of

literacy practices from writing poetry to personal statements as a means for self-exploration and

representation. Together, the ways in which researchers have conceptualized the connections

between writing and identity have helped to shape my understanding of how the GEAR-UP

students engaged in "identity work" and created "identity texts".

Defining Literacy Events & Practices

Although my primary analysis focuses on what I learned about the students, their

literacies and lived experiences, it is important that I acknowledge the significance of the

mediums or platforms that allowed them to write about their lives. In the context of the study I

both explored the literacy events and literacy practices embedded in the GEAR-UP program.

More specifically, I conducted observations and collected curricula and students' writing

samples from three of the four GEAR-UP initiatives included in the study: (1) College Seminar

(2) Summer Institute (3) and the Growing and Empowering Youth through Storytelling Program.

While I described these three initiatives in my methods section, I have provided additional

details about the literacy events that students engaged in throughout their participation in the three initiatives listed above.

In my conceptualization of literacy events and literacy practices, I drew upon the scholarship of Heath (1982) and Street (1993). Heath defines literacy events as any event in which a piece of text is central to the activities that take place. In the context of my study, I draw upon Heath's definition of literacy events and also expand it to include events where students engaged in reading text inclusive of books, poems and essays and where students engaged in writing personal narratives, poems and journal entries. In addition to the reading and writing that students engaged in, literacy events also include discussions about texts and students' presentations of their own and other peoples writing. Street helps us to look more comprehensively at these events and recognizes the importance of also understanding how these literacy events are embedded in broader literacy practices.

Writing in the Third Space with Tupac, Sanchez, Hughes & Angelou
Background & Context of College Seminar

The College Seminar course took place at Oakbridge high school over the course of four weeks during May and June of 2014. Oakbridge high school was selected as a site for the program given the strong relationships fostered over the past four years with the administration. The administration embraced GEAR-UP's presence in the school and valued the partnership. Faculty at Oakbridge high school designed the College Seminar as a course through which ninth grade students could gain exposure to information that would both encourage and prepare them for college success. Since the curriculum was not fully developed in the spring of 2014, Oakbridge faculty welcomed the opportunity for GEAR-UP to pilot a curriculum. The GEAR-UP director served as the lead for both curriculum development and instruction. I provided

support when needed with the curriculum and instruction along with a GEAR-UP AmeriCorps VISTA and a student staff member. The director, Dr. Malcolm was especially committed to the College Seminar given that it was the first time that GEAR-UP was able to implement a course within one of the partner schools. Together, we agreed that it was crucial for us to provide students with information about college, but to also provide the space for them to engage in writing that was meaningful to their lives. During an interview, Dr. Malcolm expressed his commitment to the course and to the focus on reading and writing:

> DM: …so the college seminar for me was one of the things that I threw a lot of my energy and time into which is very hard as a director to do. And it was, it was based around students experiencing reading and writing in ways that they *traditionally* don't. In ways that get them to, with authors that they can see that look like them, that come from the same background, have the same culture and at the same time, was directly connected to college readiness concepts (Interview, August 2014).

Focusing on reading and writing, particularly for the students at Oakbridge high was key for a number of reasons. During our first cycle of GEAR-UP, we realized that while the students from Oakbridge were some of our most committed and enthusiastic students, quite a few of our students struggled significantly with reading and writing. Additionally, in the bi-monthly meetings with Oakbridge and GEAR-UP staff, increasing students' reading and writing proficiency was a major goal.

Consequently, we designed a curriculum that we hoped would provide students with texts they could connect to and that would serve as meaningful catalysts for their own writing. Since our course sessions were often less than forty-five minutes, we decided to select a series of poems. Our criteria for selecting texts were that the message in the poem could spark meaningful conversations and were authored by a person of color. Prior to creating their own literary works, the GEAR-UP facilitators highlighted poems authored by African American poets that served as

mentor texts. We chose four primary texts: The Rose that Grew from Concrete by Tupac Shakur, Put on the Sleeves of Love by Sonia Sanchez, Still I Rise by Maya Angelou, and As I Grew Older by Langston Hughes. Each week we introduced one of the mentor poems, and engaged in discussions with students about the author of the poem and their reflections of the poem. Additionally, we asked students to create their own reflective poems in response to reading the mentor poem. Importantly, students had the autonomy to write about any particular topic that resonated with them. While students had the autonomy to choose their topic and style of writing, we encouraged them to utilize some of the rhetorical devices the authors used, which we discussed with them before they wrote. I have included more details about these rhetorical devices and how some of the students used them in their poems in my discussion of students' writing samples.

"The Rose That Grew From Concrete"

> *Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete? Proving nature's laws wrong, it learned to walk without having feet. Funny, it seems to by keeping it's dreams; it learned to breathe fresh air. Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else even cared.*
> - Tupac Shakur

One of the first poems that Dr. Malcolm introduced to students was Tupac Shakur's "The Rose That Grew From Concrete". In the poem, the rose represents Tupac as a young person and young people who grow up in challenging circumstances. The concrete represents the actual conditions that make it difficult for youth to survive in. "Concrete is one of the worst imaginable surfaces in which to grow, devoid of essential nutrients and frequently contaminated by pollutants. Any growth in such an environment is painful because all of the basic requirements for healthy development (sun, water, and nutrient-rich soil) must be hard won" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 5).

This particular session began with Dr. Malcolm asking for a student volunteer to read the poem (Fieldnotes, May 2014). Noah, a ninth-grade student at Oakbridge and also an avid writer volunteered to read. After Noah's reading of the poem Dr. Malcolm asked students to pull out the words that resonated with them and also provide an explanation for why they chose the words. Some of the key words that students shared were "dream, care, concrete, feet, crack, nature's and breathe". For Carlos, the word "feet" resonated with him. The class awaited his response since he was the only student who chose the word feet and the significance of feet was not as easily apparent as some of the other words that were chosen. Carlos shared that since the rose did not have feet and still walked that the act of walking for the rose symbolized the act of "trying something different" to survive in harsh conditions (Fieldnotes, May 2014). Although I did not have the opportunity to talk with Carlos further to ask exactly what he meant about "trying something different", I gathered that he meant that in spite of adverse circumstances, the rose tried to do whatever it could to survive. Additionally, April shared that the word *grew* stood out to her. "Grew" stood out to April as she shared: "Like they say you can't be anything. That's what some people say about students in Oakbridge". April continued asserting that despite these messages, that like the rose, students from Oakbridge could still grow. (Fieldnotes, May 2014). Her comments echoed students' awareness of this deficit narrative about what is possible for Oakbridge students that appears several times throughout my analysis. While April was very aware of this narrative, her comment reflected her understanding of how untrue it was and the importance of defying it. Another student, Omari shared that he was surprised that people neglected to care for something so amazing and beautiful as a rose.

After we discussed the words that resonated with students and their reflection of the poem, we also highlighted rhetorical devices that Tupac used in his poem, particularly his use of

symbolism. From the poems that students submitted, Evan was one of the students who integrated symbolism as Tupac did in his poem entitled "Know One Knew":

> Know one new
> It was made
> For it didn't suck up the
> Sunshine
> It was hidden in the shade
> For it overcame,
> Its past there it stood in the
> Shadows
> A tree built to last

Evan represented himself and young people in similar conditions as trees instead of roses. This particular tree lived in harsh conditions similar to Tupac's rose, but instead of growing in the concrete it grew hidden in the shade. As Evan noted, no one knew that it existed in the shade, but despite the lack of attention and deprivation of sunshine for nourishment to grow, it lived and it was built to last. The fact that the tree survived under such harsh conditions represented how resilient and strong the tree was. To use Carlos' interpretation of what Tupac's rose did to survive, the tree tried something different to survive.

"Put On The Sleeves Of Love"

> *The great writer Zora Neal Hurston said,*
> *Fear was the greatest emotion on the planet Earth*
> *and I said, No my dear sista*
> *Fear will make us move to save our lives*
> *To save our own skins*
> *But love*
> *Will make us save other people's skins and lives*
> *So love is primary at this particular point in time…*
> *-Sonia Sanchez*

"Put On the Sleeves Of Love" was our second mentor poem and one of my selections for the College Seminar. During my search, I combed through poems by African American authors searching for topics that would both spark conversations among the students. I also searched for

poems that were authored by poets who students may not have been as familiar with. On this

particular day, we engaged in a debate. Dr. Malcolm divided the room in half and asked students

if love or fear was the greatest emotion (Fieldnotes, May 2014). The room was almost exactly

divided. Students spent the time with their team members debating and sharing their perspectives

about love and fear. "Love will make you do anything for someone you love"; "love and fear are

equally powerful emotions but you have to know when and how to use them", and "fear can

make you protect the people you love" (Fieldnotes, May 2014). After our debate, students were

then encouraged to write down their thoughts in the form of a poem. Below is an excerpt from

my interview with Brandon where he recounted his experience with the debate and his process

for selecting one of the two emotions to write about:

> T: …What did you think about reading those poems and analyzing those poems and having the opportunity to like write a response to them or write your own?
>
> B: Okay, I remember this. We did like a division thing, like whoever thought love was more powerful, go on that side of the room. Whoever thought fear was more powerful, go on this side of the room. We all had to explain why and I remember that I was confused so I was kind of in the middle until later on. I think I moved to love. And the reason I moved to love is because if you love something, you're willing to do anything for it or for someone so I feel like that was really powerful. But I also felt that fear was powerful because fear will stop you from being who you want to be or it'll stop you from doing certain things. Like for example, like sometimes kids get bullied and it stop them from academic success so I was thinking like about both of those, I couldn't really choose.

Brandon's words were very telling especially the part where he mentioned that fear had the

power to make students feel like they needed to be someone else, especially when being bullied.

Brandon had unfortunately experienced being bullied which appeared in his response to "Put On

the Sleeves of Love" below and reappeared in his response to Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"

which is discussed further in the chapter. So his comment that "fear will stop you from being

who you want to be" reflected his own experience with being bullied. From what I could gather

about this experience, Brandon was bullied because he was uninterested in socializing with

students who were not focused on their academic success. As he expressed, this experience or fearing his bullies almost stopped him from his own academic success. Although Brandon grappled with which side to choose during the activity, he decided to write about love in his response poem entitled "Love Is Like":

> Love is like a warm blanket
> On a cold night or like a cold sprite
> When it's just right. Love is
> Priceless, especially when it
> Comes to someone's heart, because
> You must be invited. When the
> Haters are shooting at me,
> I just grab my love vest,
> Wipe the comments off my
> Chest and tell others
> I am blessed

Through using symbolism and metaphors, Brandon created a poem that spoke to his positive feelings about love and his beliefs about the power of love. While the tone of many of the poems that students created was serious, Brandon's poem was lighthearted. Brandon again mentioned his "haters" who were the bullies he referenced earlier in the poem. But instead of being overcome by the bullies, in his poem he grabbed his "love vest", which was a metaphor for his confidence. For Brandon, love ended up overpowering his fear of the bullies and what they said about him and the value he placed on his academic success.

Additionally Nyla, like Brandon believed that between love and fear, love was the most powerful emotion. In her poem below entitled "Emotion" she explained why.

> Love is such a powerful
> Emotion
> It can make you do anything.
> I guess that's why most
> People Fear it.
> But its nothing to be afraid
> Of. Because love is something
> That just comes natural.

> So why Fear love?
> Its just an emotion…

Through her poem, Nyla took the time to importantly explore and share her thoughts about the significance of love. She expressed her understanding of how love's intensity could cause people to fear it because of its capacity to cause people to do anything. At the same time, she also questioned why people fear love's intensity, because in her opinion, it is simply an emotion. In the end she compelled her reader to reconsider fearing love.

"Still I Rise"

> *…Just like moons and like suns,*
> *With the certainty of tides,*
> *Just like hopes springing high,*
> *Still I'll rise…*
> *Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,*
> *I am the dream and the hope of the slave.*
> *I rise*
> *I rise*
> *I rise.*
> -Maya Angelou

"Still I Rise" was the last mentor poem that we examined during our final sessions. During this particular session, Dr. Malcolm introduced "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou as a mentor text. Dr. Malcolm and the students also explored Maya Angelou's use of repetition as a rhetorical strategy for emphasis throughout the poems. He then asked students to create their own poems that were centered on a topic that resonated with them and to integrate the use of repetition surrounding the central point of their poem. We also asked students to use features of Maya's poetic stance such as the use of repetition to draw her reader in and increase the urgency and intensity of her message. This stylistic use of repetition to intensify words or a delivered message is one that is also prevalent in Black preacher traditions (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). Of the three poems, we actually focused on "Still I Rise" for the longest amount of time.

Students learned a significant amount about Maya Angelou and also had the opportunity to perform her poem in groups that Dr. Malcolm referred to as *cyphers*. Cyphers are very common when people recite poems and raps. The idea is that the multiple members in the group or cypher listen and then follow after each other. Similarly, students divided up their sections of the poem and worked together to perform. We encouraged students to personalize the poem and many students were creative and changed the cadence of the poem, similar to a rap. Other students performed their own poems that they created in response to "Still I Rise". Below I explore three of the response poems that students created.

Resisting the Stereotypes & Representing Who I Am Not Who They Say I Am

Nyla and her voice emerged at the end of the program and Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" was a catalyst for her. Nyla was another student participant in the College Seminar at Oakbridge. Nyla had a quiet, peaceful, and positive demeanor. She had been a faithful GEAR-UP participant during the three years the program was active at Oakbridge. Throughout the College Seminar, Nyla was very quiet but this changed toward the end of the course when students could share one of their poems with the entire class. During one of the last sessions, we asked students to raise their hands if they were interested in performing any of their poems. About ten hands went up and I noticed that Nyla's was not one of them. After class I encouraged her to consider sharing her poem and she smiled and said that she would think about it. I was pleasantly surprised during our next session when she stood up to perform her poem entitled "Who Am I?" Through "Who Am I? Nyla grappled with issues of self-esteem and responded to imposed beliefs about who she was in her poem below:

> Who Am I? That's the question a lot of people ask. Now let me think…
> Who Am I? I'm that shy girl that you call rude because I don't like being in front
> of a lot of people
> Who Am I? I'm that girl that you always see blushing and laughing

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Who Am I? I'm that pretty, fat girl as society would say
Who Am I? I'm that smart, intelligent girl that you love to hate on
Who Am I? I'm that multi-threat that people love to hate
Who Am I? I am a creation made in my Father's image. I breath the breathe of an honest
God. I bleed the blood of a loyal God.
So now tell me, Who Am I? Since you know so much

Through her poem Nyla was talking back especially to people who have judged her or talked

negatively about her. Stylistically she wove back and forth acknowledging the ways in which her

peers and society attempted to impose their beliefs about who she was. Her poem then built to a

point where she started to describe herself through her own eyes and in relation to God. Similar

to Angelou's poem, she connected with her power in relationship to a higher power. For Maya

Angelou, she connected with the power of ancestors and slaves. For Nyla, she connected with the

power that she felt from her faith and believing in God. It was almost as if she spent the first few

lines acknowledging how she had been labeled while pushing back on the labels. She then spent

the next few lines almost "schooling" her audience or her "haters" about who she really was. As

she ended her poem, she used the words "So now tell me, Who Am I, since you know so much?"

to almost dare the people who had judged her to counter her powerful words. She dropped her

proverbial mic intending to render her naysayers speechless and in theory and practice, it worked

(Videorecording, June 2014). Some of the students who had teased her were in fact in class that

day and were speechless after she shared her poem. In the moments of her poem performance,

she was no longer that "shy girl" mentioned in her poem. Nyla's narrative is especially important

because it was clear that how she was feeling and what she was dealing with had been sitting

with her for a while. She needed the right platform and opportunity to let it out. Nyla used her

poem and her performance of her poem as a means to express her experiences with being judged.

Her poem served as a form of resistant capital helping her to resist and refute negative messages

about her identity. Prior to her performance, she had not worked up the confidence to do so, but

analyzing the poem, making connections to her own life, writing a response poem, and performing her poem, gave her the courage and confidence to speak out and push back.

While Nyla focused on how people judged her physical being and her personality, Carlos' writing sample exemplifies his understanding of how he is judged as an African American male and his resistance to this positioning. While Carlos attended almost every College Seminar session, he was often hesitant to write. On the day that we read through Maya Angelou's Still I Rise, Carlos was motivated to write. He created a very powerful poem and personal narrative entitled "Statistises":

> Statisteses- say most blacks never get out of High School. they drop out. I don't (want) to grow old and stay at my moms house.
> Statisteses- say young blacks do drugs and hit licks **but that Just a lot of drama I'm not with**.
> Statisteses- say that statisteses- say this/they say stuff I Just can't believe all tho they said it, how much have I witness. but I no **me and my people are not ideits**.

In Carlos' narrative he acknowledged the societal messages about Blacks and purposely disrupts the negative messages, which he is keenly aware of. Through his poem, Carlos critiqued the ways in which statistics negatively position Blacks and stereotype them. He resisted through saying that he does not wish to be a participant in these negative activities and also refutes the grossly false notion that Black people are idiots. Carlos' narrative serves as an example of what Yosso (2005) refers to as resistant capital. Resistant capital can be found in myriad places such as through messages that are taught to students by their parents about how to resist negative societal messages. Resistant capital can also be seen in the ways in which youth position themselves in relation to these negative messages. In this example, Carlos created his own resistant capital through his poetry. Throughout his poem, he addressed several topics such as race, identity, his lived experience and resistance to stereotypes. In Carlos' case, he was utilizing writing as a vehicle to resist these negative abounding messages about what is possible in his life

as a Black male. In this way Carlos' poem like Maya Angelou's poem provides an example of a Black Protest Literacies that call out the negative ways in which society positions African Americans while also disrupting the negative positioning.

Additionally, Carlos' resistance is not only evident in the content and intensity of his poem, but also in his language use. His use of the word "statistises" does not represent a grammatical error, but instead represents a valuable example of AAL. Carlos pluralizes the word statistic not by adding an 's', but by adding 'ses'. What some would consider a mistake, others who acknowledge the richness in AAL, would consider it a creative example of wordplay. According to Alim and Smitherman (2012), "while many youth can learn "standard English" grammar, they resist the constant and unrelenting imposition of White linguistic norms by their teachers." (p. 175). When these White linguistic norms are employed they often limit students' authentic expressions of their thoughts and lived experiences. We must consider Carlos' choice to use the word "statistises" as a valuable use of language that best captures his thoughts and lived experiences. The word "statistises" alone commands attention to the poem and Carlos' powerful words that are woven together to demonstrate his resistance to dominant narratives and dominant language.

Rising Above Obstacles

The title of Brandon's poem was "I Got Over It".

> Being bullied by bullies it never stuck to me I got over it
> Having trouble making friends turned into having too many friends and just when I
> thought my problems would end, It started all over again, but I got over it.
> Having surgery never hurt me, writing sloppy never stopped me, and just when I begin to
> quit, I just remember to get over it. Because a thinking man is a successful man and even
> though I get over it and get over things again and again and again, my problems always
> start over again, but eventually I'll get over it.

Throughout his poem Brandon highlighted events or obstacles in his life that he overcame. He mentioned being bullied, writing sloppy, having surgery, and having trouble making friends, all of which he successfully overcame. He also acknowledged that he understood that problems would continue to manifest in his life but given his experience of overcoming hardships, he had confidence that he would continue to as he said "get over" them. While all of the events that he listed were significant to Brandon, his experience with "writing sloppy" was an obstacle that appeared again in our interview, which signaled to me how significant this was for him. During the interviews I asked students to talk about how they felt about writing and its significance in their lives. Below is a part of Brandon's response that provided additional information about his experience with "writing sloppy".

> B: Reading and writing. Okay, I think I'm a wonderful reader and with writing, I can write real good but I write sloppy because a long time ago, I had dyslexia
> T: Okay
> B: It was kinda hard for me so I think I got more comfortable with writing even though I still write sloppy

Brandon was one of our students who created and turned in several poems throughout the College Seminar. For him, writing was extremely important in his life given his struggle with dyslexia. He did not want his dyslexia to prevent him from being comfortable and connecting with writing. In the College Seminar and his continued participation in GEAR-UP, which is discussed later, it certainly did not prevent him from engaging. Brandon he emerged as one of the most engaged, diligent, and committed students, leaders and writers in the program.

In addition to Brandon's narrative, which included his story of overcoming obstacles, Meisha also wrote a response poem to "Still I Rise" entitled "Rise Above" through which she discussed her ability to rise above:

> To rise above the pain that only one
> Day I could spread my wings in the rain.

To rise above the tear drops that run down my face.
But I'll rise above just like the sun and the moon. Every day.
The wind that blows the trees in the
Afternoon. Just like beez who are
Addicted to honey I'll rise above
I'll rise above from the past that rooted in
Pain.
Because I am the Future and my Future is
Me so I'll rise above.

In Meisha's poem she utilized imagery, symbolism and repetition similar to Maya Angelou's. In "Still I Rise", "Up from a past that's rooted in pain" appears in the sixth stanza. While Meisha used different imagery and analogy than Angelou, she used it similarly to talk about the certainty of her rising above her pain. Just as the wind blows and bees produce honey, Meisha decided that she too would rise. Reading and engaging with the poem helped Meisha to find the words to express and represent the possibility or the certainty of her overcoming obstacles in her life.

Discussion

Over the course of four weeks, the students in the college seminar utilized writing to explore their feelings and experiences. From their thoughts about love and fear, their ability to overcome obstacles, to their resistance to dominant narratives about their identities, they wrote without abandon. The students who wrote allowed themselves to be vulnerable enough to share important details of their life. They also demonstrated their talent and how in many cases, they were able to create powerful pieces of writing in just a few minutes.

The College Seminar As a Third Space

In any space that is designed to meet the needs of students it is important to identify what works to engage and connect with students. We were very intentional with the design and implementation of the college seminar. One of our goals was to create a space in which students were exposed to and embraced by the poetry of African American authors given their absence in

their curriculum. We were committed to selecting and engaging students with texts that we

hoped would resonate with them and functioned as enabling texts (Tatum, 2008). Below Lena

described her feelings about the type of texts we engaged with during the seminar:

T: For you, does it make you feel some kind of way to see, again, this question, to learn about African American history or to read this poetry from African American poets?

L: It does because it's like when we think about it, we say they don't know how it feels to be this and they don't know how it feel to be that. But we relate to Tupac more than we relate to anybody else

T: Okay, okay. So you think it's important to be able to read things that you relate to, that you can relate to

L: Right. Things you actually think somebody in this world understands what I'm going through

For Lena, reading poems by authors she could relate to in some way was significant. In

acknowledging the significance of particular literacy events and practices it is important to

identity what makes them significant and unique for African American Youth. In addition to

being provided with the space to write about topics that are meaningful to students, it is also

important to consider the types of texts that students are asked to engage in which are used to

spark critical thinking and writing. The attention to the types of text that GEAR-UP students

were allowed to engage in during the College Seminar was important for students' engagement.

In creating spaces that are truly meant to engage African American youth in discussions and

writing that they find meaningful, it is essential to use texts that are meaningful. Utilizing texts

authored by African Americans that also speak to topics that students can relate to is paramount.

It is paramount particularly due to the absence of in-school literacy experiences where African

American students are not connected to meaningful texts. In this way, the integration of these

texts also connects to Ladson-Billings' (1995) third tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy that

calls for educational spaces that foster cultural competence. To be clear, African American

students can connect to a broad array of texts, however, the students' poems and their responses

reveal that texts authored by African Americans are meaningful. In his work with African American males, Tatum (2012) asserts that due to the absence of positive texts, African American males need what he terms as *enabling texts*. An enabling text is defined as "one that moves beyond a solely cognitive focus- such as skill and strategy development- to include a social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus" (p. 164). This is not only true for African American male students, but also for African American female students. The texts that we selected and shared with the students were to some degree useful in inspiring many of the GEAR UP students to write.

While I believe the College Seminar was successful mainly because most students utilized it as a space to write and felt comfortable, both the students and GEAR-UP staff felt challenged in quite a few ways. Many of the students were attentive and engaged, but quite a few struggled to engage. Students were asserting their voices but in ways that distracted their peers. Students were communicating with each other in non-affirming ways. Although we knew quite a few of the students, it was the first time that GEAR-UP was actually teaching a course in their school. For the students who did not know us, we were still outsiders who they did not yet trust. Helping the students to truly understand how powerful their voices were and to reflect on how they were using their voices was a significant part of the program.

Consequently, one day we stopped to better understand what students thought about their own voices. We asked each student to write one word that described their voice on a sticky note and place it on the front board so that we could all see. While everyone wrote a word on the sticky notes, just a few students actually came to the board. Some of the words they wrote to describe their voices were "standard (average)", "rude", "funny", "influence", "mature/goofy", "joyful", and "deeper". Quite a few things were happening. We realized that for many of the

students, school and classroom spaces were not spaces that affirmed and embraced who they were or spaces were they could trust the adults in the room. They needed to trust us first and the trust for them was not going to be established in a matter of a couple of weeks; it would take time. They needed to know that we would be consistent in our care and concern about their well-being and success. Throughout their participation in the College Seminar, GEAR-UP was committed to helping students to know that their voices were meaningful and powerful. One of Dr. Malcolm's standard practices was to have the students recite mantras that spoke to the significance of their voices, reading and writing. Two of the mantras are listed below.

> Mantra 1: You don't see with your eyes, you see with your mind. The more you read, the more you know. The more you know, the more you read.

> Mantra 2: My voice is powerful. My voice is beautiful.

In separate interviews with both Lena and Brandon, I asked them whether or not the discussions about how powerful their voices were, impacted them. Below are excerpts from their responses:

> L: …I remember how Dr. Malcolm used to tell us that our voice is powerful, our voice is beautiful and things like that so it really made me think about my voice and how I could be creative with it or help others with it. So that's what I thought.

> B: Yeah, because like your voice is a powerful weapon to where like if someone hears you, understands you, if you use your voice in a certain way, you will be heard.

Lena and Brandon were two of the students in the seminar who walked away feeling like their voices were affirmed. Lena began to see her voice as powerful and beautiful. Her comment about utilizing her voice to help others was in reference to how she was able to write for community change during her participation in the GEMS program, which I further explore this more in chapter six. Like Lena, Brandon began to feel as if his voice was being heard. Through writing he was able to express his emotions and his ability to overcome some of the obstacles he discussed in his poems. The community that GEAR-UP helped students to form fostered a space

that affirmed their identities and their literacies. Maisha Fisher (2007) in her ethnographic work that explores the power of poetry among youth of color asserts that such spaces serve to "build literate identities" (p. 92). More specifically, spaces that provide texts that highlight the literary contributions of African Americans and also allow students to utilize writing to tell their truths, support positive identity development among African American students.

Challenges to Identifying As Writers & Engaging in Writing

While many of the students in the study were indeed able to form these positive literate identities, some of the students did not connect with writing or see themselves as writers due to their previous experiences with writing. It manifested in their articulations of how they saw themselves as students and more specifically writers. It also manifested in their struggles with engaging in the course. To provide further context I briefly explore what is my analysis of Kim and Curtis' responses to the seminar. Kim had a very positive personality and was always willing to engage in discussions but not always in writing. One day as I was talking with her group about what they were writing, I noticed that she was not writing. I asked Kim if she needed help and below is the conversation that followed my question:

K: I am not a writer Ms. Theda.
T: What makes you say that? Why do you feel that way?
K: I am not really good at it.
T: Well, remember that regardless of how much experience we have with writing, we all continue to get better at it. So think of yourself as an emerging writer. That's how I think of myself.

She asked me to clarify what emerging meant and I shared with her that it meant that she was getting better. The next time that she came to class she said "Ms. Theda I'm an emerging writer" (Fieldnotes, May 2014). We laughed and high fived and I told her that I was glad that she felt that way. It was clear that how she viewed herself as a writer was changing, but Kim was often absent from school, so we did not have the opportunity to continue making connections with her.

Curtis made several efforts to stay with us in the seminar, but ultimately his discomfort with writing in a class where his peers could see him, prevented him from staying. After a few sessions I realized that Curtis, like quite a few other students in the seminar, was very conscious of his own writing abilities and the writing abilities of his peers.

Unfortunately, many African American youth may not see themselves as writers because they feel like they are missing the tools to engage with writing in the ways they are being asked to in school and the ways they desire for themselves. African American Youth need to be in spaces where they feel loved. As educators we must recognize that as Tupac and Evan wrote in their poems, they are beautiful roses and trees. In stark contrast to the concrete and shade, we must provide them with light, sun and water in the form of love and educational spaces that acknowledge their lived experiences and connect them to the resources, including literacy resources they need to thrive.

CHAPTER 5: EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERSONAL NARRATIVES

The purpose of the personal narrative workshop within the GEAR-UP Summer Institute

was to increase students' understanding about the purpose and structure of a college personal

statement and to provide a space for students to create drafts of personal statements. Students

also received personalized feedback from GEAR-UP staff. In the past, former GEAR-UP

students had shared with us that writing their personal statements was one of the most

challenging components of their college application. This workshop was particularly significant

given the number of students who had expressed how challenging personal statement writing had

been for them as was expressed during my interview with Natalie, the summer program

coordinator. During my interview with Natalie the summer program coordinator, I asked her to

share why she believed that incorporating a workshop on personal statement writing was

necessary:

> M: So for the essay writing, because I know that's an area that a lot of adults
> struggle in, so I know it's a struggle for a lot of students, just them having a
> really adverse reaction to writing and critically thinking and then being
> pushed to write.
> T: Can I ask you if, have you seen that among our Gear UP students? Do you think
> that it's meeting a need that you have seen among the students that we work with?
> M: Yes.
> T: Okay
> M: So when we have them, so there's a couple, there are a couple of things.
> So with the application, we ask the supportive learning questionnaire and a
> lot of parents express that their students, their futures have issues with
> reading and writing. I won't say the majority but a good, significant
> amount and I feel as though if we're gonna be a college prep, college
> readiness program, we know that in college and even before you get to
> college, reading and writing is like very fundamental to everything that
> you're going to do. So the earlier they get that exposure, and get, again,
> another tool, to gain some more knowledge, I won't say it's the know all
> to end all solution but it'll be able to assist them.

Natalie's response also spoke to GEAR-UP's understanding of the significance of connecting

students to meaningful reading and writing resources. While developing students' literacy skills

was not the major focus of GEAR-UP initiatives, as Natalie stated, GEAR-UP attempted to respond to areas that students needed support in. Over the past few years GEAR-UP started to include a supportive learning inventory that Natalie spoke about in order to better understand what students' individual strengths and areas for growth were. She noticed a trend in the increasing number of students whose parents shared that their students needed assistance particularly with reading and writing. Natalie originally asked me to design the curriculum and facilitate the workshop given my past experience with developing the curriculum for many of the literacy-focused workshops. Since my major focus during the summer was to collect data for the study, I developed a curriculum for the majority of the workshop and left space for the student leaders who facilitated the workshop to have input. I worked with the GEAR-UP staff to train twelve student leaders, six of whom actually facilitated the workshops. Over the course of the two weeks, a different group of three student leaders led the My Personal Narrative workshop.

Participating in the personal narrative course gave students the opportunity to learn how to construct a personal statement for college and to actually practice writing their own. While participating in the program, students produced two major pieces of writing inclusive of a poem and a draft of their personal statement. Students wrote their poems as a warm-up and introductory activity before they started to think about their personal statements. The student leaders wanted to engage students in a meaningful warm up activity that also helped them to think about their goals and dreams for the future. In keeping with GEAR-UP's commitment to exposing students to meaningful mentor texts, the student leaders utilized "I Dream A World" by Langston Hughes. They showed the students a short video clip about Langston Hughes, his life and the significance of his writing during the Harlem Renaissance. Students then read and analyzed the poem as a large group. The student leaders followed up by encouraging students to

create their own dream narratives that spoke about their dreams for their individual lives, their

communities and the world. Students spent approximately fifteen minutes brainstorming and

creating their dream narratives. The student leaders then asked for volunteers who wanted to

share their dream narratives.

Overwhelmingly, students' dream narratives or dream poems were not only focused on their

dreams for their personal advancements, but also for the collective advancement of the world.

Across the dream narratives and poems that I collected, several themes emerged. Students

discussed various topics including eliminating violence and advocating for peace and equality

and their career aspirations.

Dreaming Out Loud

While providing the opportunity for the GEAR-UP students to write poems about their

dreams for the future was meant to warm them up for longer writing and to hopefully set a

positive tone for writing their personal statements, it proved to be so much more. As I analyzed

students' dream poems, I ultimately categorized them according to the resonant themes. I

selected samples of students' poems that demonstrated some of these themes including their

representations of their career aspirations, representations of worlds that are safe and absent of

violence, representations of equality and representations of worlds where they can be themselves.

Career Aspirations

Ramon, a GEAR-UP student from Westgrove High School also created a dream poem

through which he discussed his dreams of becoming a doctor and a soccer player.

> My name is Ramon Tellis
> I tell people what it is
> I aspire to be a doctor
> And help people of all kind
> I know I'm only fourteen
> But I always aim high

My name is Ramon Tellis
I know that you all are jealous
Yes I'm only 14
But I know I'm going to do big things
I aspire to be a doctor
If I go pro in soccer
I want to help people of all kind
So everyone's life will be fine.
I always aim high
So now it's time I say bye, bye.

Through Ramon's poem, he creatively described his aspirations of becoming both a doctor and a professional soccer player. He also shared that he would like to utilize both of these careers as a means to help other people. His poem demonstrates his confidence in his future aspirations as is visible in the lines "I always aim high" and "I know I'm going to do big things". His poem not only reveals his confidence in his future, but is also demonstrative of his positive, lighthearted and jovial disposition. Brian created a dream poem through which he used vivid imagery to convey his dreams of becoming a musician.

I dream a world where music
is played. Through day and night
as I stay awake. Every corner
and every street, people hear me
play, as I move my fingers through the milky way.

In the five lines of his poem, Brian was able to tell a very creative story about his future dreams of becoming a musician. Through Brian's narrative he very vividly described the possibility of a world in which his music touched the lives of many people.

Aspirations of Happiness, Peace & Nonviolence

Fatima, a student from Westgrove High School also created a poem where she talked about here future aspirations. Fatima was one of the students who I had an opportunity to interview as

well. Below is her dream poem as well an excerpt from our interview where she describes why

she created her poem.

> I want to have happiness in everything I touch and see.
> To grow old and wise with the things and people that love me.
> Sadness and being upset has no room in my book.
> There is no purpose of being so upset just take another look.
> The field is where I belong
> ***When I am there I feel I can do no wrong***
> Keeping my head held high and on a straight path will 90% of the time lead the way
> If you're having a bad day, no worries tomorrow will be a much better way.

In Fatima's poem she was able to dream about the possibility of happiness prevailing not only in

her life, but also in the world. It was important for her to write about happiness since that it was

she was truly looking for at that point in her life, especially given some of the challenges she was

dealing with. She also utilized the poem to talk about how playing sports brought her happiness

by writing "The field is where I belong, When I am there I feel I can do no wrong." During our

interview, we had the opportunity to talk more in detail about why she chose to write this

particular poem. In the excerpt below, Fatima responded to my question about what led her to

create her poem.

> H: Okay. Okay, I remember writing this just because like before Gear-UP, it was like everything was like all sad and depressing in my life.
> T: Okay
> H: Before that week, and I had a talk with my mom before I got there and then she was just like, I don't want you to be sad anymore. And she just gave me like this long pep talk. Right before we got there. And when they told us to write a poem and they gave us different topics of what we could write the poem on, I chose to write it on being happy. (Fatima's Interview, December 2014).

Free to Be Me

At the end of Fatima's poem she switched to sending an encouraging message to her audience

about staying positive in the face of challenging or bad days. It seemed as if this part was drawn

from her conversation with her poem and she used it in a way to remind herself and others to

essentially believe in the possibility of happier days. In part of her narrative she also makes

reference to dreaming of world where she can do wrong. I interpreted this to mean that she

desired a world where she would not be judged and did not feel the pressure of having to be

anyone else but herself. Jocelyn also created a poem that focused more heavily on the notion of

a world where people could be themselves.

> ***…I dream a world where no one's afraid to be themselves***
> and we don't hide in the corner like little elves.
> I see a world where our differences make us who we are,
> And we shine bright in the dark like a burning star…
> ***A place where you can be what you want to be***
> And run through the streets happy, and free- Jocelyn

Through Jocelyn's poem, she also envisioned a world where people did not have to hide who

they truly were. Similarly, Paul created a dream poem where in addition to other resonant

themes, he touched on living in a world where people can be themselves.

> I dream a world calm and free
> Acts of art in the air we breathe
> ***Where anyone can be who they want to be***
> Without having a scare
> A world of equality
> Peace and tranquility
> A world that is fair for you and me
> Sounds of pianos in the right key
> Base hits and kicked snares
> A world based on knowledge
> For knowledge is the key
> To pass the jagged rock
> And finally pick the lock
> Music is at it's potential
> Where people take things to heart or mental
> This is My world to me. (Paul)

Paul began his poem by outlining some of the things that he dreamed about for the world

including peace, equality and fairness. He then included his passion for music and his skill as a

musical lyricist as he integrated musical metaphors to describe his dreams. This notion of

equality and safety also resonated through Etienne's poem, which is included below.

> I dream of a world where there is no violence or guns
> Where children can be safe and free to run
> Of a place of happiness that you can fly and spread your wings
> And your destined for great things
> Cause with success you can pass the rest
> Shoot for the stars and soon you will be the best
> ***I dream of a world where you can be free from shyness***
> Where people treat you with respect, equality, and kindness
> Cause you never know what might happen people will spread love back
> And only then would the world know the right way to act
> I dream of a world where inspiration can flow
> Where you can push yourself cause there's no limit you can go
> So in the end keep your head high and spread joy in this world (Etienne)

In Etienne's poem in the first line he mentioned his dream of no violence or guns. Throughout

his poem he also discussed the importance of personal success and being in a world that supports

peoples dreams. The poems that I have included are a mere snapshot of the honest and creative

poems that students were able to create in a matter of minutes. Through the workshop, students

were provided with the opportunity to write as a means for envisioning the possibilities of worlds

that embraced who they were, their aspirations for the future, and their creativity.

Personal Statement Writing

After students had the opportunity to create their poems, the student leaders encouraged

students to volunteer and perform their poems. The student leaders anticipated that engaging in

an activity where students could write about their dreams for the future would spark their

creative energy for drafting their personal statements for college. Through the workshop the

student leaders explored what the personal statement was, why it was important and also

provided students with strategies for writing an effective personal statement. Students then chose

one of the five prompts to respond to and spent the next three days in the workshop drafting their

personal statements.

Overcoming Obstacles

Overwhelmingly, students utilized the opportunity to write drafts of their personal statements

as opportunities to talk about how they were triumphant in the face of obstacles. In the

discussion that follows, I illuminate the narratives of three students: Jocelyn, Keisha and Lynette.

All three young ladies were ninth grade GEAR-UP students at Westgrove high school. She had

participated in the campus visitation and summer program. Jocelyn was a very ambitious and

dedicated student. She chose to write about how she dealt with the obstacle of losing several

family members in a short amount of time for her draft of her personal statement for college.

> Life is an ongoing rollercoaster. There's that slow buildup of thoughts, anticipation, and dreams but within that same minute, a plunging drop that makes you hold your breath…At the end of the ride though, once it's over, you catch your breath and find a newfound sense of strength, determination, and overall bravery and accomplishment. This rollercoaster may just be a metaphor, but at one point I felt like it was the story of my life. In the middle of October my mom's uncle died…Less than a month later my grandfather passed…About 2 months later my dad's aunt also passed. Emotionally this took a toll on my family. Eventually though I realized that I couldn't keep crying forever. I knew that life moved on that it would keep going whether or not I moved along with it. I got back up, dusted myself off, and decided to keep moving forward. During this time, I had the mentality that what I needed to focus on was school (Excerpt from Jocelyn's personal statement).

In Jocelyn's personal statement she described a very challenging time in her life where she and

her family experienced the loss of several family members. During our interview Jocelyn

expounded on why she chose to write about her family losses in her personal statement and why

it was important for her to discuss.

> T: Okay. Can you, if you're okay talking about it, can you tell me why you chose that? Like why that stuck out to you, to write about that in your personal statement?
>
> J: I talked about that because for me, so far, it's been like the craziest time in my life. I felt like it was the most like time where there was ups, downs, everything

was going on at once. And I felt like that was a time in my household where like things were like crazy. Not crazy in a bad way but just kinda crazy

T: Lot going on

J: Lot going on. So I felt like writing about that and how I worked through it to just keep going and keep going on my pathway, I felt like it was kinda like a bump in the road. That I kinda got over and kept going. So I felt it was a moment in my life where like if I wrote about that, it'd really like touch hearts and see like, kinda put an insight on me as a person more than like the rest of my application which was just grades and numbers and all that (Jocelyn's interview).

Jocelyn also contextualized the significance of her narrative. She expressed how she wanted people who read her narrative, particularly admissions counselors, to understand that who she was could not adequately be captured through her grade point average or any other demographic information that she included in her profile. Most importantly, she wanted them to know that she was a strong, young woman who had endured the loss of important family members. While this loss took a toll on her emotionally, she also wanted admissions counselors to know that she allowed herself to grieve but in the midst of her grief, she managed to refocus on her academics.

Jordan also elected to write her personal statement about an obstacle that she successfully overcame. Her personal obstacle centered on the struggles she faced with academic success in her math class. Below is an excerpt from a draft of her personal statement entitled "Overcoming My Math Obstacle".

Overcoming obstacles is what makes you a stronger person. No one in life has it easy but, you can't let that one thing stop you from moving on in life. I have encountered many obstacles and failures in my life. One failure I experienced was when I started to get bad grades in Algebra… My grades were slowly getting worse and I felt as if everything was just falling apart… However, when second semester came I developed a plan. I didn't want to fail twice in a row…So, I did my math homework first, took notes in class, and watched extra videos to refresh my mind. I used all of my resources to help me get back on top…I got my results back and I had passed! I was proud of myself. I had overcome a failure and an obstacle…I had a failure but, I didn't let that stop me from moving on. Everyone will encounter failures and obstacles in their lives it's what makes us stronger.

Through her personal statement, Keisha explored her tenacity and commitment to succeeding in math. As she noted, she had experienced many obstacles in her life but her math obstacle was very significant for her. During our interview I asked Keisha to share why she chose this particular prompt and she expounds on why below.

> T: Can you remember why did you choose, so there were five different prompts, of the prompts, why did you choose to talk about an obstacle and why did you choose to talk about your obstacle in math?
>
> K: Because like in the educational area, like math is like my biggest problem that I have to overcome and I did and I'm so happy cuz, like math is like, is a real big struggle for me
>
> T: okay
>
> K: And I wanted to talk about something that I overcame
>
> T: Do you feel like this workshop was beneficial and if so, tell me how.
>
> K: Yes, cuz like this was my first time hearing about the personal statement. I knew we had to write something but this actually helped because it gave what prompts might be like and we could actually use this in the future reference if we wanta use it in our common app. And it actually taught me like the packet they gave us, like gave us all like, like little facts on how to make your paper better and stuff

As Keisha expressed in our interview, she chose to write about her obstacle in math because of her ability to successfully overcome it. Additionally, she was not familiar with the personal statement so participating in the workshop increased her knowledge about the structure and purpose of a college personal statement. She chose to talk about her math obstacle not because she walked away feeling defeated, but because when she reflected on it, she felt happy about her accomplishment of strengthening her math skills.

Lynnette was also a student who chose to write about an obstacle that she overcame. For Lynnette, this major obstacle surrounded her challenges with speaking at an early age which is detailed below.

> Observant and peaceful are two words that embody me. As a child I didn't talk much and I just listened to other people talk. My mom didn't believe that I would ever talk. It was her love and concern for me that led her to seek answers. She took me to the doctor in hopes of finding an answer and a cure for why I was so quiet. The doctor reassured her that I'm just listening and one day I will talk. However even after what the doctor said

she still was in disbelief that I would talk…I believed in myself that I would talk so I decided to prove to her that I could. When I came upon this idea I felt really good about it because I was doing something that my own loving mother didn't believe that I could do. As I matured I begin to socialize more, but still I am an observer.

Thinking back on this event I get a feeling of achievement because I accomplished something that some people thought I couldn't achieve. Going through this experience really taught me how to have faith and believe in myself that I could do anything that I put my mind to.…If I was ever put in this type of predicament again I think I would do the same thing that I did when it happened, have faith and believe that I can do any and everything if I put my mind to it.

Through her personal statement Lynnette shared a very personal story about the challenges that she faced with talking. She had never shared this story with any of the GEAR-UP staff. As Lynnette described, she watched as people questioned whether or not she would ever talk and verbally engage with the world. The outcome of this experience was not only that she became to talk and socialize more with her family and friends, but an increased faith in herself and her belief in the possibility of her future achievement.

Explorations of Self During Transitions

As I analyzed students' personal writing samples, I noticed a trend among the ten students who wrote about their transitions to young adulthood. While they do not represent the majority of GEAR-UP students' responses, they do represent a very important topic. Eight of the personal statements were written by young men and the transition they all wrote about in their personal narratives, focused on their transitions from boyhood to becoming young men. The excerpts below reveal Khari, Joshua and Mario's transitions.

In his personal narrative response Khari vividly described how dealing with the loss of a close family member forced him to reflect on his life and make changes.

In my life, I have noticed that there are many events where a boy is turned into a man. That event may be being left alone at home for the first time, going on a date, or getting your first job. But in my personal experience, I have had many events that made me think "I am a man". That is until I experienced my first family tragedy. Recently, I was taught

the hard way that nothing can test a man more than a death in the family. The day my aunt passed away was the toughest day of my life, and it was also the day it was time to stop being a child, and become an adult. Before that tragic event happened, I was merely a boy masquerading as an adult… After that day, I began to reflect. Reflecting on my decisions that I made as a boy, and how I should change them as man…The best way for me to do that is be myself… That was the day I was given the blueprint on how to be a man, and it's quite simple. In order to make the transition from being a child to an adult, you must be able to put your pride aside sometimes. (Khari's writing sample)

Khari very eloquently chose to write about losing someone very close to him, his grandmother. In writing this very poignant story, Khari like all of the students in the program allowed himself to be vulnerable and recount a very challenging and life altering time in his life when he lost his grandmother. In his narrative he also reflected on what manhood meant to him. Throughout his narrative he also engages in self-reflection about his life and how he treated other people.

For Joshua, his transition to manhood happened through a serious of events surrounding his academic performance and his response to those events.

The transition from my childhood to become a young man was very difficult. The one I really will remember was 7th grade year the real beginning of my middle school year. I went to the local school in my community with the boys that I grew up with. …The beginning of 7th grade year I was on a good start compared to my friends.
Christmas break was over and I was back to school and I was excited to show off my stuff I got for Christmas. After that I got lots of respect and started to get out of out of control. Skipping school with the local boys that I grew up with and getting suspended….My G.P.A went from a 3.4 to a 2.9 then 2.5 the fourth quarter was almost here and I was never doing work and still in trouble.
Fourth quarter was here and I was just doing a just a little to get by my grandma and mother was upset. So next year I couldn't go back to Allen academy. So I ended the school year with a 2.6 G.P.A, which was not my best but it was ok. I felt dumb for the choices I made 7th grade year. I really understood education was very important. I only hang with my friends during the summer but in the school year I couldn't. I knew it was for a good cause and it change me and set me in a path to become a better man. Cause males (in) my family didn't go to college.

Joshua ended his personal statement draft with a powerful statement "I knew it was for a good cause and it change me and set me in a path to become a better man. Cause males (in) my family didn't get to go to college." His entire statement is powerful because it demonstrates his

commitment to breaking a pattern in his family and becoming the first male to attend and

graduate from college. He realized that many people in his family did not have the opportunity to

attend college. However, his narrative powerfully demonstrates his commitment to breaking this

cycle and becoming not only one of the first men in his family to attend college, but one of the

first among all of his family members. His narrative also disrupts dominant narratives that

several GEAR-UP young men such as Carlos and Noah mentioned that fail to acknowledge the

academic aspirations and potential of African American youth. For every student we must

understand the barriers that they face in succeeding.

For Mario, learning of his parents divorce and the conversation that he had with his father

about it, signaled his transition from being a boy to a young man. Below is an excerpt from

Mario's personal narrative.

> …One day, on the way home from school I noticed a stoic look on my father's face.
> After parking the car he turned and looked at me…He drifted into a speech of his
> experiences becoming a man, having his transition into adulthood bestowed upon him by
> his father…Any bystander could have easily mistaken it for a sermon, due to his strong
> gestures and intensity when speaking. Almost as if he was preaching to me he
> commenced my evolution into manhood…I could almost feel the passing of the torch, the
> fire getting closer and closer to my face. Now so deep in his words I failed to notice I was
> looking down into my lap, the conversation was now too strong for eye contact.
> As I now looked up for the first time as a man, the first thing I noticed was the time. The
> car's clock now read 10:25, three hours since our initial stop. My father and I were now
> both tired, him from talking, and me from learning. He looked over at me one last time,
> looking right back at him I gave a simple nod to show that I understood. We walked up to
> the apartment, two men side by side.

Mario recounted a profound conversation with his father regarding the ways in which he

understood his life changing. He remembered his feelings, his and his father's detailed actions

and even the time. He utilized writing his personal statement as an opportunity to explore and

represent his feelings as he dealt with learning about his parent's divorce. However, the

conversation was not only significant because of this life-changing event, it was also significant because the event for Mario marked his "evolution into manhood".

The Possibilities of Safe Spaces Where Students are Perfectly Content

As with the GEAR-UP students' narratives about obstacles they had overcome, students' personal narratives focusing on a place or places where they were perfectly content revealed significant information about their lives and their experiences. In order to further illuminate the significance of GEAR-UP students writing about places where they felt content, I included excerpts from the narratives of three students: Lena, Etienne, and Marshall. I begin with an excerpt of Lena's personal narrative, which is included below.

> There are mirrors on the wall, balancing beams, and ballet bars in the most peaceful room in life. As I step on the soft mats feeling free and relieved, the music surrounds me; I close my eyes and feel the beat while others are dancing...My time has finally come… I love dance as a hobby and as a way to express my feelings, emotions, and words that are unexplainable. Sometimes I ask myself how can a person who had an ugly day come and create a work of art sometimes? Most times when a person who is having a chaotic day they are not calm enough to think through the on-going storm. But it amazes me how, like the blind folded artist who created a Mona Lisa, my creativity transcends the stormy clouds…Nobody knew I didn't have a vent to let out my steam, but dance became the vent. I also use to cry a lot because I felt like I didn't matter to the world. I felt like I didn't belong here which lead me to crying all the time. When dance came into my life I stop being angry because I had ways to express myself. I stopped crying because I found love with Dance and dance has showed me I am important to many others because of my gift. When I dance its like I leave the world for and enter a zone I feel the calmest and I'm at peace with world, not just the world but myself as well. (Lena's writing sample, July 2014).

Throughout Lena's writing she in different ways acknowledged how she felt about not quite being able to let her feelings out. Through her personal statement rough draft she did much more than describe a place that made her feel content as the prompt asked her to do. Lena was able to use personal statement writing as a means to talk about many of the challenges she was experiencing in her life. She described the dance studio as a place where she felt like she

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belonged and she mattered to the world. Dancing served as a means of validation and inner peace. It is important to reconnect to one of Lena's poems that she created during the college seminar: "Who Will Cry for the Little Girl?" In her poem Lena described many of the challenges that she was facing in her life that caused her sadness. In her poem she asked a very powerful question: "Who will cry for the little girl when she wants her voice to be heard?". In her personal statement she also expressed that people in her life were unaware that she had so many thoughts and feelings bottled up. Her personal statement was a medium through which her voice could be heard. Lena also discussed how dancing served as a vehicle to help her deal with her emotions and experiences.

 As Lena expressed, students not only utilized the prompt to talk about a place where they felt content, but also a place where they could be themselves. Etienne, a GEAR-UP student from Westgrove High School also chose to write in response to this same prompt.

> Haven't you ever just had that special place where you felt perfectly content? Where you wanted to just escape and find that one special place where you can just be like you and do what you want? Well, in fact, I have so many places/experiences that I would like to share with you because as you know I'm a shy person with hidden talent, that's just waiting to explode!!!! So get ready, pick up the paper because here I go!!!!
> A place where I'm perfectly content is at home. I feel this way at home because that is the main place where I can just be myself, relax, and excel the most. When I'm away from home, I worry about being judged or criticized. Also, this is a place where I get my inspiration and motivation to succeed and do well in life….
> Writing is another comfort zone for me. When I pick up the pen and pencil my creative and talented side magically appears. This is where I feel I can finally be in my place and be able to write however I feel inside and just go deep into my mind. Another reason writing is a comfort zone for me is because it's one of my favorite things to do when I'm bored. Whenever I write, I experience a different amount of emotions and my sensitive side immediately comes into play.

For Etienne, being able to write about a place where he felt perfectly content connected to his life experiences. Earlier in his dream narrative, he included a line referencing shyness, "I dream of a world where you can be free from shyness". He returned to his experience with being shy in his

personal statement, signaling how significant this was in his life. The places that he described as he noted, protected him from "being judged and criticized" and provided him with "inspiration and motivation". Etienne also shared that the act of writing was comforting since it allowed him to express his creative energy and release many of his feelings.

Michael was another student who utilized his writing time to describe a place that allowed him to showcase his creativity and talent. Below is an excerpt from Michael's personal narrative.

> Thump! Thump! Thump! That's the sound my heart makes when I'm getting ready to go on stage and entertain boatloads of people. So many questions are running through my head; "What if they don't like me?", "What if I forget my line or my cue?" Sweat drips from my face like water off the leaves of a tree after it rains. The director comes and introduces the play or production and then its time. I take a deep breath and go through the curtain. Lights and faces are all I see when I look out, but my nervousness disappears. I can focus on nothing but the audience and my lines….I spoke my first line and everything took off, I felt a tickle of satisfaction in my belly, all my pains and sorrows began to evaporate. That's when I realized I was genuinely happy and there was nothing that could make me feel more alive….I strive to eventually change the world with my craft, to make it a better place for hundreds of generations and everyone in it…It makes me proud to know that I can change someone's life and be someone's inspiration. That is what pushes me to keep going, knowing that there is someone out there that needs me.

During the course of the workshop one of the writing strategies that student leaders reinforced to students was to utilize vivid words and sentences to draw their readers in. Michael was quite successful in doing just that and drawing his reader in. He utilized his personal statement to tell an important story about his dreams of becoming a director. Michael also outlined that one of the reasons why theater was so significant in his life was because of his desire to be change agent. For Michal being a director would not only benefit him individually, but he also viewed it as a vehicle to positively impact the lives of other people.

Discussion

What began as a simple warm-up activity turned into an opportunity for students to creatively share their dreams for the future. This activity is particularly significant given the significance of dreaming. Consider the danger of preventing African American youth from dreaming and providing them with the tools to turn their dreams into realities. We must also consider what happens when we do not provide African American youth with the space and opportunity to even create their dreams. Students' dreams must be protected. It is important that we not take for granted the significance of dreams and the act of dreaming itself. Andrea, a GEAR-UP participant very honestly wrote: "I've learned to keep my dreams to myself though, cause there are people who get in your head. Dreaming isn't easy, but then again, nothing worth putting your time in is" (Journal Entry, June 2014). Through her poem, Andrea was able to honestly describe how she felt about sharing her dreams with other people. Similarly, Sean began his poem writing about many of his life's goals very confidently, but then at the end of the poem, his tone abruptly changed. In the last four lines of Sean's dream poem he wrote: "…Until I see it is not real, A paper faced with lead, I'm writing down all my thoughts, there only in my head." These last two lines signal that Sean doubted whether or not his dreams would actually come true and feared that they would only remain with him as dreams about his future.

Andrea and Sean remind us of the importance of spaces that honor and protect their dreams and provide them with the tools to see their dreams come true. In Ladson-Billings' (2009) pivotal book, "The Dream Keepers", she poignantly describes teachers who are dream keepers in the sense that they are committed to ensuring that African American youth are able to fulfill their academic dreams and aspirations. Through her book she primarily focuses on the role of teachers in protecting students' dreams. Like teachers, it is important that everyone in

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students' communities of possibility create spaces for them to dream, protect their dreams and provide them with the tools for their dreams to come true.

Personal Statement Writing & Community Cultural Wealth

The workshop was also significant because it helped to demystify the personal statement for college that students would need to write. It also provided them with the opportunity for reflect on their lived experiences that they wanted to share. As Jocelyn shared through her interview, it also provided them with the opportunity to let future admissions counselors know that they were more than just an application and more than the individual representations of who In order to obtain additional feedback from students about their participation in the personal statement writing workshop, I created and administered a brief survey about their participation. Sixty-six students completed surveys regarding their participation in the workshop and over 98% of the students reported benefitting from the workshop. Additionally, students were able to leave the workshop with a working draft of their personal statement. GEAR-UP was attempting to provide students with specific writing tools for creating meaningful personal statements for college. Throughout their participation in the workshop students also received individual attention from the student leaders and staff. In this way the workshop served as a third space that provided students with writing strategies and resources necessary for their future college applications. In the past, GEAR-UP would often begin working with students on their personal statements during their senior years when they were applying for college. We attempted to respond to students' needs and our knowledge of the impact of personal statements. While some students had not yet heard of the personal statement for college, others were aware of it but were unsure about how to construct it. In this way the students were provided with a form of navigational capital. More specifically, they were provided with the tools to create a document,

which in tandem with other factors played a significant role in their acceptance to college. The workshop helped them to maneuver through the college application process and also provided them with a skill useful for navigating their paths to college.

Furthermore, drafting their personal statements also allowed students the space to discuss important life events. For students such as Kiara and Etienne, they were able to talk about spaces where they felt embraced and safe. For Jocelyn and Keisha, they reflected on obstacles in their lives, which they were able to successfully overcome. For Mario, Joshua and Khari, the workshop offered them the space to talk about significant life events that marked their transitions into manhood. In analyzing their narratives I noticed a pattern between the students who wrote about transitions. Ten students chose to write about life transitions and of those ten, eight narratives were written by young men about their transitions in manhood. The prevalence of the young men in the program writing about becoming young men was very significant and demonstrated their need to engage in an activity that allowed them to explore and express their feelings. Scholars such as Kirkland (2013) remind us that the literacies of African American young men are often silenced and that we need to honor their voices and their experiences. While the young women in the program did not write about the same transitions, the same is true for them. Both African American young men and women deserve spaces where they are allowed to utilize literacy as one of many means to engage in authentic writing that is a means for self-exploration and representation.

Third Space

As is revealed in students' writing, the personal statement workshop allowed students to use drafting their personal statements for college as a means to write about significant lived experiences. In describing how the personal statement workshop served as a third space for the

GEAR-UP students I draw upon Gutierrez's conceptualization of third spaces as spaces where youth of color are able to explore their identities as youth of color. Through the workshop students were able to express themselves through writing as students who have lost loved ones yet learned how to work through their pain, who have experienced academic failures but were able to ultimately succeed, and who use words to creatively express their dreams of becoming doctors, musicians and college students. In this space students were able to draw upon and write about their realities. This space also affirmed who they were through allowing and encouraging them to write about their lives while they simultaneously acquired the necessary tools for completing their personal statements in preparation for their college applications.

CHAPTER 6: SELF & COMMUNITY EXPLORATION THROUGH ACTION

Growing & Empowering Minds Through Storytelling

In the final chapter which illuminates students' writing and experiences in the GEAR-UP program, I focus on The final GEAR-UP program included in my analysis, the Growing and Empowering Youth through Storytelling (GEMS) program took place from July to August of 2014. It originated as a pilot program with the GEAR-UP participants from Oakbridge High School. During my data collection I worked with the GEAR-UP staff to determine the scope of the program. We first decided that we would work with the Oakbridge GEAR-UP students since only a small number of Oakbridge students had the opportunity to participate in the summer camp at Jordan University. Historically, when GEAR-UP initiatives were held at Jordan University and took place outside of the school year, students from Oakbridge were not as visible as other students. In terms of distance, Oakbridge was the furthest away from Jordan University and parents often found it difficult to secure transportation to the campus. In order to minimize students' challenges with transportation, we hosted the GEMS program at Jordan University's satellite location, situated in close proximity and on the bus line to Oakbridge high school and many of the students' neighborhoods. GEAR-UP provided all students with bus passes for the duration of the program and staff transported students when they had challenges with transportation.

One of the GEAR-UP program coordinators, Diego Lawrence led the GEMS program. Diego had worked with the GEAR-UP program as a program coordinator for three years and had over ten years of experience developing and implementing curricula for mentoring programs for African American youth. Diego was supported by three of the AmeriCorps GEAR-UP Vistas who were placed to work specifically with Oakbridge High School and myself.

Each week was dedicated to four different themes including self-exploration, understanding the importance of school, understanding the importance of community and engaging in community change. One of the major goals of the program was to allow students the opportunity to develop community change proposals and to share their proposals during a culminating presentation at the end of the program to parents, GEAR-UP staff and school leaders. During our curriculum planning meetings we expressed our desire to develop a powerful name that students would feel good about. During one of our planning sessions, Diego commented on viewing the students as "gems" (Fieldnotes, April 2014) and as valuable. We discussed how similar to gems, students from Oakbridge were hidden and often overlooked when viewed through eyes that negatively judge their exterior. Through the program, we wanted to give Oakbridge students a platform to talk about their experiences in meaningful ways. More specifically, we wanted to help students transform the ways in which they viewed themselves, their school and their city. Consequently, we developed the acronym GEMS, which stands for Growing and Empowering Minds through Storytelling. GEMS ultimately became the name we used for not only the program, but also the GEAR-UP student participants. Below Diego described the purpose and vision of GEMS during our interview:

> …It ultimately turned into where we had a project for the Oakbridge students where we would teach them how to… to critically think but focusing on a story or a narrative where they would speak to, be a voice in their community and in being a voice for their community, they would learn these different skills that they would learn how to control critical thinking. They would learn how to practice peacemaking and things like that. To really take what they're passionate about and recognize it. So that they can, you know, show people outside of Oakbridge, this, this is not just a five minute drive through, down Wright. This is our community and this is where we live. And so they ultimately turned that into putting together proposals for either school projects or just community projects (Interview, January 2015).

Significance of GEMS in Oakbridge

In describing the impetus behind the GEMS program, it is essential to also discuss why working with the Oakbridge students and working in Oakbridge was significant. Oakbridge is an urban city that borders the largest urban city in the state, Dunbar. Over ninety-eight percent of Oakbridge's residents are African American. The city has a very rich and vibrant history. Unfortunately, Oakbridge students have watched as the city and its schools have struggled financially.

Over the past two decades, the school and the city experienced significant declines and population flight. In May of 2014, students learned their high school building was closing due to the lack of funds for maintaining the building and the declining number of students. The school was originally built in 1977 to accommodate over 2,000 high school students. At the time it operated with less than 200 students. During several of my conversations with teachers in the school, some of whom were alumni, I learned about the former grandeur of Oakbridge High School (Fieldnotes, May 2014). In its early days students at the school ran an automotive shop, hosted a radio station, had access to state of the art printing presses and an impressive Olympic sized pool. However, these details were only history to the current students since funding depleted years ago to maintain these assets. Consequently, the students would begin their tenth-grade year in the new building, which formerly functioned as one of two Oakbridge middle schools. Many of the Oakbridge students were disappointed at the move. This was particularly the case for some of the students who had attended the middle school and had to return to attend high school in the same building.

We understood how challenging this was going to be for many of the students and we also understood that it was a reality that we would all have to face. As a team we agreed that the

Oakbridge students needed to feel empowered and regain hope in themselves, their school and community. Consequently, we created the space in the curriculum for students to think of projects that we could work on together at the school. We believed in the power of their voices and hoped that if they had the chance to learn more about their communities and reengage utilizing some of the principles of Youth Participatory Action Research that they would feel differently. According to Irizarry (2009):

> Instead of being positioned as 'problems' to be fixed, young people engaged in YPAR serve as researcher identifying problems, collecting and analyzing data, and developing and delivering recommendations to address issues they identify as relevant and in need of transformation. (p. 196).

As Irizarry notes, Ypar work particularly with youth of color acknowledges the ways in which they are often characterized as problems instead of problem solvers. The GEMS program was our attempt at creating the space for this to occur and for the students to understand the power in their voices in instituting school and community change. We believed that students would experience a transformation of how they felt given the chance to tell their stories, identify assets and challenges in their school and community, and develop authentic ideas of how to strengthen their school and community. Through staff-created presentations about the history of their community and the research they conducted at the library about their city, students were positioned as researchers who had valuable contributions to make about their school and city.

Walking Through the Community

On the day that we set out to canvas the school to take note of its assets and things students would like to change, I was not prepared for how students responded. As we were preparing to leave the classroom, Nyla exclaimed: "this school is ghetto and I don't feel like doing this". Amara then echoed Nyla's comments and said "I'm not coming back here any way so I don't really care." (Fieldnotes, July 2014). Although I had heard students express similar

sentiments about their schools, I was still taken a back a bit given our beginning discussions about how they could potentially be a part of transforming the school in a positive way. Reluctantly, some of the students left the classroom in their groups canvassing the school.

When I went home and reflected on the day I reminded myself that the students had been through a tremendous amount of challenges. According to Paris and Winn (2014), approaches utilized in humanizing research are "those that involve the building of relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness raising for both researchers and participants" (p. xvi). The dialogic consciousness raising that Paris and Winn had to happen through my own personal reflections and thoughtful dialogue with the students. I do believe that I look the world through an ever-growing critical lens and I am from a community that is similar in many ways to theirs, however, I did not experience their community in the same way. I had not experienced being a student at their school. I had not been bombarded with messages that attacked me as a student at Oakbridge or a resident of Oakbridge. I had not been displaced from my high school only to return my middle school, which served as my new high school. Their feelings were just that, their feelings, which were important and worthy of being acknowledged and discussed, regardless of how difficult they were for us to hear. I had to stop and think that as difficult as their words were for us to hear, how difficult must it have been for the students to truly feel that way about their school and community. We were asking students to reconsider the ways in which they were thinking about their communities, but we needed to rethink the way that we understood their experiences and were in dialogue with them about how they made sense of their experiences. They had the right to feel angry and disconnected from what would be their new school. To some degree the students felt let down by the school and the school district and felt a bit hopeless.

In an effort to continue talking with them about their views about their school and community, we created an activity that provided them with the space to write down some of their thoughts. We asked students to walk around the room and place words that were used to describe students at Oakbridge, Oakbridge High School and the city on large, white post-it notes. We then posted another set of post-its next to the first ones and asked students to write how they would describe themselves as students at Oakbridge, Oakbridge high school and the city. The two sets of narratives were quite different. Words such as "dirty, raggedy, abandoned houses, unintelligent, and bad" were repeated. The words they used were "smart" were also present in some of the students' comments about the city of Oakbridge. In my interview with Brandon he brought up how participating in the GEMS program helped him to transform his thoughts about his community, which is discussed later in this chapter. In doing so we talked about his thoughts about why some of his peers also struggled with identifying as residents of Oakbridge and students at Oakbridge High School.

T: Okay. Can you talk about, so I noticed that a lot of students, and it's not just you, most of the students who were in the GEMS program at some point have felt like they did not want to claim Oakbridge, right? Or that being from Oakbridge or going to school in Oakbridge was a bad thing. Can you tell me more about that? Like what makes students feel that way?

B: The thing that makes students feel that way is cuz they stereotype us so much that it kind of pushes us to give up on Oakbridge

T: Okay

B: You know what I mean? And it's like, I was raised a couple other places, so I'm like I don't have to claim Oakbridge if I don't want to but I've been living in Oakbridge for a long time so I'm like, maybe I should. But the way other students feel that way is because the community looks like people gave up on it already, so why should we stick with Oakbridge if everybody else is giving up on it.

T: Say more about that. What, how does it look like people gave up on it?

B: Because it look like people just don't care, like they just throw their trash on the ground. They don't care about grass growing real high. They don't care about how houses look. They don't care about the parks.

T: Okay.

B: And that's how it look like people don't care so I'm like, why should I care?

Brandon's response illuminated several important points about the narratives about students from Oakbridge. In Brandon's opinion, students' internalized these negative feelings about the city as a result of stereotyping and the neglect of the city and its residents. As a result of the stereotypes and neglect he also felt that students in many ways had given up on the city. Brandon felt that people stopped caring about the city as was visible in the trash, high grass and the significant presence of decaying houses. In retrospect, during the interview I wish that I had asked Brandon if he thought that some of the residents who he mentioned might have also internalized what was happening to the city and essentially gave up. Feelings of being negatively judged because of where she lived and attended schools were also echoed in Amara's response.

> I think they like judge, cuz judging by how, how Oakbridge look, how people litter everywhere, I think they think Oakbridge is actually a bad city, nobody wanta live in there or whatever. The houses all raggedy but that's basically, like they're judging a book by its cover because it's a lot of people in Oakbridge that's actually better than what people see them as. (Amara's Interview, August 2015).

Both Amara and Brandon also touched on the fact that in many spaces in Oakbridge a significant level of neglect was apparent. In some instances, students had begun to internalize the negative messages they were constantly hearing about their community. It was especially difficult, given how they were able to identify their own challenges with their community, which made it difficult for them to identify with their school, community and city in a positive way.

> T: Okay. Part of the projects that you were doing was really doing research on your community and one of the things that we talked about was the perceptions that people have about Dunbar and Oakbridge. So what did you think about, you know, the opportunity to talk about maybe misperceptions about Oakbridge. So what do you think some misperceptions are and why do people have those misperceptions?
>
> N: Well, they say, oh, Oakbridge, they're dumb or like it's not really a lot of good people because on the news, all they show is the bad things that happen when they never really show the good things that happen.

In Nyla's response she shared that negative narratives that characterize people from Oakbridge as dumb. She also felt as if the media perpetuated these narratives by only focusing on stories that highlighted Oakbridge and its residents through negative lenses.

Reengaging With the Community

As an important part of the curriculum, we organized several walk-throughs through the community. We saw it as an opportunity for students to talk with us and show us their community and for us to also expose them to knowledge about their community they had not yet been exposed to. While students walked through their communities, we provided them with cameras to take pictures of people and places that stood out to them. The inspiration for participating in the community walk-throughs utilizing photography came from our knowledge of Photovoice (Wang, Yi, Tao and Caravano, 1998) and from Kinloch's (2010) work with students living and learning in Harlem. Photovoice originated as method of participatory research in public health. While not specifically named as a Photovoice project, in her research, Kinloch helped students to utilize photography and literacy to capture their feelings regarding the impact of gentrification on their communities. Similarly, during the GEAR-UP students' walkthroughs, they took pictures of buildings, each other and also things that sparked what would later change into their community change proposals and presentations. Students spent their time over several sessions doing research for and creating their proposals. They utilized the computers and space in the new Oakbridge High School library, the Dunbar public library and the Jordan University satellite location.

As Nyla, Omar and Amara walked through their communities they wanted to walk to their former high school building. As they walked to the large field in the back of the building, they noticed a large abandoned garden. As they were taking pictures of the garden, Amara asked

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a simple question: "Why isn't anybody using this garden?" (Fieldnotes, July 2014). Her question

catalyzed her group's interest in developing a plan for reviving the garden for Oakbridge

residents. They created the group name GROW which stood for Growing Resources on Wilson.

Wilson was the name of the street that served as the major thoroughfare through the city

connecting it to Dunbar and to several surrounding suburbs.

> We are a group of 7th and 10th graders in Oakbridge. The reason we started this group is to help the homeless and those with low-incomes to get fresh fruits and vegetables. We choose to focus on this set of people because they are often forgotten. We recognize that it is important to use the resources we already have, and that is why we choose to use the garden behind the Oakbridge Renaissance Academy building (GROW Students' Writing Sample).

Through their proposal, students expressed their thoughts on how to maintain a gem in their

community, by revitalizing the garden in the back of their old high school. What began as a trek

to satisfy their curiosity of what was happening in the field behind their school turned into a site

of possibility for their community change projects. Some of the action steps they proposed

during their presentation include: recruit volunteers to help grow and maintain an organic

community garden, distribute food to Oakbridge residents who are in need, bi-weekly fundraisers

in which we raise money for the community and cook for those in need- Grow N' Eat. They

believed that in doing so they could help to provide fresh food to Oakbridge residents in need.

The second group each discussed individual issues they had been thinking about for a

long time. Lena felt very unsafe about many of the bus stop locations in Oakbridge. She retold a

story of her younger sister taking the bus in a location where older men were banging on the

window and staring at her from inside a nearby building (Fieldnotes, July 2014). The rest of the

group also connected with Lena's passion for advocating for a better bus system. Her peers also

shared their experiences of feeling uncomfortable waiting at bus stops that were located in front

of abandoned buildings or riding on buses that had not been maintained. On our community

walks she took her group past two bus locations near abandoned buildings. In addition to the bus stop locations, they were also concerned about the timeliness and cleanliness of the buses. They worked together and created the Safe Zone student group whose focus was a safer and more reliable bus system.

> We are a group of 10th grade students, who are a part of the Gear-Up program. The Gear-Up program is an undergraduate program that helps prepare students for college. During one of our sessions we found some issues within the bus system. Such as, bus times, location of bus stops, maintenance issues, and they're not in clean condition. We would like to change the bus system because we know to build up our community because transportation is an important factor to our community… We came up with the safe zone organization because we feel that the Oakbridge community should have safe and reliable transportation. The organizers of this group along with many people we know use public transportation and we do not feel safe or satisfied. As young residents of the community we deserve at the very least a safe zone to catch the bus to places like home and school. We feel that if we can make this change than we can start working on the big picture (Safe Zone Students' Writing Sample).

As the Safe Zone students noted in the excerpt from their proposal, they were concerned with "building up their community". They understood that their issues with the bus system were not specific to them, but to everyone who utilized the bus system and all residents of Oakbridge. The Safe Zone students also used the word "deserve" signaling their understanding that having safe and reliable transportation was a right of the citizens of Oakbridge, including young people such as themselves. During their presentation they expressed some of the following solutions: put stops by busy areas like restaurants, police station etc., get the buses cleaned daily, do fundraisers to raise money for new buses, cleaning supplies, new drivers, etc., talk with the current governor on a new proposal for an improved bus system.

The third group was composed of students who had great ideas about several issues impacting their school and community. Kim was particularly interested in creating additional academic-focused groups at Oakbridge to help students who were struggling in school. Carlos was concerned about violence in school and the community and wanted to create a campaign to

bring increased awareness to these issues. Below is an excerpt from their community change proposal detailing their focus on the issues previously mentioned:

> We are a group of sophomores concerned about our community and the people that not only live in it but the people who visit as well. Our rising involvement started in the GEAR UP Program where we talked about being leaders in our community. Our community is a historical landmark and for the past three years has not acted as such. So we decided to create a group called Y.P.I.C, which stands for Young People Involved in the Community to address some of the problems in the community. We have outlined four specific issues that include: homelessness, violence, the trash in the community, and teens who are struggling in high school (YPIC Students' Writing Sample).

The students of YPIC as they discussed in their proposal began to view themselves as leaders who could contribute to the improvement of their community. They drew upon their individual ideas for community change and developed YPIC as a means for addressing issues they deemed pertinent in their school and community. The integration of the line "Our community is a historical landmark" also demonstrates how they began to respect and take ownership over the future of their community after learning about its rich history. Instead of selecting one major focal area, they decided that homelessness, violence, trash in the communities and supporting teens academically were all pertinent to address.

During their presentations YPIC presented some of the following solutions: after school program, credit recovery and tutoring, counseling, violence prevention poster campaign, clean vacant lots, and place more trash bins on sidewalks. In thinking of the school resources, they were particularly interested in preventing students from "dropping out" and supporting those who had already "dropped out". According to YPIC's vision of the learning center, Oakbridge students would be able to recover the credits needed to complete high school. Students would also have access to counseling to understand "why they want to drop out/did drop out" (YPIC PowerPoint presentation, July 2014). While none of the GEMS students had expressed thoughts

of exiting school, through their presentation they illuminated their concern for their peers for whom school was not welcoming.

Transformation of Students' Thoughts on Community

Throughout students' interviews and their participation in the program, it was clear that the ways in which they thought about themselves in relation to being students at Oakbridge High School and residents in Oakbridge was shifting. As is reflected in Amara's comments below during our interview, students started to see their community and their roles in their community very differently.

> T: Do you think that young people, especially young people in Oakbridge get the opportunity to do those things that you did in the GEMS program this summer?
> A: Other people?
> T: Uh huh. Like most students
> A: No
> T: Do you think they have experience to do that? Why do you think it could potentially be beneficial for not just you but for other students who don't have the opportunity to participate?
> A: Because they can see what they don't see.
> T: Okay
> A: Yeah, so like you see that it's bad but then you don't see that it could be better. So if you in this program, they help you see what you don't see

Amara's words, "See what you don't see" were quite powerful. Cahill, Rios-Moore and Threatts (2008) engaged in a PAR project through which they examined the social constructions of their identities as women living in a Lower East Side neighborhood of New York. They described their experiences with participatory action research "as a process of "opening" our own eyes and seeing the world through "different eyes," coupled with a desire to open others' eyes" (p. 90). I interpreted Amara's words about GEAR-UP helping students to "see what they don't see" to mean two things: GEAR-UP exposed students to experiences that they possibly lacked access to and GEAR-UP also helped them to view things they already knew or were familiar with through a different lens. Amara's sentiments about participating in GEAR-UP were

also echoed in Brandon's interview. During the interviews I asked students to talk about how, if

at all participating in GEMS impacted them. In the excerpt below, Brandon described how his

thinking about his community changed:

> T: How did you feel about having the oppor… so we walked around the community and really, your project was to come up, to see yourselves as an agent of change? To see yourself as an asset and to come up with these ideas. What was that experience like and why did you think about the things that you thought about?
>
> B: When we had to walk around the community and look at things we can change and stuff like that, ***I remember we took pictures and it actually made the role of the leader bigger than what I thought it was*** because I thought a leader was that you just set an example but leaders actually do stuff for their community and try to help other people out, things like that. So when we was taking pictures, I seen a lot of things that I've seen before but it kinda became more serious, like the playground. It was like, the playground attracts more kids which becomes more students at one school and if the playground is messed up, what kids would wanta go to it so I was thinking about things like that so that kinda helped my thought process when it came to that
>
> B: … Once I learned about how Oakbridge used to be, it made me want to claim Oakbridge more as in say I'm from there because when I was learning about it, I didn't know Oakbridge was as cool as it was. And it made me think like, wow, I used to be like saying I'm not from here because I thought it was a horrible place but come to find out, it was one of the best places to be in Michigan so it made me respect Oakbridge more (Brandon's Interview, August 2014)

Brandon was honest about the ways in which his thinking and identity related to being a

student at Oakbridge shifted. His earlier comments revealed his reluctance to openly let people

know that he attended Oakbridge High School. However, after learning about the history of

Oakbridge and viewing his school and city from a different lens, his thoughts shifted. He began

to also respect his city as he mentioned in the interview.

> L: I learned a lot. I mean, just some stuff that I never, like it's just some stuff I never knew and it just like, the GEMS program, it showed me that the, this thing with the power through storytelling, yeah, like it just like you can say a lot by telling a story so that like encouraged me to write more stuff because like a lot can be said beginning with a pencil and a paper (Lena's Interview, August 2014).

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For Lena, the stories that she learned about Oakbridge and Dunbar and the story that she was able to tell with her peers reinforced the significance of storytelling. She experienced how powerful telling stories about her life could be.

Students' Action in Oakbridge

Ultimately, the students also decided that they would like to engage in transforming and preparing the new high school. Collectively the students painted the school sign on the outside of the building, pulled weeds from the garden, raked and layed mulch at the front entrance. Below Brandon and Amara reflected on their experience of helping to beautify the new Oakbridge High School building:

> B: At first, I was feeling like maybe I should do this but I'm not going to Oakbridge so I'm not gonna be able to enjoy this nice paint. But I was like I'm gonna do it for my friends and the fact that I'm from Oakbridge and I went to Oakbridge High School and I want them to look nice because I still **represent** them so I did it. And it was irritating because the paint was kind of chipping off and I'm like, oh, no, and I couldn't reach the top on my tippy toes so it was kinda…
>
> T: But you did it. I mean, the two of you, you are a part of why the sign is painted. You know, and you learned about cleaning up paint and wringing out, you know, wringing out the paint
>
> B: Yeah, YPIC (Brandon's Interview, September 2015).
>
> T: …How did it feel to be able to help do things to prepare the school that you were gonna be transitioning to?
>
> A: It was pretty good because we got to paint the sign outside and plant flowers. It was pretty good to see our hard work pay off (Amara's Interview, September 2015)

In his response, Brandon indicated that in the beginning of the project he grappled with helping to improve the new Oakbridge school building. However, he began to connect more with the school and community even though he was transitioning to a new school. His connection to his friends and that fact that he would still represent Oakbridge made him feel good about taking

part in beautifying the school. For Amara, being able to see the outcome of their hard work resonated with her and made her feel like she was a part of something meaningful.

Community Cultural Wealth

As a part of the community walk-throughs, students had the opportunity to talk with three local business owners in the area. In developing the curriculum, the GEAR UP team thought that it would be a great opportunity for the students to meet and talk with members of their community who were engaging in positive efforts. Among these community members were William and Serena, two of the student leaders discussed in chapter three. GEAR-UP students also had the opportunity to meet and talk with David Grey and the Morrison family who were local entrepreneurs in Dunbar. David was a local entrepreneur who opened a very successful barbershop about five miles from Oakbridge High School. The Morrison family, a mother and daughter team were the owners and operators of one of the few Black-owned bookstores not only in Oakbridge and in Dunbar, but also in the entire state. Each of the people that students were able to talk with left an impression on them in different ways. When we stopped by they were excited to talk with students about their lives and why and how they opened their bookstore. Below Amara recounted her experience with the Morrison family:

> T: What was it like going to the bookstore and talking to those women who owned the bookstore?
> A: They, well, for, for women, I think, it was better for it because they encouraged us to really like use our environment and one of the ladies, she said she went to Spelman
> T: Yeah
> A: That's where I wanta go so she really encouraged me to like go there
> T: So that resonated with you. For you, do you think it's important for you to see black women, so women who look like us in our community who own their own businesses and who go to college and are successful? What is that like for you to be exposed to people who, you know, are doing different things?
> A: It's more of a push. It's like more of a strive to get there.

For Amara, talking with the Morrison family helped her to envision herself as a student at Spelman College. Seeing their success as business owners in her community and as college graduates provided models of what was possible in her life and provided her with an extra "push" for working toward her academic goals.

Tapping Into Community Assets

Meeting and talking with David, the owner of a local barbershop also positively impacted students. During our interviews students mentioned that meeting him and hearing his story served as encouragement and reminded them of what is possible in their lives. In the excerpts below, Nyla and Brandon and Che discussed how his eco-friendly barbershop provided an example of how even a business such as a barbershop could be environmentally friendly. Their thoughts were in response to my question regarding how they felt about meeting David and learning more about his experience and the barbershop.

> N: The barbershop, it was good to know the things they were doing, like how did he, how he built like the bookshelves and his barbershop, like from the houses that were like burned down and things like that and how he, like how he sent the hair to like different places where they use it when they're planting stuff (Nyla's interview, September 2014).

> B: Oh, okay. I start off with David's barbershop. When you first walk in, it looks normal at first but when you look at the walls, it like bookshelves and when David was talking to us, before he talked about how he opened the barbershop, he was telling us that the inside was made from blighted houses, like the bookshelves and things like that. So he said it was just a positive way, like something positive to do with the abandoned houses and things like that. So I thought that was, I thought, I didn't know what to think about that cuz I've never seen a barbershop like that so I was kinda shocked about that…so I thought that he wasn't just cutting hair, he was doing stuff for the environment. So that was pretty cool to me (Brandon's Interview, August 2014).

> C: That was interesting, too, because it was a whole bunch more to his story about being a barbershop and he talked about hair can be… I forgot what he said. Hair can plant
> T: absorb the nitrogen

C: Uh huh, yeah. I didn't know that. I went home, I told, I told my mother and my sister. They was shocked, too. My mother didn't even know that. (Che's Interview, August 2014).

Many of the students were in awe of how he was able to operate a successful business like a barbershop and also save the environment. As students shared in their responses, David composted hair from his barbershop and donated it to local green initiatives that utilized the hair. David also provided an example of a business owner who was helping to eliminate blight in the city by repurposing some of the old wood from abandoned houses. Additionally, the GEMS students walked away feeling encouraged with messages about perseverance and moving forward in the face of obstacles. David also shared his story with them and let them know that his business plan had been denied three times before it was accepted, but he did not give up. Below are excerpts from Lena and Nyla's journal reflections about learning to never give up specifically from their interactions with David.

David is a black business owner who owns a barbershop. He had his business plan denied 3 times before he got approved. I learned from him that anything is possible; stay determined and never give up. To me just those 3 things alone can create a successful business (Lena's Journal Entry, August 2014).

When we went to David's barbershop I learned a lot. There are a lot of things I didn't know like you can submit a business plan. He inspired me to always(s) try and never give up. He spoke about how his plan was declined 3 times and it got approved the 4th time. Also how he made a miracle with the scrapes he was given… (Nyla's Journal Entry, August 2014).

So I thought that was, I thought, I didn't know what to think about that cuz I've never seen a barbershop like that so I was kinda shocked about that. When I was taking notes, he was telling us how, how we have to work hard at what we want to do and how many times he was turned down… So I was thinking like if I get turned down two times, I'm gonna quit but he actually got it his third time so I was thinking like, he actually stuck in there and wanted to do what he wanted to do… (Brandon's Interview, August 2015).

Meeting the Morrison family and David Grey helped students to think about the possibilities of success, owning a business and transforming a good idea into a successful

business. It also reinforced that they have the capacity and ability to think of solutions to meeting needs in their communities and that it is possible to be successful with the support of other people in the community.

Discussion

The GEMS program was another third space within the GEAR-UP program. Participating in the program also helped students to identify and better understand the people, places in their community that were valuable or functioned as sources of community cultural wealth. In her study of youth activism, Ellis-Williams (2007) explored the ways in which African American elementary and college students understood the possibilities of engaging in activism. She posits "when schools provide information and role models, students are more likely to take risks and want to improve their surroundings" (p. 123). While schools are important spaces that can and should connect students to role models, beyond school spaces are as well. In any space that students occupy where they have access to members of their community who are activists in different ways, they are more likely to connect with and get excited about engaging in community change themselves. We saw this firsthand with many of the students who participated in the GEMS initiatives.

Utilizing Writing to Engage in Community Change

In Kinloch's (2010) work with African American youth who were reading, writing and talking about their experiences as Harlem underwent gentrification, she posited that for Khaleeq, a focal student in the study, "…writing became not only an activity that he performed at school; it became an activity that allowed him to express difficult ideas and emotions in and about the community" (p. 47). Similarly, for many of the students, writing transformed into an activity that allowed them to work through their complicated feelings about their school and community as

well as articulate their visions for school and community change and their role in it. In his work with urban youth of color, Duncan-Andrade (2007), asserts that engaging in participatory action research, "is powerful because it exemplifies the types of complex and critical literacy skills made possible by giving students access to a postcolonial pedagogy-an 'empowering education'"(p. 35). Through students' proposals they sought to discuss issues in their school, neighborhood and community that deserved attention including access to fresh and affordable vegetables, safe and effective public transportation, violence in the community and access to supportive academic resources. These issues not only directly impacted them but also impacted their peers and others in their respective communities. In this way, the opportunity to write about their ideas for engaging in community change connect with the third tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy which speaks to the importance of allowing African American youth to critique social injustice.

We can understand and validate students' experiences, help them to understand the histories of their communities and to think about how they want their communities to change. It is important to reinforce to students how valuable their communities presently are despite the stereotypes and what they see and experience every day. Students need to be provided with the opportunities to see themselves as leaders. Seeing themselves as leaders can help them to transform the ways in which they engage with, and for, their communities.

Walking through their communities and also talking about its history and how students saw themselves as agents of change dramatically impacted how they saw themselves. Students started to see their ideas and writing as meaningful and powerful. Amara's comment about GEAR-UP and how "GEAR-UP helps you see what you don't see." Students were not seeing things in their community for the first time, but they were seeing them through a new lens. This new lens was not primarily coated with negative messages about their community and what their

community was lacking. These messages were still there, but now the lens contained messages about what their community used to be, its current value and the possibilities for growth and their role in it. GEAR-UP helped to facilitate them seeing their community through a new, more affirming lens.

By engaging in Ypar work and discussing and researching issues that impact their lives, African American youth also have the opportunity to develop critical reading and writing skills that are very much connected to the third tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy and help students critique and challenge the status quo. Additionally, the centering of the stories and lived experiences of youth who engage in Ypar also embodies CRT's focus on counternarratives. Ypar seeks to foster critical consciousness among youth which is intended to help them explore the ways in which systems of oppression such as racism operate and negatively impact their schools and communities. Ypar is an example of the type of progress and transformation that can occur at the hands of youth who are powerful sources of knowledge. All youth deserve opportunities for empowerment, for validation, to experience academic success and to envision and help transform their schools and communities. Ypar is reflective of such an opportunity that has the potential to help students actualize such a transformation.

School Implications

While this particular project was constructed by the GEAR-UP staff in concert with the GEMS students, it is important to note that teachers and other educational practitioners both in and beyond school can and should lead and engage in Ypar work with African American youth. However, educators must take into account the type of curricular changes that need to occur to counter traditional curricula that does not provide the space for Ypar work to occur. In designing a curriculum that meets the needs of youth of color, it is important to consider a curriculum that

centralizes instead of marginalizes their voices. According to Sleeter (1996), multicultural curricula should serve as a means to critique and question the way that society functions and include and affirm the voices of students, particularly the voices of African American students, who have been and continue to be marginalized (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 1996). In the context of this particular program, it is essential that the voices of the youth in the program are not only heard, but also affirmed and used to guide the curriculum. Sleeter further asserts that traditional curricula do not encourage students to question or challenge the status quo. By enacting a multicultural curriculum which connects to the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers are not only encouraged to discuss the history and traditions of historically marginalized groups, but are also encouraged to help students question and critically examine systems of power that contribute to their marginalization.

Unlike the banking model of teaching and learning, which according to Freire (1970), positions teachers as the only valuable sources of knowledge in the classroom, in GEMS students' knowledge and expertise was incorporated into the curriculum. According to the banking model, students are unable to participate in any other actions besides "receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" or uncontested information that the teacher provides (p. 72). When students are subjected to this model of teaching, as many students are, they are less likely to develop the type of critical consciousness that would give them the tools to transform their worlds. Freire also argues that if we as educators truly value liberation, we have a responsibility to challenge the heavy reliance on the banking model of teaching and learning. Instead, we must rely on methods that allow us to see students as knowledgeable and capable of instituting positive change.

Additionally, it is important that we embrace students with sustained opportunities to engage in work that centers their voices, helps them to challenge the status quo and also connects to the first tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy and ensures that students experience academic success. As Irizarry (2011) notes in his work with youth engaging in Ypar work, while students were able to develop a critical consciousness and speak out about how they were marginalized in schools, their overall schooling experiences were largely absent of spaces that engaged them in such work and provided necessary academic support.

Based on students' experiences and what they created, the GEMS program served as a third space. According to Gutierrez (2008), two important features of third spaces are that they are transformative spaces where the expansion and acquisition of knowledge occur. Through their reengagement with their school and community, students were able to transform their views about and connection to their schools and community. Literacy in the form of their community change proposals was a vehicle through which this transformation was demonstrated. Counternarratives about African American Youth from Oakbridge stand in stark contrast to the negative narratives that many students in the study mentioned. Through their writing and their participation in GEAR-UP, students established their own counternarrative: Their voices are powerful and beautiful and they have meaningful contributions to make to their schools and communities as African American youth.

As we walked through a community arts project during GEMS, one of the groups of students stumbled upon what appeared to be a television. It was an oversized frame of a television and the screen was empty. The students talked with each other for a few minutes and then decided to put themselves in the television screen and take a picture for fun. As I returned to their picture in my records, I thought more deeply about the significance of that particular

picture. It seems that the artist left the screen open to give those who entered an opportunity to tell their own story. We need to remind African American Youth that they have important stories to tell. In doing so, we also need to provide them with the tools to tell their stories. As they tell and broadcast their stories across classroom and beyond school waves, we need to tune in. Tuning in not only consists of listening, but of responding, and connecting students to important resources both in and outside of their communities.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION: RETURNING TO THE COMMUNITY OF POSSIBILITY

Discussion

I embarked on this journey intending to accomplish three major goals: to illuminate the significance of beyond school spaces such as GEAR-UP in the lives of African American Youth, to provide a platform for the voices of African American youth who are often marginalized, and to explore the significance of literacy in the lives of African American youth. Through my dissertation it is my hope that I have done justice to the stories of the African American Youth who are the focus of the study. They are stories of students like Amara who have dreams of being the first in their family to attend college or students like Carlos who want to defy the statistics that say students who look like them, speak like them, write like them and live in their communities will not succeed. GEAR-UP provided the space for students to develop counternarratives about what was possible in their lives. It also provided them with the space to utilize writing as a means to represent their realities.

While GEAR-UP connected them to valuable forms of social capital, navigational capital, aspirational capital, cultural capital and resistant capital, they did not enter the program void of their own capital. As students' narratives revealed in their narratives, their families supported them in ways that must be accounted for, but too often are not. Their parents in multiple ways embraced them with familial, navigational and aspirational capital, serving as tools to help them make it to college. GEAR-UP student leaders served as role models who demonstrated that it is indeed possible for African American youth from urban cities such as Dunbar and Oakbridge to succeed in college. Community members and business owners served as a valuable form of community cultural wealth. Students' parents, the GEAR-UP staff, the

GEAR-UP program, community members all functioned as a network forming a community of possibility for the GEAR-UP students.

Additionally, I began my discussion in the first chapter by operationalizing and critically discussing the terms academic success. In my discussion I acknowledged the importance in not only understanding what academic success is, but also in understanding the factors that both positively and negatively impact African American students' academic success. The narratives of many of the GEAR-UP students who are a significant part of this story speak to GEAR-UP's influence on their beliefs in their ability to succeed academically. Students such as Lena illuminate the significance of connecting with African American college students. Meeting many of the student leaders, particularly those that were also from Oakbridge, transformed her disbelief in the possibility of attending to college, to belief in her ability to attend college. Participating in GEAR-UP for students such as Noah served to disrupt negative portrayals of African Americans. For many of the GEAR-UP students in the study, GEAR-UP either strengthened or helped shape their identities as academically successful, college bound African American youth.

GEAR-UP functioned as a culturally relevant third space that understood the importance of spaces that intentionally identify African American youth as capable of achieving academic success and also provide them with resources that contribute to their academic success. GEAR-UP was a space, which acknowledged that college was a possibility in their lives and helped to transform their identities as future college students. Additionally, students were embraced in spaces where they engaged with writing produced by African American authors, which served as catalysts for their own cathartic writing. Unfortunately, these spaces were rare occurrences for some of the GEAR-UP students. As is demonstrated in students' poetry in chapter four, these

texts sparked their creativity and allowed them to write about their lived experiences in ways that some of them had not been able to. GEAR-UP also helped students to develop identities as African American youth who were leaders in the their community. Students' participation in GEMS also helped them to reconnect with their communities reminding them of their significance.

In writing about the significance of programs such as GEAR-UP in the lives of African American youth, I was reminded by and compelled to acknowledge the sociocultural significance of the Black Lives Matter movement in relation to the study and the students in the study. This movement began by three African American women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opel Tometi. After the tragic death of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen year old, unarmed African American young man, the three activists created the Black Lives Matter hashtag to illuminate the historical and contemporary social disregard for Black lives and to also disrupt this disregard. Several years later its power still resonates given the countless societal examples of how Black Lives Do No Matter. The students in the study are living in a time and space where they are witnessing the ways in which society devalues Black lives in many ways. Therefore, this study is meant to disrupt this narrative, calling out for spaces in and beyond school that demonstrate that Black youth do matter. Not only do Black Lives Matter, but Black Minds Matter, Black Literacies Matter and Black Students' Academic Success Matters. Additionally, the current social context provides evidence suggesting that programs such as GEAR-UP alone are not the answer to the challenges that society faces in truly educating and embracing African American youth. Indeed more spaces such as GEAR-UP are needed to ensure that as many African American youth as possible can succeed, however, these programs still exist within a

society plagued by racism, classism, sexism and many other ills that impact the education system.

Implications

The stories and pieces of GEAR-UP students' lives shared through writing speak very loudly about the need for increased opportunities for students to engage in similar forms of writing in school. For the GEAR-UP students whose futures are indeed bright but have not been provided with the reading and writing tools to access some of the information they are exposed to in and beyond school, additional support is needed. As I wrote this section I was thinking specifically of students in the College Seminar at Oakbridge. They were students who had dreams and goals for the future, yet were fully aware they were missing fundamental skills that would make it extremely difficult if not impossible to achieve these dreams and goals without support. Indeed, it is essential that GEAR-UP programs not only commit to increasing students' knowledge about college and help them to understand that college is a possibility, but it is also essential that GEAR-UP helps to identify students' specific academic needs. While the team at Jordan University's GEAR-UP are most certainly committed to identifying and responding to the holistic needs of students, much more needs to be done.

The findings from the study also have implications for teachers and teacher education. Reveal a stark gap between the number of teachers of color and the number of students of color. The Center for American Progress (2011) in an analysis of teacher diversity, found that students of color represent over 40% of school-aged students while teachers of color represent approximately 17% of teachers. In the most recent analysis of the composition of the teaching force based on race through the National Center for Education Statistics, Tourkin et al. (2010) found that approximately 83.5% of teachers are White while Black teachers account for 6.7% of

the teaching force. These statistics indicate the significant need of both more educators of color and the need for teachers, regardless of their race, who are trained to adequately meet the needs of African American youth. Scholars such as Milner (2010) and Villegas and Lucas (2002) continue to remind us of the skills and dispositions that are required of teachers in order to effectively teach all students. Since teacher education programs also have a role in preparing teachers, it is essential that teacher preparation program are able to prepare teachers who understand, value and are well-equipped to design and teach lessons that are culturally relevant and culturally sustaining. Additionally, teachers must be able to provide students with the literacy tools necessary for academic success. This would mean providing a platform in the classroom for students such as Carlos to discuss and write about the significance of negative narratives that describe African American youth through dismal "statistises". It would also mean that they understand the significance of exposing students to a wide array of literary genres and authors inclusive of historical and contemporary writers of color. Furthermore, it would also mean that they create classroom conditions that do not reinforce or support dominant narratives that restrict the success of African American youth, but instead help them to form counternarratives as GEAR-UP did, of all that is possible in their lives.

Limitations

In an effort to increase my understanding of the significance of the GEAR-UP pre-college program in the lives of African American youth and their experiences as program participants, I employed a case-study design. Utilizing the case-study design was most appropriate for this study given the focus on obtaining data about the GEAR-UP program, program staff and student participants that is qualitative in nature. One of the limitations of this particular study is that the findings will not be generalizable to all pre-college programs or

programs that are specifically focused on providing academic and social support for African American youth in middle and high school. While a case study design was appropriate for this study, it is important to note that the data collected was subjective in nature and specific to the individual study participants and may not be generalizable to staff and student participants in similar programs. While similarities often exist across programs that are similar to GEAR-UP in mission and operation as is discussed in the literature review, programs can also vary according to the profiles and capacities of the staff, program location, student population served and program resources. These variations related to similar programs can limit the generalizations that can be made across programs.

A second limitation of the study is the amount of time that was spent during data collection. While I was intentional in selecting a study time frame that coincided with GEAR-UP's most significant programs in an attempt to collect data that was representative of the program, staff and student participants, the time frame could have limited the collection of additional data that can be useful to the study.

A third limitation of the study is that while the data produced from this study may likely speak to the ways in which GEAR-UP influences students' beliefs about their academic success, the data is not able to yield quantitative information regarding how the program influences students' academic achievement. As several researchers have noted, the ability to quantitatively speak to how programs impact academic achievement is one of the factors that funders often consider when providing financial support to sustain programs such as GEAR-UP. While I agree that such quantitative data is useful, we must consider the benefits and limitations of quantitative and qualitative data. While quantitative data that speaks to students' academic progress and achievement is essential, it is also essential to ensure that constructs such as academic

achievement and success are operationalized in ways that take into account the lived experiences of African American youth. By not doing so, future studies are at risk of perpetuating deficit narratives about the achievement and success of African American youth. Additionally, gains in academic achievement are not the only indicators of whether or not a program is a useful resource. The information that was gleaned from students' writing is but one example. Through their multiple literacies, students in the study were able to represent who they were and their stories. Such data is challenging to measure quantitatively, yet crucial to school and beyond school educators who are committed to creating spaces that take into account their lived experiences as African American youth.

Future Directions

It is indeed my hope that both the act of engaging in this particular study as well as the findings from this study will have implications on many levels. On the individual programmatic level of Jordan University's GEAR-UP program, this research study is the second of two research studies. Findings from the study and their impact on GEAR-UP student success and program success can spark the program's efforts to continue engaging in research. Moving forward, additional research that not only speaks to the structures of the program and how it operates and students' experiences, but also parents' experiences, and the experiences of the staff of the participating GEAR-UP schools can serve as feedback loops which help the program to sustain what works and strengthen areas that need improvement.

Additionally, given the need for increased research that focuses on these and other elements of pre-college programs and similar programs that work with African American youth, this research can encourage GEAR-UP to also engage in research to inform local and national communities of the significant work that is taking place. This is particularly significant since we

are often inundated with messages about what is not working in education for African American youth. While I agree that we must understand and acknowledge the problems impacting our youth before we can begin to effectively develop and implement solutions, we must refocus the energy we expend on the problems to focus on the efforts that are both established within the communities of African American youth and outside of their communities. Understanding the best practices of similar programs can not only provide support for other pre-college programs that are committed to strengthening their efforts to support African American youth, but can also influence what happens in students' classrooms. This presents an opportunity for GEAR-UP and other pre-college programs to strengthen their school partnerships and learn from and integrate some of the best practices of partnering teachers. Ultimately, I hope data from the study contribute to the strengthening of communities of possibility both in and beyond school, ensuring that African American youth thrive in every way possible.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Demographic Information of Gear-Up Students Interviewed

CV- Campus Visitation   CS- College Seminar
SI- Summer Institute   GEMS- Growing & Empowering Minds Through Storytelling

Name	School	Gender	Program Participation
Amara	Oakbridge	Female	CV, CS, SI, GEMS
Brandon	Oakbridge	Male	CV, CS, SI, GEMS
Brian	Oakbridge	Male	CV, CS
Brittany	Westgrove University High	Female	CV, SI
Che	Oakbridge	Female	CV, CS, GEMS
Fatima	Westgrove University High	Female	CV, SI
Glenn	Oakbridge	Male	CV, CS
Keisha	Westgrove University High	Female	CV, SI
Jeremiah	Oakbridge	Male	CV, CS
Jocelyn	Westgrove University High	Female	CV, SI
Lena	Oakbridge	Female	CV, CS, SI, GEMS
Mark	Westgrove University High	Male	CV, SI
Najee	Oakbridge	Male	CV, CS, SI, GEMS
Noah	Oakbridge	Male	CV, CS
Nyla	Oakbridge	Female	CV, CS, GEMS
Omar	East Academy	Male	GEMS

Table 2: Race & Ethnicity of Gear-Up Students As Reported by Jordan University Gear-Up

Race & Ethnicity	Number of GEAR-UP Students
American Indian or Alaska Native	1
Asian	13
Black or African American	765
Hispanic or Latino	26
White	70
Two or More Races	1
Race/and or Ethnicity Unknown	56
Total	932

Table 3: Gender of Gear-Up Students As Reported by Jordan University Gear-Up

Gender	Number of GEAR-UP Students
Female	425
Male	472
Total	895

Table 4: Gear-Up School Eligibility According to Free & Reduced Lunch Status

School	Percentage of Students Who Qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch
Baker	65%
Oakbridge	73%
Westgrove High	51%
Westgrove Central	54%
Westgrove Preparatory Academy	43%
Westgrove Collegiate Academy	63%

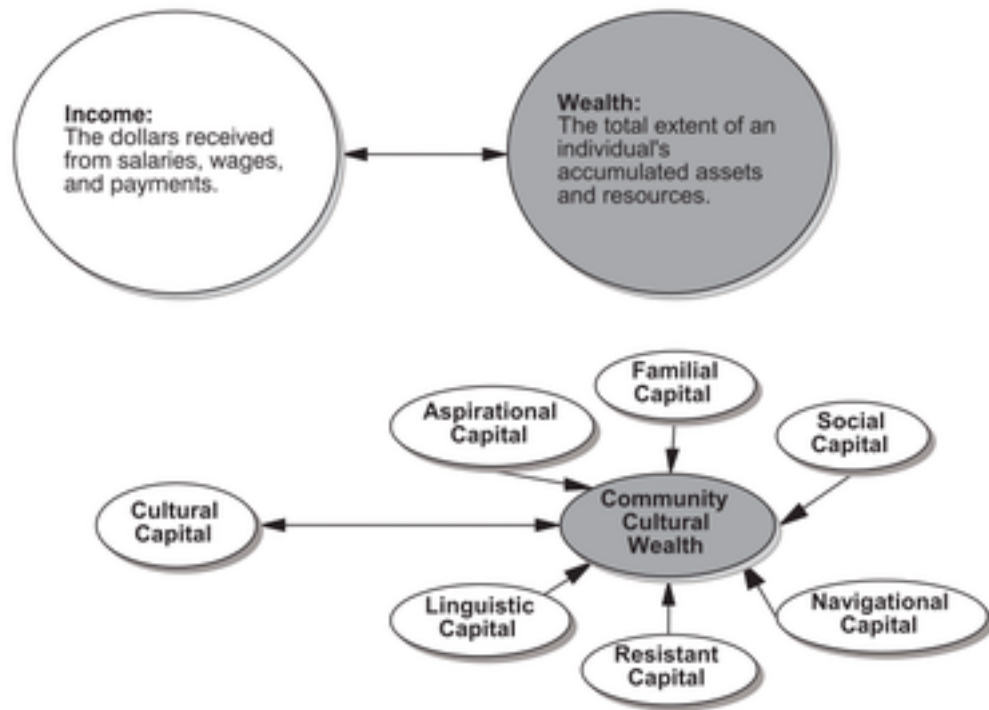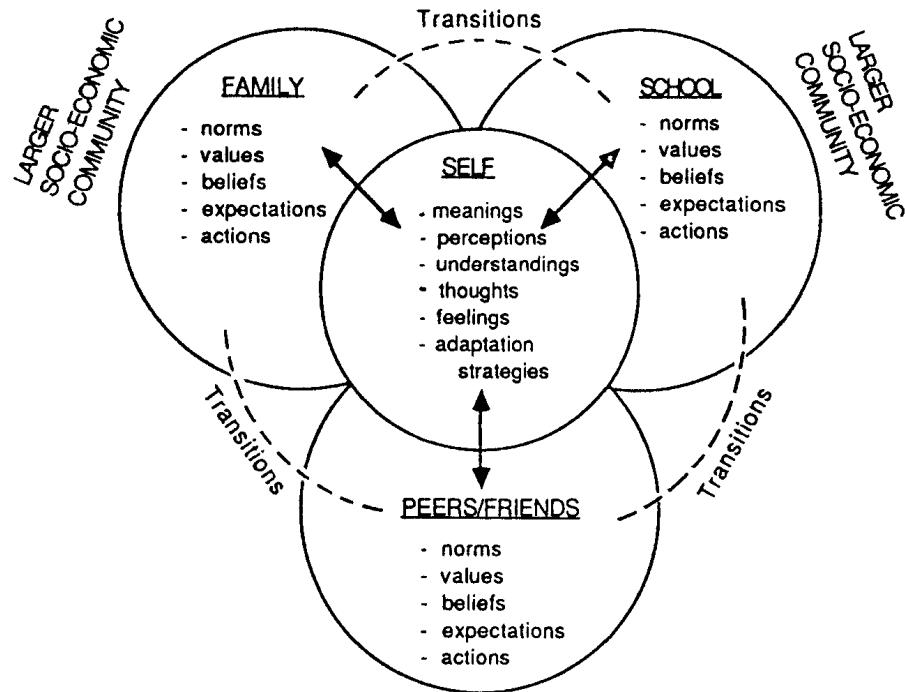**Figure 1: Yosso's (2009) Model of Community Cultural Wealth**

Figure 2: Phelan, Davidson and Cao's (1991) Model of Multiple Worlds Typology

A model of the Interrelationships Between Students' Family, Peer, and School Worlds.

Figure 3: Adaptations to Phelan, Davidson and Cao's Model of Multiple Worlds Typology

FAMILY

Norms
Values
Beliefs
Expectations
Actions

LARGER

SOCIETY

SCHOOL

Norms
Values
Beliefs
Expectations
Actions

SELF
Meanings
Perceptions
Understandings
Thoughts
Feelings
Adaptation
Strategies

PEERS/FRIENDS

Norms
Values
Beliefs
Expectations
Actions

BEYOND SCHOOL SPACES

Norms
Values
Beliefs
Expectations
Actions
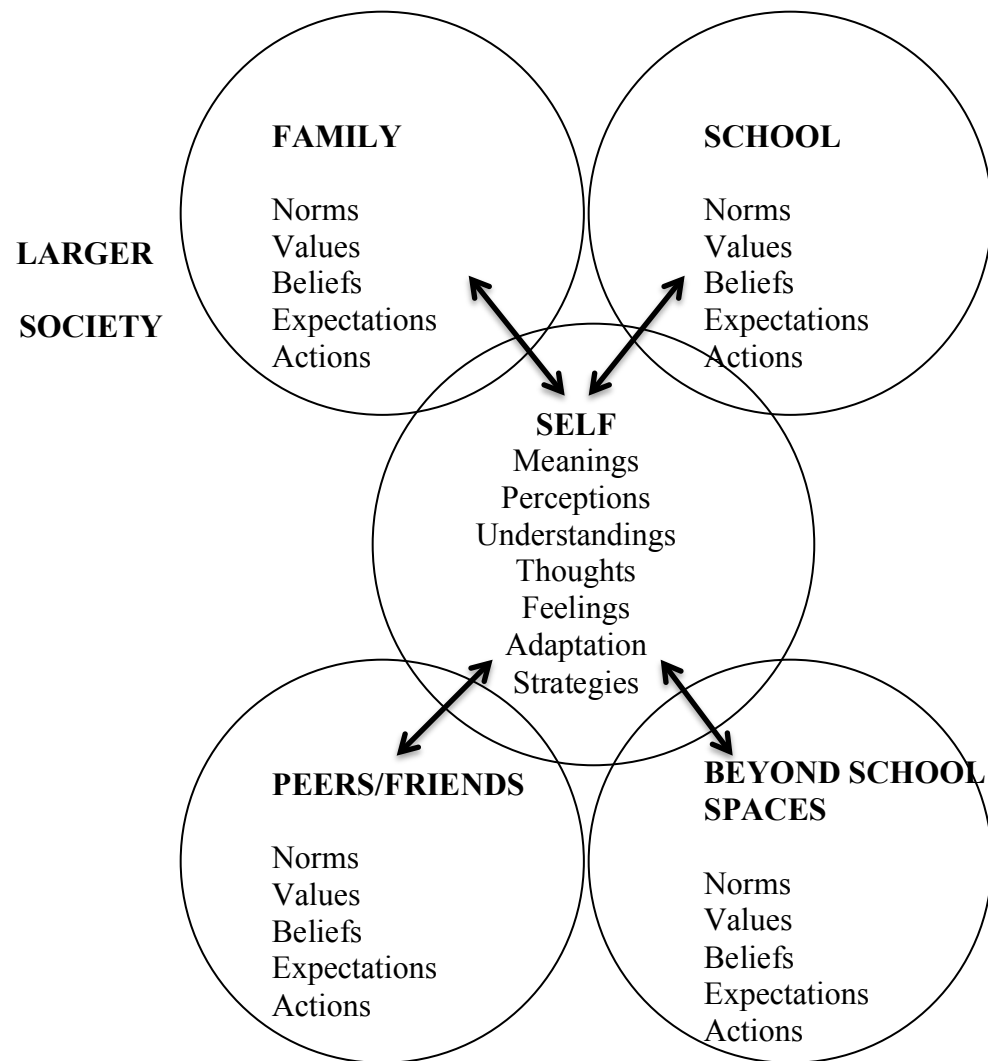
*Adapted model includes an additional world labeled "BEYOND SCHOOL SPACES

APPENDIX C: GEAR-UP STUDENT PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about what it was like to participate in the College Seminar, The Summer Institute and GEMS programs?

2. Was there anything that you liked best about the programs? If yes, what was it?

3. Was there anything that you liked least about the programs? If not, why not?

4. Do you believe that you benefitted from participating in any of the programs? If so, in what ways did you benefit? If not, what makes you feel this way?

Questions Related to Complete Program Participation

5. What are some of the components of programming that you have participated in that you feel have been the most beneficial to your development?

6. Do you believe that participating in the program has influenced/will influence your academic performance?

7. Do you believe that participating in the program has influenced/will influence you in other areas of life outside of school?

8. In what ways if at all have your experiences at GEAR-UP influenced your experiences in school?

9. How if at all has participating in GEAR-UP influenced your aspirations to attend college?

10. How if at all has participating in GEAR-UP influenced what you know about college?

11. How if at all has participating in GEAR-UP influenced your preparation for college?

12. Are there any similarities in your experiences in the GEAR-UP program and school?

13. Are there any differences in your experiences in the GEAR-UP program and school?

14. What can you do?

APPENDIX D: GEAR-UP STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Can you tell me about your role in the GEAR-UP Program?

2. What excites you the most about what you do?

3. Can you walk me through some of the programs you have created this past year? What were your goals and what were the outcomes?

4. Do you believe that GEAR-UP is a beneficial resource in the lives of students/parents? If yes, can you tell me why you think it is a beneficial resource.

5. Do you believe that your GEAR-UP program is culturally relevant in the sense that it acknowledges students' culture in a positive way? If yes, can you provide me with examples?

6. In what ways do you believe that GEAR-UP is a successful program?

7. Do you believe that the GEAR-UP program positively impacts students' identities as African American youth? If yes, how so.

8. Do you believe that GEAR-UP is successful in helping students to successfully navigate school and the college preparation process?

9. In what ways, if any, would you like to see GEAR-UP grow even stronger?

10. What do you think are the most important needs of many of the GEAR-UP students/parents?

11. What are some of the challenges you face when developing and implementing programs?

12. What does being a part of the GEAR-UP team mean to you?

APPENDIX E: GEAR-UP STUDENT EVALUATIONS

GEAR-UP Summer Institute Student Evaluation

1. Please discuss how you feel you have benefited from participating in the GEAR-UP Summer Program.

2. Please list at least three words that describe the student leaders. Also, what was your experience like with the student leaders and GEAR-UP Staff?

3. Did participating in the summer program increase your desire to attend college?
Circle how you feel.   Yes   No

4. Do you feel like participating in the GEAR-UP program will help you in school? If yes, explain how it will help you.

5. Do you feel like participating in the GEAR-UP program will help you at home? If yes, explain how it will help you.

6. What did you enjoy the most about participating in the GEAR-UP Summer Program?

7. What did you enjoy the least about participating in the GEAR-UP Summer Program?

8. Please complete the following sentence. GEAR-UP is…

9. Tell us what support you would like from GEAR-UP to provide for you in the future?

GEAR-UP Personal Narrative Workshop: Student Evaluation

1. What did you enjoy the most about the personal narrative workshop?

2. What did you enjoy the least about the personal narrative workshop?

3. Name at least two things that you learned from the personal narrative workshop.

4. Did you learn new writing skills or strategies? Please circle how you feel.
Yes   No   If yes, what did you learn?

5. Do you feel better prepared to write your personal statement for college? Please circle how you feel.

    Yes   No

APPENDIX F: STUDENT INFORMATION FORM

Dear GEAR-UP Student,

My name is Theda Gibbs and I a graduate student at Michigan State University. I am doing a research study about pre-college programs like GEAR-UP and I am asking you to participate so that I can learn more about how pre-college programs are helpful to students.

If you agree to be in my study, I am going to observe some of your GEAR-UP classes and workshops. I will also ask you at a later date to participate in an interview about your experiences in the GEAR-UP program. The interviews will be audio-recorded, but your name and any other identifying information will not be associated with the audio-recorded interviews. Your participation is voluntary, you may choose not to participate at all, or you may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or discontinue your participation at any time without consequence (e.g. will not affect treatment you will receive, will not affect your grade or evaluation, etc.).

You can ask questions about this study at any time. If you feel uncomfortable with me observing your classes or participating in the interview, you can talk to me, your teacher or a GEAR-UP staff member and I will stop my observation and not conduct the follow up interview.

I have also included a permission slip for you to share with your parent/guardian for more information and for your signatures if you agree to participate. If you don't want to be in the study, you don't have to sign the permission slip. Being in the study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't sign the permission slip if you change your mind later.

_____   _____   _____
Student's Printed Name   Student's Signature   Date

_____
Student's Contact Phone Number

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name of Person Conducting Study   Signature of Person Conducting Study   Date

APPENDIX G: PERMISSION SLIP FOR PARENTS & STUDENTS

Dear GEAR-UP Parent & Student,

Thank you for your time. My name is Theda Gibbs and I am graduate student at Michigan State University. I am doing a research study about pre-college programs like GEAR-UP and I am asking you to participate so that I can learn more about how pre-college programs are helpful to students. As a part of the study, I would like to observe the workshops that your student participates in and also at a later date, interview your student about their participation in GEAR-UP. By agreeing to your child's participation, you will assist me in understanding the role that pre-college programs serve in students' lives.

You may choose not to allow your child to participate at all or discontinue participation at any time. All results of this research will be treated with strict confidence. I will audio-record the student interviews, but your child's name or other identifying features will not be used in any analysis or in any reporting of this research. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

Participating in this study poses minimal to no risk to you or your child. Your child's participation is voluntary, they may choose not to participate at all, or they may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or discontinue your participation at any time without consequence (e.g. will not affect treatment they will receive, will not affect their grade or evaluation, etc.).The only potential discomfort is that typically experienced by children when being observed. In the event that my observations or the interviews pose any discomfort to your child or disrupts the class/workshop, I will discontinue my observation.

If you have any questions about your child's role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu, or regular mail at: 207 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

I indicate my consent to allow my child to participate by signing below:

_____   _____   _____
Student's Printed Name   Student's Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____
Parent/Guardian's Printed Name   Parent/Guardian's Signature   Date

_____
Parent/Guardian's Contact Phone Number

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name of Person Conducting Study   Signature of Person Conducting Study   Date

APPENDIX H: INFORMATION & CONSENT FORM FOR PROGRAM COORDINATORS

Dear GEAR-UP Program Coordinator,

Thank you for your time. My name is Theda Gibbs and I am a graduate student at Michigan State University. I am conducting a research study that explores the role of pre-college programs in the lives of student participants and I would like to interview you about your experience as a program coordinator. By participating, you will assist me in understanding how programs like GEAR-UP are helpful for students.

The interview should take no more than 45 minutes of your time. The interviews will be audio-recorded and will be stored on a secured computer that is only accessible by me. Participation is completely voluntary. Your participation is voluntary, you may choose not to participate at all, or you may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or discontinue your participation at any time without consequence (e.g. will not affect your will job, etc). All results of this research will be treated with strict confidence. Your name or other identifying features will not be used in any analysis or in any reporting of this research. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous. I will be the only person that will have access to the interview and observation data. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Participating in this study poses minimal to no risk to you. The only potential discomfort is that typically experienced by some persons when being asked to respond to interview questions. If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues or to report an injury please contact the responsible project investigator. If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu, or regular mail at: 207 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

I indicate my voluntary consent to participate in an interview by signing below:

_____   _____   _____
Program Coordinator's Printed Name   Program Coordinator's Signature   Date

_____
Program Coordinator's Contact Phone Number

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name of Person Conducting Study   Signature of Person Conducting Study Date

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