EMPHASIZING RELATIONS IN AN ACCOUNTABILITY DRIVEN ERA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF A CARING-CENTERED AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM FOR BLACK AND LATINA/O STUDENTS

BY

SHAMEEM RAKHA

DISSEPTION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Policy Studies in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Yoon Pak, Chair
Professor James Anderson
Professor Reed Larson
Professor Emeritus Robert Stake
Abstract

This research examines an after school program situated within a small urban school district with a documented history of discrimination against students of color. I aim to reveal the complexities of Project [em]POWER, ¹ the learning opportunities provided to its participants, and the experiences of the students themselves. I conducted this research of Project [em]POWER due to my interest in the goals of the program that include both academic excellence and providing high-quality enrichment opportunities primarily to students who have been historically marginalized within the public school environment.

By employing qualitative research methods, I engaged in a semester-long observation of Project [em]POWER, conducted both semi-structured and naturalistic interviews with students and program staff, and observed students within their classrooms. I used these qualitative methods in order to answer the question, “What are the qualities of experiences, interactions, and learning opportunities provided by Project [em]POWER and how do the students take advantage of them?” Critical data analysis reveals that Project [em]POWER offers many opportunities for its participants, but that they did not come in the form that was initially expected. Opportunity came in the form of student engagement. The program provided a caring, responsive relational environment that allowed students to engage in learning; providing a space where students had a sense of belonging due to an embracing of the students’ race; and by providing engaged learning activities. In the chapters that follow, I explore the nature of the opportunities provided to the program participants. I also provide a historical and social context of Project [em]POWER. I discuss the nature of the relations found within the program, and provide a model for understanding the way in which responsive relations were operationalized in this setting. I also

¹ Project [em]POWER is a pseudonym for the program I researched. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this research in order to obfuscate and protect the location of the program, the program itself, and all observed participants.
discuss the sense of community provided by the program, and the teaching and learning I observed. I conclude with my findings, which suggest that creating caring-centered, culturally conscious programs for students of color increases student engagement and therefore, access to opportunities to learn.
Dedicated to my beloved mother and father, Beverly and Mohammed Rakha
Acknowledgements

This research project, and my journey as an “untraditional” graduate student, would not have been possible without the support and genuine caring of my many advisors, mentors, friends, and family members. Though there were times in this process that I wondered why I was taking on this challenge at this stage in my life, looking back, I see what a privilege it has been to be given time to reflect on my life’s work and endeavor to make the changes needed to improve the schooling experiences of future students. I would like to offer my utmost gratitude to my dissertation advisor, Dr. Yoon Pak, for shepherding me through this process with amazing levels of patience. Her mentorship, wisdom, and guidance have been invaluable. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert Stake, for traveling this road with me and for sharing his many years of sagacity as a researcher, evaluator, teacher, mentor, and author. I wish to thank my other committee members Dr. James Anderson and Dr. Reed Larson for their support throughout this endeavor. The leading work of these two men served as a guidepost for my efforts and a goal to strive for in my life’s work.

I am grateful for the guidance and support of my colleagues and many faculty members in the Educational Policy Studies Department and College of Education. Their kindness, guidance, and encouragement have sustained me throughout my years as a graduate student. Dr. Erin Castro, for showing me the ropes, offering me practical advice, and encouraging me to enjoy the process. Dr. Terence Fitzgerald, for forwarding my thinking on issues of race and for walking me through how to complete this dissertation in a timely manner. Dr. Laurence Parker, for inspiring me to leave my beloved profession as a teacher in a public school, to “join the academy” and teach future teachers how to critically reflect on their practice. His course on critical race theory, and ability to quote any number of articles, chapter and verse, changed the
course of my life. Dr. William Trent, Dr. Christopher Span, Dean Clarence Shelley, and Dr. Terry Denny, for serving as my mentors and coaches. Their unfailing reassurance served as inspiration and tranquility when I felt as though I were in the middle of a storm. Dr. Deborah Gillman, my ever-present writing partner, whose wisdom, patience, writing prowess, massages, Sunday morning breakfasts, and guidance nourished me. And I am grateful for the support of future Doctors Ms. Brenda Sanya, Ms. Priya Goel, Mr. Ivory Berry, Ms. April Warren-Grice, Mr. Tony Kwame Laing, and Ms. Jasmine Parker for their friendship, inspiration, critique, and passion for learning.

I could not have done this work without having had the experience of being a teacher for most of my career. I am thankful for all of the students whom I have had the pleasure to teach throughout the years and who have thrived, despite my many errors. It is for these students, and future students similar to them, that I have done this work. I thank the wonderful teachers and principals I have had the honor to work with who taught me many invaluable lessons about teaching and learning. Ms. Jane Marriott, my dear friend and mentor, for teaching me to imagine a two-way mirror in my classroom, never knowing who was on the other side. Ms. Becky McCabe, for her amazing guidance and insight as a principal and teacher evaluator. Ms. Bridget Maloney, whose life-path inspired me to never stop learning. Ms. Carolyn Atkinson, for showing me what passion looks like in the classroom. Dr. Carol Stack, for trusting my judgment with my students, even when I wanted to teach in an unconventional way. Ms. Angela Smith, for allowing me to thrive in a school environment where without innovative and critical administrators, such as herself, I would have withered. Ms. Jan Feeney, without whom my sentences would be poorly punctuated, and quotes, poorly formed. And Ms. Eileen Suffern,
without whose support, editorial prowess, endless workouts, and unwavering friendship, I would not have survived this process.

I would like to express my admiration for Ms. Sally Carter. Without her passion, vision, and tenacity, the subject of my study would not have existed. Her commitment to the children of Pradera has been an inspiration to many, including myself. I am also very grateful to the many remarkable students of Project [em]POWER, for participating in my study, and for generously allowing me into their lives and for sharing with me their perceptions about the program, life, and schooling.

Finally, I would like to convey my deepest gratitude to my family. I could not have made it through this project without the support, understanding, encouragement, and love of my partner, Mr. Darren McCroom. His patience in times of my deepest of despair, was my lifeline. My father, Mr. Mohammed Rakha, served as a constant source of emotional and financial support for me. I could not have gone through this program without his motivation and belief in me. My sister, Ms. Naseem Rakha, inspired me through her own journey to learn, change, and grow. She guided me through my first efforts to write, and shared with me her amazing wisdom as a woman, mother, and author. My brother, Mr. Amir Rakha, reminded me that there was still life and cooking to be done, when this process was over. My godchildren, Khayri, Ina, and Asilah Patterson, whose experiences in life and in their schooling not only inspired my work, but my life. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my dearly departed mother, Mrs. Beverly Rakha, for her love, patience, and belief in me. It was as a result of she and my father’s courage to marry at a time when it was unpopular for people of different races to do so, that I was able to step, if just momentarily, into the world and lives of the students in this study. I wish she were here to read this.
# Table of Contents

Introduction to the Research .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1 The Achievement Gap: Providing National and Local Context to This Study ................................................................. 21

Chapter 2 Project [em]POWER and Review of the Literature on After School Programs ................................................................. 49

Chapter 3 Theory and Methods ............................................................................................................... 75

Chapter 4 Student-Teacher Relations .................................................................................................. 102

Chapter 5 Opportunity and Its Relation to Belonging ........................................................................ 138

Chapter 6 Opportunities in the Form of Teaching and Learning .............................................................................. 171

Chapter 7 Discussion of Findings ......................................................................................................... 201

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................. 222

References .............................................................................................................................................. 243

Appendix A Assent Form ......................................................................................................................... 259

Appendix B Consent Form ....................................................................................................................... 261

Appendix C Interview Questions ........................................................................................................... 263
**Introduction to the Research**

I begin this introduction to this research by providing a story that is poignant to the nature of this study. Through this narrative, I hope to provide a powerful contextualization for the work that is to follow.

**Journal Notes, November 5, 2012: The Day Miss Martin Died**

10:45am, Monday, November 5, 2012, “Shameem, call me, it’s an emergency.” The voice on my phone message is that of Miss Sunita Jones, director of Project [em]POWER (POWER), the after school program that is the subject of my study. This program was created in 2010 with the goal of providing high quality tutoring and academic and life enrichment opportunities to low- and middle-income students in the small urban community of Pradera. She sounds panicked. I return her call immediately. “Shameem, Miss Martin is dead.”

Miss Martin taught one of POWER’s most requested enrichment strands—duct tape art. Through teaching how to make wallets, notebooks, and even jewelry from inexpensive, accessible duct tape, Miss Martin taught a number of implicit and explicit skills to the primarily Black and Latino(a) middle and high school students in this after school program, such as how to carefully work with razor blades, work with others, ask questions when unclear what to do, measure accurately, plan ahead, think creatively to solve practical problems, be patient, and be persistent, even when frustrated. As she sat with students, patiently teaching them how to, “measure twice, cut once,” she talked to them about school, life, and learning. She both encouraged and scolded them for their choices. Before her retirement, Miss Martin had taught English for 25 years at a local middle school where she was one of only a few Black teachers in a school with a population of approximately 40% students of color.
That Monday afternoon, I went to the high school where I had been a “participant observer” of POWER for the past semester. As the scholars (as they are called) filed into the white-walled computer lab, smiles and hugs were plentiful. “Shameem, what are you doing here?” “Where is your purple computer? Won’t you be taking notes?” I fought back the tears that were just below the surface. I knew I was there for another reason.

In addition to the 12 high school students, 15 students (all of which were students of color) from the middle school program were sitting around a large white table, also unaware of the tidal wave that was about to hit them. The middle school students were brought to the high school to receive the news of their teacher’s death so that they, too, could receive the support of the district social worker and psychologists that were present. Also milling around the room, receiving warm hugs from the scholars, was the entire after school program staff. Additionally, standing along walls were the school district’s director of student services, the school social worker, and two school psychologists. The school district staff stood in stark contrast to the scholars and program staff in their familiarity with the scholars, by their race, and in the friendly way in which the scholars and program staff were greeting one another.

The director of student services, a tall Black man dressed in a three-piece suit, got the students’ attention. “Students, some things happen that are out of our control. As much as we may want things to be different, and wish that they were, they are not. I have some terrible news for you. Miss Martin is dead.” Immediately, loud sobs filled the room. Cries and murmurs of, “Oh my God!” and “What happened?” echoed around the now empty feeling space. Three middle school students began sobbing, their bodies slumped onto the Formica table. The high school students stood, stock-still, looking confused. The adults quickly shuffled to the sobbing

---

2 As a participant observer, I spent time with the students, helping with assignments, and being involved with their activities.
students, offering warm hugs. My tears flowed freely now, as they did for most everyone in the room with the exception of the school staff and the high school scholars.

Miss Jones moved to where she could see each of the scholars’ faces and spoke, “We were not alone. We are a family, and Miss Martin was one of our family. I want to tell you something . . . When I asked Miss Martin to come work with you after her retirement, she told me she had nothing to teach you. But you know what she did?” Miss Jones looked around the room as she paused, “She decided that there were lots of things she could teach you by teaching you to make art with duct tape. She didn’t know how to make stuff with duct tape! She learned that skill just so she could spend time with you all, and teach you about stuff that would help you be successful in school and life.” The few students who were looking at Miss Jones as she spoke threw her looks of confusion. “What I am saying is that she took time from her retirement to learn something new just for you. That should make you feel special. She understood what you go through every day at school.” The realization of what had happened hit the high school students in a tidal wave. They too began to cry and held on to each other like life preservers. For a good 10 minutes, the only movement in the room was that of people hugging each other as some students stood, heads hanging low, or looking around in shock.

The school social worker, one of just three White people in the room, broke into the quiet. “This is hard, kids, I know. For some people, it helps to talk about how they are feeling, or to write about it. Maybe we can make a group?” The lack of movement in the room suggested this was an intrusion into the scholars’ private moment. There were glares from several of the high school scholars aimed her way. The students did not want to group. Instead, they broke apart. Several left the room, walking slowly, wearily. A few stormed out. The social worker looked around anxiously. “Where are they going?” she said to no one in particular. “They can’t
leave like this.” Her voice was not panicked, but rather, surprisingly calm given her apparent fears. The program staff fanned out, somehow knowing the students were not leaving the building, just leaving the heaviness of the room. Some of the students went to the nearby bathroom to cry, some to the now barren hallways, and a few stayed, as if glued to their seats.

In the hallway I found Fatima standing alone outside the meeting room door, tears slowly trickling down her face. Through her tears she said in a measured tone, “I didn’t really even know her. Why does this hurt so much? I didn’t realize how much her coming to our program each week meant to me.” I smiled a small smile. “I didn’t know she learned how to work with that silly duct tape just so she could spend time talking with us. Who does that? Who does that for kids like us?”

“We do, Fatima.” I replied. She followed wearily as I walked back into the room.

Those that had stayed in the room after the initial exodus slowly migrated into a loose knit grouping of program adults and students. The sobbing slowed, replaced by sniffles and sparse words. I sat down with the group as Jessica was overheard saying forlornly to those around her, “I want to go home.” I looked anxiously around, worried that the social worker would tell her she could not leave. Knowing Jessica from last spring, I worried of the explosive outcome if this were to happen.

“You can go if you need to,” I hear Miss Audrey, the program coordinator, say with gentleness in her voice. She approached Jessica, pulling a chair beside her.

The school social worker tried again to get the students to engage their feelings. “Does anyone want to talk about what they are feeling?” She said in a straightforward, but kind voice as she walked up to the non-cohesive group. Silence.
After seeing no one was offering to speak, Miss Audrey looked-up and said quietly, “I feel . . . well, I feel like I lost a family member.” Miss Audrey’s voice was halting. A few students in the group looked at her. “I just feel so sad, and confused.” Her words were simple, almost as if she was attempting to make her feelings accessible to the young people around her.

“Are you surprised at how deeply you are feeling this loss?” The social worker asked. There was a long pause. Miss Audrey’s tears flowed once again, “Maybe. I don’t know. What I know is that I feel very, very sad.” Her words came out in bits and spurts.

The social worker jumped in, “How you are all feeling is very normal and understandable. This kind of pain is expected when you lose someone, even if they are not your family.”

Over the course of that hour I watched as these resilient youth sprung back into their own as if they had traveled this lonely road before. The scholars slowly trickled in from their hiding spots to make Miss Martin cards. The high school scholars gathered at a long white table, at first silently, drawing, some writing, with the adults spattered among them. Little by little, the sniffling and silence turned to storytelling and laughter. Miss Audrey came over to the table. “I love that you are making Miss Martin cards. You are a profoundly caring group of people. I am so honored to know you.” She smiled.

“I don’t know what to write.” Dre said to me as I sat across from her. She was stuck at “I.” I smiled at this usually hard-faced young woman and told her about the day one of the teachers I had worked with for years and who had been my mentor, had a heart attack in class and died. “I didn’t know what to do, what to feel, how to teach, so I just drew. I drew, and my students drew, for two days. Then finally, I wrote.” We shared a faint smile.
With their permission, I read the students’ cards to Miss Martin. Sonfra wrote how much she learned about patience. Houston, about having been “WHOOPED” by her when he was causing trouble in class and not trying his hardest, and how much he appreciated it. He wrote that he would think of her when he was being “stupid.” By the time the program was winding down at 6:00, the social worker was sitting silently with the students, listening to their stories, watching as they added duct tape to their cards for Miss Martin.³

Miss Martin’s Death as a Way of Understanding This Study

In thinking about a way to begin my dissertation, I was stuck, unsure of how to put into words what I had participated in the past several years,⁴ and had studied for the past year. But along came November fifth. When I left the high school on that fateful day, I had no intention to write about what had happened, let alone to include it in my dissertation, but by the time I arrived home, I determined that I had no choice but to try put down in words the experience of the day. In writing, I realized that what I witnessed and experienced that day encapsulated the themes I discovered as I observed POWER and its participants throughout the previous spring semester.

Caring opens the door for teaching and learning to occur. To say I was nervous when I was heading into the high school on November 5th is an understatement. I did not know what I was supposed to do, or how I would react, let alone what emotions might be summoned in the

---
³ I shared this vignette with two of the adults present on this day to get their reactions to it and ask if I had represented the events accurately. One shared with me the fact that by the end of the day, after I had left, the Social Worker was sitting with the students, listening to them. Apparently, she learned quickly that her “by the book approach” was not going to be effective with this group, and by the end of the day, was chatting with them at their worktables. The next day, Miss Audrey reports, six of the students went to her office to talk. Miss Jones was concerned when she saw this vignette and thought there might be others that better represent the program and what was accomplished. We met to discuss this, but decided in the end that this was the best example to represent the major findings of my themes that I had actually witnessed.
⁴ I began my work with POWER in spring of 2010 while I served as a graduate assistant for a program through our library sciences program at my university.
students by this horrific news. But when I saw the scholars’ faces, and felt a few of their hugs as they entered their afterschool space, my mind eased. When the scholars were first told of Miss Martin’s death, I saw the high school scholars stiffen-up. They shot looks at each other, seemingly unclear how to react. The middle school scholars thought nothing of this. Many of them wept openly, but not the high school scholars. I remember wondering why this could be. I watched their faces, stealing glances, while Miss Jones spoke of Miss Martin being a part of the POWER family. That is when the stone faces of the high school scholars shattered, and their tears flowed freely.

Throughout the semester of my participant observation, I witnessed many events, both big and small, that felt more like a family than a group of unrelated high school students. Sometimes it was the all too familiar joking and nice and not so nice teasing between the scholars, or the support and encouragement I witnessed on occasions, and other times, it was how the scholars and the program made me feel. I recall one incident in particular. I had just begun my observations, and had only been to the high school maybe four times when there was a fieldtrip. The scholars were taken to the local university’s performing arts center to see Nikki Giovanni and to hear her talk about her work, racism, and life in general. I, too, went to see the performance, mainly out of self-interest, but also to observe the POWER scholars while on a fieldtrip. When a few of the scholars saw me enter the back of this large auditorium, loud calls of, “Shameem!” rang out. There were eight high school scholars there with two program leaders. They turned in their seats and waved enthusiastically for me to come sit with them. I had gone with a friend to the performance, expecting to sit near, but not with the scholars, but as we approached, the group parted and moved seats so that my guest and I could sit among them. At the time, I couldn’t put my finger on how that felt. But by the end of the moving poetic
performance, I could—this was family. Not the kind of family that you are born into, but now, thinking back to the day Miss Martin died, something in what Miss Jones said comes back to me, ringing clear and true. Family sticks together when things are hard. With family, you can be yourself, with no pretenses—you don’t have to hide your feelings or your way of being in the world. Family supports and encourages each other and, “has your back.”

As I will discuss at some length in the chapters that follow, much of what I observed while with the scholars was about caring. As I learned about the school, after school, and home lives of the students in POWER, I witnessed the students interacting with each other in some expected, and oftentimes, unexpected ways. I also paid close attention to how the adults and students in the program interacted with one another, looking for something special that I had never been able to put my finger on as a veteran educator myself. The way the adults in the program interacted with the scholars the day Miss Martin died was not something that came from specialized training. None of the program staff came from a professional or educational background that would have taught them what to say or do in this circumstance. This was thrown in stark light when the social worker, who was trained to deal with crisis, attempted to initiate discussions, with no response from the students. They didn’t know her. The social worker, Miss Lynn, has an excellent reputation among district staff, but the students treated her like she was an outsider. The discussions that occurred between the program staff and students that day felt natural, perhaps organic. They seemed to have come from the heart, though there is no real way of my knowing. When Fatima asked me, tears running down her face, who did this kind of thing for “kids like them,” my heart broke. I did not know what to say. My response was not thought out, it was felt. “We do.” I had become a part of this “family,” even though that was never a part of my research plan.
This vignette illuminates a major theme of what I found in my observations and conversations with students—having an ethic of care (Noddings, 1988) creates a space for learning to occur. I came into this research knowing this. The literature on socio-cultural learning theory is filled with examples of the importance of relationships in learning, and culturally competent pedagogy centers on relationships. Even my own experience as an educator has reinforced this fact time and time again. In my years as an educator, I have rarely come across a teacher that would say they do not care about their students. This suggests to me that there is something about the quality of caring that is significant to teaching, particularly when it comes to teaching Black and Latino(a) students, who have had a long track record of being marginalized in school. In my research, I describe what I saw transpire between the students, both positive and negative. I also attempt to understand the qualities of the relations between the adults and the youth in the program, in order to build an understanding of the ethic of caring that permeated the environment of this after school program, and to understand how, if at all, this ethic of care created an environment that was conducive for students of color to learn.

There was something about the relations in this program that I witnessed that is evidenced in the vignette. Miss Jones told the scholars they were loved, but words, like water, evaporate when there is heat. More than telling the scholars they were cared for and loved, there was care and love demonstrated that day. It was demonstrated in the warm hugs, the looks of understanding, in the space and time provided to the scholars to process through their experience in their own way. The school social worker showed caring by attempting to get the students to talk about their feelings, and by being supportive of their emotions, but her care was different; it felt somehow distant or removed, which makes sense, given her lack of knowledge of the culture of the program and more significantly, the students themselves. As I write about in Chapter Four
on relations, I witnessed caring in both the formal learning environment of the classroom, and in the informal learning environment of the after school program. My observations suggest to me that there was a qualitative difference in caring witnessed in each of these settings. It is this quality that I will attempt to illuminate in my writing.

**Race plays an important role in creating a sense of (not)belonging.** Though POWER is not a program created solely for Black and Latino(a) students, it is this population is who is primarily targeted and served. Both the participants and many of the program staff are people of color as well. This is one reason I chose to study this particular program. Having been an educator, and having learned about racism both through life and my studies, I wanted to understand how we could do a better job of teaching students who have been historically marginalized in schools. On the day that this event took place, I couldn’t help but look around the room and see the stark difference between the school staff, of whom all but one, were White, and the program staff, who were not. In thinking about what occurred, I saw that race mattered and in this case, race played a part in who belonged, and who did not belong. I couldn’t help but wonder if the social worker would have had better luck engaging the scholars had she known them, or understood the scholars’ way of dealing with grief, that may have been quite different than her own. I wondered if what I observed when she initially asked them to form a group was a form of resistance.

Another aching in my mind as I write this introduction is that of the notion of “voice” and its converse, “silence.” On November fifth, once the ice dam of silence broke, and the high school students felt safe to cry, feel, and talk, emotions flowed freely. This was not unlike what I saw when observing the program the previous spring. Rarely would the students in POWER hold back when they had a feeling. The emotions I witnessed last spring, while the students were
engaged in an after school program, predominantly were of happiness (happiness to be out of school, to see friends, to be able to talk, and to get help when needed), sadness (sadness because of what a friend or another peer said or did, because of a bad grade, or because of something a teacher or other adult said or did), and frustration (frustration due to an inability to do the work assigned or forgotten materials, due to lack of understanding, or due to a friend or adults words or actions). But this emotion and lamentation was in contrast to what I saw when I spent time with these same students observing them while in class. In the more formal setting of a school classroom, I saw very little emotion, and heard their voices even less. In class during the regular school day, these normally boisterous students were surprisingly quiet. As I explored this notion further while doing my research, I found that many of these students felt they could not speak in their classes, or share their emotion. I found that the students were less engaged academically and emotionally in their formal classroom. But as this vignette demonstrates, they felt quite differently in this after school space. My interviews, as I will discuss in later chapters, shed some light on this matter.

Engaged learning takes a variety of forms. In thinking about this vignette, I could not help also seeing the teaching that was taking place. I have been a teacher for over 17 years, and how I have come to think about teaching has been limited by my experience, yet, in this space, on this day, I could see that in this informal environment, there was a lot of teaching taking place. In the chapters that follow, I will discuss the different types of teaching and learning I witnessed while observing POWER, but the story of Miss Martin exemplifies some of what I observed throughout my semester with the project—“meaningful” teaching can take a variety of forms and can be done by anyone. Whether or not the adults were aware of it (and from my discussion with several of them, they were not), in their grief, they were teaching. Miss Audrey
was teaching when she talked about how sad she felt, and how confused she was feeling. She taught the students it was okay to feel, even if those feelings could not be clearly articulated. She taught them that it was okay to open up, even if it was to strangers. She taught them it was safe to trust, particularly when you need help and someone that can help you is present. In talking to the students about their day and about their experiences in school, Miss Martin taught. She taught the students to ask questions even if they were embarrassed to do so; she taught them to persevere, even when they wanted to give up; she taught them how to make something useful out of material that most people take for granted. The social worker taught. In trying to get the students to talk about their feelings, she taught them that it was okay to feel and grieve. In sitting silently with them as they added duct tape to their farewell cards, she taught them that regardless of age, one can always change plans. As a teacher, so much of what I do is planned and calculated for teaching. When Dre was stuck and didn’t know what to write, I really thought about what to say to her. Should I say nothing at all? I decided, in a calculated way, to tell her in brief about my dear friend and colleague who had had died while reading a story to her kindergarten students. I wanted to teach something in that moment. I wanted Dre, and those listening, to know that there are times when you don’t know what you are feeling, that that too, is okay. I wanted them to know that the pain you experience when someone dies is yours to contend with in whatever way works for you. In all four of these incidents, there was teaching going on, and this idea calls into question the notion of who and what a teacher actually is and can be. It also begs some thought on what constitutes “meaningful learning.”

Additionally, in the chapter on teaching and learning, I will examine the types of skills and knowledge the scholars learned while participating in POWER. The notion of the, “culture
of power” found in their school will be discussed. I will explore these notions further in subsequent chapters.

**What I Seek to Understand**

When I first decided to study POWER, I had been working with the project for over a year, and felt I knew a lot about the organization and its leadership, goals, and some of its inner-workings from an organizational standpoint. In planning my study, I knew that the philosophy of the program was unique, and I thought this might be something to probe and understand more deeply. What I was initially interested in was knowing what exactly the students experienced and what educational opportunities they were given by participating in POWER. I knew some of this in theory, due to the many conversations I had had with Miss Jones, the program director, through my grant writing and curriculum planning for the organization, and through the research I had done on after school programs, but my experience as a teacher suggested to me that what was on paper and in the mind of the director about the program, and what was actually occurring, might be two different things.

My interest in researching this program came from my experience as a teacher and my education as a graduate student. I taught in the school district in which this program is located, for over 9 years. In this time, I saw plenty of inequity. I saw a disproportionate number of students of color being removed from instruction due to disciplinary problems, what looked like too many students of color in low academic tracks, and I saw a students in non-honors track classes being exposed to what I then called a “skill and drill” pedagogy, while I and others like me, as honors-level teachers, without worries of test scores, got to teach based on student interest. What I did not realize until I began studying race and racism in schools, was that I was a
part of this problem. I, too, disciplined my students of color for their behavior that was not in line with what I now understand was my own cultural norm. I, too, was guilty thinking, at times, of my students’ failures as being an indicator of lack of motivation or effort on their part, rather than being a fault of my own pedagogy. In my doctoral work on critical race theory, I began to see that far from leveling the playing field, as I thought schools were supposed to do, schools were places that exacerbated inequities based on race and class, and rarely offered meaningful opportunities that addressed race-based needs. I had recognized this as an educator, but somehow, had not internalized this information in such a way that dramatically changed my pedagogy or philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning.

When I began working with POWER, I saw a program that might have the potential to provide the opportunities not afforded to students of color within the regular school day. I remember thinking to myself, “If the schools are too broken to fix, then maybe the solution will have to come from outside of the school.”

Having spent nearly a year working with Miss Jones, and having had hundreds of hours of time together, talking about her program, I knew I was intrigued by the idea of it. I saw possibility in the idea of creating a program that emphasized student culture and centered student interests in a positive, caring environment. I was excited by the tutoring component of the program. But mostly, I was interested in this notion of offering enriching opportunities to students who didn’t have access to them. Miss Jones’ aim in creating this program, in part, was to, “make the world bigger for the students involved.” I wondered, if indeed, it did.

As a teacher, I was often frustrated by summers. Come the start of the school, it was always clear who had gone on educational vacations, or had seen the world. It was clear who took Hebrew classes, or got to go to math or band camp. It was also clear who did none of those
In that short three months of time, the gap between those who had done planned, often expensive activities over the summer, and those who did not, widened. I did not need the students to complete the ubiquitous, “What I did for my summer vacation” essay in order to see whose world was broadened, and who was being “left behind.” I wanted to know if a program like POWER, that focuses on students who do not have the same access to rich life and learning experiences (like taking vacations and receiving one-on-one tutoring in mathematics from a local high school calculus instructor), could actually provide meaningful opportunities that could actually make their world bigger, and give them a leg-up on their academics.

In order to understand what the program did for students, I needed to understand the program. What were the program goals, how did it run, what enrichment activities were provided? But, I also wanted to understand what the students got out of participating in POWER, and how they understood and experienced the opportunities provided by the program. In setting such a broad research statement, I knew I would have to use progressive focusing to narrow down my questions. As I spent time with the students in the program, and thought about the context of the program and about its goals, my questions became more honed. So much of what I was observing was about the social nature of the program, and though relations were not initially what I sought to research, I came to understand that they had a great deal of bearing on the experiences of the students in the program. Thus, one of the goals of my research became to seek an understanding of how participants in the project experience the relations within the program. My main research question evolved. Not only did I want to understand the opportunities provided by the program for its participants, but I wanted to understand how the students take advantage of these opportunities and how they perceive what the program offered them, and even, their perceptions of opportunity itself. Were these so called “opportunities” actually
something the students were taking advantage of in a meaningful way and did they learn from them? So much of the research on education today and discourse within the media is about achievement. But I want to interrogate this notion. Achievement of what? Achievement to what end? Does the notion of academic achievement include the multitude of skills students learn in formal and informal settings that cannot be measured? Does this notion include the many skills students learned in the program through the numerous opportunities provided that help students of color navigate and take advantage of the schooling provided to them even though these schools are not set up for their success?

At the outset of my study, I knew I wanted to better understand the learning experiences provided to the students of the project, but in thinking about the research on the achievement gap and the purposes of after school programs in general and POWER in particular, I wondered about the notion of “opportunity.” I witnessed much of what I would consider opportunities, such as the trip I mentioned above to see Nikki Giovanni, but what does having this experience, and many others I witnessed and will come to discuss at length, do for the education of the participants in the program? Does the project truly provide meaningful opportunities to its participants? If so, how do the students view and experience these opportunities? My research questions now encompass this notion. I now ask, what opportunities Project [em]POWER affords its students and how the students view and experience these opportunities in ways that are educationally meaningful.

**Why This Research Matters**

It is this question my dissertation seeks to explore. But there are times when one of my former professors, Dr. Sue Noffke’s voice rings in my head. She would often ask, “Who cares?”
I think about this question a lot as I do this work, along with the question, “Why does it matter?” In thinking about these questions, I have just a few answers that I will further explore in my literature review.

This research is important to educators, after school programmers, researchers interested in the issue of educational opportunities, and policy makers alike because in it, I seek to illuminate the experiences of students in one program designed to increase the educational opportunities and academic outcomes of middle and low-income students. This micro-analysis of one program can help educators, after school programmers, researchers interested in educational opportunities, and policy makers because it can build an understanding of what happens in this space: how students experience what adults see as opportunities; how race impacts students’ learning; what constitutes, “opportunity” in a time when there is such great focus on high-stakes testing; and how we can create a space for students to learn where care is centered.

I chose to use the term “accountability-driven age” in my title because it is a sign of our current times. In our nation today, there is a nation-wide call for accountability, and nowhere is this demand more apparent than in our nations’ public schools. Due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school districts, schools, administrators, and teachers are being besieged with accountability measures that look squarely at standardized tests as a litmus test for student achievement and school effectiveness. But this narrow focus on the academic achievement of students as measured on standardized tests is only one facet of accountability that could, and in this study I indirectly argue should, be had in our nations’ schools. Accountability in and of itself is not a bad idea. As an educator, being accountable to my students and my profession was what urged me to stay atop of the latest research. It is what gave me impetus to engage my students on a daily basis in a way that was interesting and relevant. Accountability to my
community and world gave me reason to care about my students and provide them the best possible education. It is not accountability that is the issue here, it is how accountability is being narrowly defined, and its measures implemented, that is the issue. This research is important because it demonstrates other ways in which we, as educators and policy makers should be accountable. Schools do not just educate the minds of young people. We educate the whole child. Because of this, we have responsibility to the whole child. Part of that responsibility, or in today’s language, accountability, is not only to teach them the knowledge and skills in order to actively and fully participate in our democracy, but it is also to teaching our students to care about the complex and ever-changing world we live in. But of course, this, one cannot be held accountable for, at least not in ways that can be measured by today’s standardized tests. I am in no way advocating for accountability measures to be put upon such abstractions as caring, but am suggesting that in looking at programs such as Power, that center student care, one can see possible ways to engage students in ways that not only create academic achievement, but a more caring, inclusive world.

In an age when our nation is so myopically focused on achievement as traditionally valued, this micro-analysis is important. With it, we can look more closely at what matters to this program’s participants, and experience, vicariously, what they experience. We know only little of what our students think and feel about academic opportunity and the impact their race has on their schooling. With this research, interested parties can learn what happens when the student and care of that student, and recognition and appreciation of the students’ race is placed at the center of a program. Though the setting of this study is an after school program, it is a learning environment. It is my goal to provide teachers and researchers alike some ideas that can be attempted in schools to change our present trajectory of inequity.
After school programs are ubiquitous, but how well do we know what happens within them? Some are coming to see the need for after school programs to pick up the educational slack to help diminish the achievement gap, but, if these programs are mere replicas of the work done in school, what good will they do? If after school programs are places where students can learn, this research will help illuminate what is conducive to this process and what is unique about this after school program. Knowing this particularity may help those contemplating policies around after school programs, or those implementing them, better understand program components that will further the academic goals of after school programs.

I will discuss underachievement and the failure of public schools to equitably educate our children at some length in the first chapter of this dissertation. What this research seeks to do is to illuminate one organization’s attempt to help solve this national problem on a local level. My observations suggest that after school programs are places where students can learn about life and the world, and can gain skills that help them navigate their schooling experiences, as well as skills that support learning. This opportunity for learning is far too important to waste. It is far too important to disregard and view merely as a place for students to be while parents are at work.

Observing the students of POWER, I couldn’t help but notice that in this space, there was a feeling of belonging. There were many times I witnessed and felt this sense of family. There were also many times when academic success was celebrated. This was a space where these students, who live lives impacted by their race could be their authentic selves, and feel success and belonging, and this stood in stark contrast to the classes these students spent their days within. Knowing specifically what the program does to create these important opportunities for belonging and success will give those contemplating school reform more to think about.
In this introductory chapter, I have attempted to tell a story that explains why this research is important to me, and why it should be important to others. In Chapter 1 of my dissertation, I will discuss the problem of lack of educational opportunity afforded to students of color within a national context, but will also discuss the particularities of the school district in which this program is located. In Chapter 2, I introduce POWER to provide an understanding of the project itself and discuss research that has been done on after school programs. Chapter 3 explores the theoretical frameworks I used for understanding the research I conducted and the methods I used to gather and analyze my data. Chapter 4 shares the results of this study with an emphasis on observations drawn about relationships within the program. Chapter 5 delves into the issue of the students’ sense of belonging and not, in honors-level courses as compared to POWER. In Chapter 6 I discuss the opportunities for learning witnessed throughout my observations. In Chapter 7, I discuss the findings of this research and propose a model for responsive relations that can be used in classrooms and after school programs alike to alleviate the opportunity gap. My final chapter I will conclude with implications and recommendations for researchers, educators, after school program administrators, and policy makers on the issue of after school programs including the issue of accountability measures and their impact on after school programs. My hope is that this work will help readers to understand what happens in this one after school program, in order to better ponder the relevance of after school programs in the present day context. It is also my goal to help illuminate what we, as people who deeply care about education, can do to help increase the learning and life opportunities for students of color in our nation.
Chapter 1

The Achievement Gap: Providing National and Local Context to This Study

In order to contextualize this study in both a national and localized setting, I begin my literature review by presenting research on school achievement for students of color (here, primarily discussing Black students). In the later part of this chapter, I will discuss the local nature of this national problem. By examining what the research has to say about unequal educational opportunities for students of color, it is my hope to add to this understanding a possible new way of looking at the causes of, and potential solutions to, this ubiquitous, and often cited, national problem. I want to preface this review by suggesting, as other researchers such as Ladson-Billings have, that the over-focus upon the achievement gap in research, and in popular media alike, has had a devastating effect upon our schools. As I discuss the achievement gap I do so understanding the context of this issue, and recognize that it is a present reality in which our students, and our schools, must function.

National Context of the Achievement Gap

Research is rife with examples of ways in which American schools have failed to provide youth of color educational opportunities commensurate to the level of their White counterparts (Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2010; Dillon, 2009; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; K. Magnuson, Rosenbaum, & Waldfogel, 2008; Willie & Willie, 2005). One measure often cited in the literature, policy debates, and in the classroom, is the issue of achievement as measured on standardized achievement tests. The term “achievement gap” traditionally centers around the difference between specific groups’ (such as Black students and White students or low-income students and non low-income students, etc.) scores on achievement tests like the National
Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and various state administered achievement tests such as the California Achievement Test (CAT), but these only represent one type of achievement measurement. Unfortunately, due to a deafening neo-conservative call for accountability, this standardized measure of achievement is one that holds the greatest value in the minds of policymakers (Darling-Hammond, Noguera, Cobb, & Meier, 2007; Wiseman, 2010), and is therefore, one that is important to understand as standardized achievement tests are the primary measure by which individuals, schools, school districts, states, and even our nation is evaluated.

Despite gains made by Black students in the late 1960s through 1980s, achievement gaps remain high (Anderson, 2004; Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2010; Dillon, 2009; Jennings, 2011; Lubienski, 2002) and have actually increased since the enactment of Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, the very law that was purportedly initiated to diminish them. When looking at the NAEP math achievement data from 1990, 1996, and 2000, Lubienski (2002) noted that 12th grade Black students scored below that of eighth grade White students. This is despite the fact that by the end of the 1980s, Black and White student achievement scores in math had converged (K. A. Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2008).

Skrla and Scheurich (2003) noted, upon looking at overall achievement, that U.S. schools and school districts have had a miserable record of demonstrating sustained success with educating Black children. Though the achievement gap decreased for nearly 30 years, there is indication that there has been a trend towards a return to gap levels similar to those of the early 1980s (Berends & Penaloza, 2008; Lee, 2002; K. A. Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2008). In his study of NAEP data, Lee (2004) found that the percentage of Black 12th graders at or above the basic achievement level barely increased from 1990 to 2000 and that as of 2000, “Black students
performing below the basic proficiency level in mathematics is about three times larger than that of their White counterparts” (p. 67). Even when socio-economic status is accounted for, the achievement gap stubbornly persists (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Ladson-Billings (2006) analyzed the NAEP data set from 2005 and found that the gap between Black and Latino fourth graders and their White counterparts in reading was more than 26 points, and this decreased to 23 points in eighth grade, 23 points. In this data, she also found that in eighth grade math, the gap between these groups was 26 points. But, using the NAEP data from 2010, Chudowsky and Chudowsky (2010) found that gaps between Black and White students in most states have narrowed since 2002 in both percentages proficient and mean test. They also found that across both reading and math, and at all three grade levels tested (grades 4, 8, and 12), 78% of the Black-White gaps analyzed narrowed, and that this narrowing occurred at a faster rate for Black students than for their White counterparts. Though more studies on this and other measures are warranted, this one report does suggest a recent positive trend in the national achievement gap between Black and White students.

There are researchers who argue that the achievement gap does not fairly represent the progress made by students of color in a very short historical timeframe (Anderson, 2004; Span, 2009). Historically, Black students have been shut out from educational opportunities (Anderson, 2004) and were not given access to universal secondary schooling in some parts of the South until 1968, and this fact has great importance when looking at the academic achievement rates for youth of color. Given the historical lack of opportunities that Anderson and Span refer to for Black youth in our country, the academic growth made by these populations has been tremendous. These researchers remind us of the history of Black education and the great efforts and strides made throughout history in this regard. It is also important to recognize that there is a
history of scholarship a drive to learn within this population. Anderson and Span remind us that Black students were not given the same access to schooling as White students until just one generation ago, and that this had nothing to do with a lack of desire within this community to learn, but rather, a lack of will on the part of the people making decisions about who had access, to grant such access to people of color. We are also reminded through this historical documentation that Black students have overcome tremendous roadblocks on their paths to education. Yet, despite the many challenges faced by people of color: of lack of schooling opportunities; segregation; and lack of access to high quality resources, buildings and instruction; research indicates that the achievement gap between Black and White students diminished from the late 1960s to the late 1980s (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lee, 2002, 2004; K. Magnuson et al., 2008; Willie & Willie, 2005).

The narrowing of the achievement gap occurred as the nation grappled with the desegregation of public schools in the Post-Brown Era. During this Post-Brown Era, Black students made significant progress on their achievement test scores while White students progress remained relatively stable (Anderson, 2004; Berends, Lucas, & Penaloza, 2008; Berends & Penaloza, 2008; Jennings, 2011; Lee, 2002; K. Magnuson et al., 2008; Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010; Willie & Willie, 2005). During the time of this diminishing achievement gap educational policies had been put into place, with an attempt to equalize educational opportunities for students of color (Grissmer, Kirby, Berends, & Williamson, 1994). And it was during this time, when students of color had made significant academic gains, indicating a potential convergence of achievement between students of color and their White counterparts in the foreseeable future, that then Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education, directing the commission to report on the state of
education in the United States (Gardner, 1983). The report begins, “Our nation is at risk,” and continues on to state, “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (p. 1). This report seems to fly in the face of the fact that a large percentage of people historically shut out from an education were indeed seeing greater academic achievement.

* A Nation at Risk acknowledged the importance of equity, but suggested that the goal of equity could not be permitted to outweigh the goal of high-quality schooling. In the end, this document, which was a call for educational reform in light of impending great “risk” to our nation, opened the door for the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1991 and the accountability measures by which our students, schools, school districts, states, and nation are now measured. Since the time of the implementation of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 1991, the gains made by students of color have stalled (K. A. Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2008), and the achievement gap between White students and students of color has increased (Grissmer et al., 1994; Lee & Wong, 2004).

**Reasons for the Achievement Gap**

Many in the field of educational research have studied the phenomenon of the achievement gap and disparate educational outcomes for students, with the intent of figuring out its cause.

**Resegregation.** There are some who argue that the gap in achievement is due to resegregation. In recent years, our schools are resegregating (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003; Orfield, 1978, 1993, 2001; Orfield & Eaton, 1997; Orfield & Lee, 2005, 2006; Orfield & Yun, 1999). With resegregation comes unequal allocation of funds
(Darling-Hammond, 2010). According to Berends and Penaloza (2010), “Segregation stands as a major obstacle to continued equal education for all” (p. 996). Condron (2009) went even further by suggesting that segregation was the leading culprit for the achievement gap, noting that attending segregated school inhibits both reading and math gains. Hanushek and Rivkin (2006) found that attending high minority schools harmed Black students. Tushnet (1996), in contrast to Coleman (1966) and all of the subsequent studies published on the premise of his study, suggests that school funding will become a significant issue as schools become more and more segregated as White Americans will not be willing to provide stably adequate funding for schools unless the schools contain substantial numbers of White students. This author understood that segregation was being used as a proxy to mean poor and Black or Latino(a). He recognized that as White flight happens, there will be less support for public schools.

**Teacher and school resource quality.** There is also ample evidence that Black and Latino students are being taught by less qualified teachers and often uncertified teachers (Anderson, 2004; Corcoran & Evans, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 1999, 2010; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006; Haycock, Lankford, & Olson, 2004; Kelly, 2010), and that these students tend to be in schools with substandard resources and funding. Researchers suggest that access to quality school resources such as facilities, libraries, and laboratories, does impact educational outcomes (Grogan-Kaylor & Woolley, 2010; Kozol, 1991; Lee & Wong, 2004). Ladson-Billings (2006) discusses how segregated schooling allows for differential funding of schools. She points out the great funding disparities that exist between urban schools and their suburban counterparts. Kozol (1991) went to great lengths in his book, *Savage Inequalities*, to describe the inequalities that exist in predominantly poor, minority serving schools. Though no one has been able to prove that schools are poorly funded because Black and Latino(a) students attend them, it has been proven
that the amount of funding rises and falls with the number of White students (Tushnet, 1995). The fact that a school on one side of a gerrymandered line can expend over double the amount of money, per pupil, than on the other, is incomprehensible. This is what (Ladson-Billings, 2006) refers to as “economic debt.”

**Curriculum access.** Anderson (2004) suggests that another reason for the failure of American schools to adequately educate youth of color is the lack of a rigorous curriculum for all students. In a study done by Diamond (2007), the researcher found that teachers in schools that were in danger of not making Adequate Yearly Progress narrowed their curriculum, yet did not change their pedagogy. Kozol (1991) suggests that these accountability measures made schools, particularly those schools serving poor and minority children, use more skill and drill curriculum and instruction. This gap in curriculum rigor is further evidenced by the fact that in most schools serving predominantly minority students, Advanced Placement and honors-level courses, courses that are aligned to college entry exams, are not available (Anderson, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

**Staff mobility.** Another reason cited for the achievement gap between Black, Latino, and White students is that of staff mobility (Anderson, 2004; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ferguson & Mehta, 2004; Harris & Herrington, 2006; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). These researchers have found that the retention of teachers in schools that are attended primarily by low-income Black and Latino(a) students is extremely low when compared to those attended primarily by White, middle- and upper-income students. Staff mobility impacts not only the quality of schooling students of color receive, but also the continuity students have access to. In addition, as positive, stable relationships with caring adults has been found to be important to student achievement, these same students have less access to this important form of

Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that this myopic focus on the achievement gap I have just spent pages discussing, is misplaced and even dangerous as it moves us towards short-term solutions that do not address the long-term problem that she calls the “education debt.” In making this argument, Ladson-Billings suggests that an, “all out focus” on the achievement gap (p. 4) neglects the “historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society” (p. 5) and that the achievement gap is a logical outcome of these factors.

**Impacts of the Educational Debt**

Moving beyond the achievement gap discussion, the educational debt of our nation, posited by Ladson-Billings (2006) has created a dim picture of sustained progress for Black students in American public schools. In 2003, 55% of Black students graduated as compared to 78% of White students (Greene & Winters, 2006). In addition, over 30 years of documentation shows a disproportionate use of suspension and expulsions for Black students (Skiba et al., 2011). There are many other indicators of academic performance that suggest that students of color in grades K-12 are not being provided equal opportunities for educational success such as placement and retention rates for advanced level and Advanced Placement classes, over enrollment in special education programs (Persell & Hendrie, 2005) and funding inequality (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In each of these areas, Black and Latino students fail to measure up to their White counterparts, and this failure to measure up leads to real life consequences in terms of economic and social parity for all people within our democracy (Day & Newburger, 2002;
Harris & Herrington, 2006; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Harris and Herrington (2006) suggest that the achievement gap, though traditionally used as a measure of educational inequality, is now a direct cause of socio-economic inequality (p. 1). In the very report that appears to be at the forefront of the neo-conservative call for accountability, *A Nation At Risk*, the importance of an education and impact of its failing is clear when its authors state, “The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life” (p. 3).

After the *Brown v. Board of Education II* (1955) decision, American schools were forced to desegregate “with all deliberate speed.” In the decades following this decision, as noted above, students of color made significant strides towards academic parity, but since the reauthorization of 1991 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, this progress has stalled. In fact, American schools have failed to increase the achievement rates of any of its students to any large extent during this time (Anderson, 2004). One reason for this, Darling-Hammond (2007) argues, is that the strong emphasis placed on standardized test scores by the No Child Left Behind legislation has led to a narrowing of the curriculum.

According to Anderson (2004), the achievement gap, and this lack of equitable education, is a structural problem. It is a problem that exists, not due to inherent flaws of people of color, or their culture, but rather, due to fundamental and historical inequalities in our schooling system and society. Anderson suggests that this structural problem is one of unequal access to high quality teachers, resources, and curriculum. My research examines one afterschool program located in the Midwest that seeks to address the problem of unequal educational opportunities for
students of color, in grades 6-12, located within this national context, in a district that has also had a contentious school history of racial inequity.

**The Local Nature of This Educational Debt**

The problem of unequal access to high quality learning opportunities including facilities, staff, and curriculum, leading to unequal educational outcomes of students, has grave impacts on school districts and individual students (Anderson, 2004). POWER is situated in a school district that struggles with this problem. Pradera, home to POWER, is a small urban university community in the Midwest that has recently gone through a consent decree (see Figures 1-3 for the racial breakdown of Pradera, the Pradera School District and Pradera High School).

![Pie chart showing the racial makeup of Pradera in 2011](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/17/1712385.html)

*Figure 1. Racial makeup of city of Pradera in 2011 (estimated). Source: United States Census Bureau (2012) [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/17/1712385.html](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/17/1712385.html)*
Figure 2. Racial makeup of Pradera School District. Source: Illinois Interactive Report Card (2012) http://iirc.niu.edu/

Figure 3. Racial makeup of Pradera High School. Source: Illinois Interactive Report Card (2012) http://iirc.niu.edu/

As can be seen from Figures 1 through 3, the Pradera School District is experiencing a significant flight of White students from the school district, creating a situation where the racial makeup of the school district is significantly different than that of the community itself.
Historical Context of Pradera School District

In Pradera, despite the *Brown v Board of Education II* (1955) decision which called for desegregation to happen, “with all deliberate speed,” the local schools remained segregated, via de facto segregation, until 1967, at which time, four schools in the predominantly Black neighborhoods of northern Pradera were closed, and a mandatory busing program began which bused a majority of Black children from their neighborhood on the segregated north side of the city to predominantly White neighborhood schools on the south side of town, or in this case, “the tracks.” In 1969, members of the Black community came together and formed the Concerned Citizens Committee of Northeast Pradera (CCP) in response to these school closures and other concerns that are specifically discussed below.

From the time of its inception in 1969 until 1978, the committee actively brought concerns before the Pradera School Board. Concerns raised at board meetings by CCP members included the numbers of Black students in special education, expulsion rates of Black students, truancy rates, and lack of staff diversity (J. Smith, 1996). The members of the CCP and John Smith, a lifelong community activist, attended school board meetings regularly, and held ongoing discussions with district administrators. One issue that was of particular concern to Mr. Smith was that of busing. When the schools were originally desegregated in 1967, four elementary schools in the predominantly Black neighborhood of northeast Pradera were closed. The outcome of this was that as many as 90% of the Black students who once attended schools in their neighborhoods, were now bused to schools with predominantly White student and staff populations. The impact of this was many-fold, according to Mr. Smith, but one of the most

---

5 The following discussion of the history of the Pradera School District is an adaptation of the work I completed for my early research. This research was an examination of the district via court records, personal communications with staff members present at the time of the consent decree, and examination of a collection of documents from Mr. Smith, a local community activist. This research was conducted in 2009-2010.
egregious was that of lack of access to resources. Title 1 funding, which is meant for reading and math remediation, is based on the level of poverty found in any given school. Black students, who once attended low-income schools with Title 1 services, were now being bused to schools with no services (J. Smith, 1996). According to one complaint filed with the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) against the District, these busing practices indirectly led to children being labeled as needing special education in order to receive the much needed remediation which could have been had in a Title 1 schools provide (J. Smith, 1996).

With years of effort and little change in policy or practice, in 1993, Mr. Smith formed an additional community-based committee to seek comprehensive solutions to the problems of the “at risk student.” The goals of the group were to dismantle the two-tiered curriculum (one for the general population, and one for the at-risk population); create pressure for the District to commit its fullest resources to eliminate educational discrimination towards the at-risk population; prepare annual goals and objectives at the end of each academic year for each grade level, which address at-risk students’ needs; work collaboratively with staff and parents to develop learning plans for at-risk students; and call for the District to create an annual at-risk plan which was to be supported by the use of District and supplemental funds. The committee called for the District to commit and serve 100% of the pre-school population by the end of 1994; fully integrate the pre-school and head start program, codify statistics from all grade levels on the performance of at-risk children; and establish an at-risk committee (J. Smith, 1996).

On February 2, 1993, The Committee on the At-Risk Student presented a proposal to the Pradera School Board. The proposal called for the adoption of a comprehensive at-risk plan. The proposed plan included a wide range of solutions and came with 29 recommendations for the District. Included in these recommendations were such measures as training teachers to serve the
needs of at-risk students; offering extended after school hours at each attendance center for at-risk students; establishing goals to equalize test scores among all students; equalizing busing burdens across all groups; creating a culturally sensitive curriculum; establishing hiring goals to create a more representative teaching staff; and attending to the issues of truancy (J. Smith, 1996). Even though the 29 points were approved by the school board in January of 1994, the District took no action to equalize busing, nor did they address questions raised about the need for equity for at-risk students (J. Smith, 1996).

Having approved the points made by the Committee for At-Risk Youth, the Board was bound by this decision to act. Failure to do so led Mr. Smith, along with another community activist and newspaper owner, Mr. Phillips to bring a complaint to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR), asking them to examine the District’s student assignment system under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and Section 1981 of the U.S. Code. In August 1996, the OCR initiated its own proactive compliance review of the District. They examined minority overrepresentation in special education, and underrepresentation in upper level and gifted courses. In October of 1996, the Plaintiffs amended their original complaint to the OCR to allege system-wide discrimination in student assignment and other issues including educational equity, staff hiring, and assignment practices (Education Equity Implementation Plan: “Closing the Achievement Gap,” 1998).

In November of 1996, after several months of study and community input, the District adopted a Redistricting Plan that provided for a series of five schools of choice. The plan, which was modeled after the magnet plan of Cambridge, Massachusetts, encouraged, but did not require racial diversity in school enrollments. The District projected that five of the schools would be racially identifiable as White schools. The Plan also created a racially identifiable
Black school. The District stated that it intended to develop additional measures to address racial and economic diversity at a future, unspecified time. Plaintiffs contended that though the Redistricting plan addressed part of their complaints, it did not do so fully. As a result, the Plaintiffs notified the District that they were considering the initiation of a class action litigation against the District under the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution; 42 U.S.C. 1981; Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; and The Regulations promulgated under Title VI, 34 C.F.R. 100.3. This class action litigation brought together seven individual lawsuits against the District all alleging district-wide discrimination against Black students.

Under pressure of this impending litigation, the parties met and agreed to a consent decree, holding the district accountable for change. It was decided that Robert Peterkin and Michael Alves, who had worked on the desegregation of the Cambridge and Boston, Massachusetts schools, would be brought in as consultants to develop an exhaustive redistricting plan that would guarantee racial diversity and promote school reform while providing parents with choice regarding school enrollment. The first agreement reached between the Plaintiffs and the District was the Controlled Choice agreement that was signed in September 1997. This agreement established a detailed framework for student assignment.

In June of 1998, the OCR and the District reached the Resolution Agreement which set forth the appropriate actions to be taken by the District to further its commitment to ensure that minority students were to be provided equal access to high standards, high quality education in accordance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. 2000d, and its implementing regulation at C.F.R. Part 100. Next, in July 1998, the parties reached an Education Equity Agreement, which addressed opportunities for and treatment of Black students in the District’s educational programs. These agreements which were made to avoid legal action, and are
considered an official consent decree and represent a recognition on the part of the District that the complaints of the Plaintiffs and OCR were indeed legitimate, and that change was needed to improve the educational opportunities of Black students in the District (Education Equity Implementation Plan: “Closing the Achievement Gap,” 1998).

The consent decree of the Pradera School District specifically required the parties to develop a clear process and a detailed and effective implementation plan to achieve equity for Black students (Education Equity Implementation Plan: “Closing the Achievement Gap,” 1998). This plan included specific remedies to address concerns in the following areas: climate and discipline, special education, gifted education and upper-level courses, student performance, alternative programs, and hiring and staff placement and retention (Memorandum of understanding, 1998). The plan attempted to address the concerns of equitable access to high quality teachers, resources, and curriculum called for by researchers who examine educational equity. The district’s obligations were set to expire at the end of the 2008-2009 school year, giving the district a total of 12 years (including the four since the original complaint) to meet the requirements of the decree (S. Jones et al. v. Board of Education of Pradera Community Unit School District, 2nd revised consent decree, 2006).

From the initiation of the official OCR complaint in 1997 to 2009, the district attempted full-implementation of the consent decree requirements. Included in these efforts was the completion of a climate survey. The survey, created and conducted by a local university researcher, found that the racial climate was indeed dire with large disparities between Blacks and Whites in terms of their perception of need for change in the racial climate (Aber, 2001). The district implemented significant changes in policies for inclusion in special education programs and gifted/advanced placement classes; staff development in the areas of discipline
practices, differentiated instruction, and data analysis, administration, teacher hiring practices, data analysis, and disciplinary policies. The Court closely monitored the District’s progress throughout these years, requiring detailed yearly reports documenting implementation of the plan.

In June of 2009, just two months before the consent decree was set to expire, the plaintiffs and district agreed to terminate the consent decree, recognizing that despite the many changes made in the policies and practices of the district, racial disparities remained. This lack of substantive improvement was acknowledged by the courts, and despite this, on November 4, 2009, the judge ruled to terminate Pradera School District’s consent decree. In the courtroom when this decision was being argued, echoes of “We’ve done enough” (Tushnet, 1995) rang through many of the proclamations of those who were in support of termination of the consent decree (Notes from the consent decree hearing September 14, 2009, 2009). In the end, the superintendent of the district stood to tout the efforts made by all and to show that indeed, the achievement gap had narrowed. He ended his speech with a resounding, “Mission accomplished!”

**Present-day Context of Pradera High School**

Despite what was presented at the November 4 hearing, and despite the significant changes that were made to policies and practices within the Pradera School District due to the consent decree and NCLB, the achievement gap persistently remains. As I argued earlier, a narrow focus on the achievement gap, as traditionally measured by one-time test scores, is insufficient to the task of measuring overall educational opportunities for students. In my analysis, I have chosen to broaden my definition of achievement gap to include measures of
achievement on state administered tests, but also on enrollment in upper level and advanced placement (A.P.) courses, enrollment in special education courses, staff diversity, and disciplinary rates at the high school in which POWER is situated (see Figures 3-12 that illustrate this disparity at one POWER site, Pradera High School).

![Figure 4. Average percentage of Pradera High School students “meeting or exceeding” state reading standards grade 11 in years 2004-2012 by race. Source: Illinois Interactive Report Card (2012) http://iirc.niu.edu/]

As seen in Figure 4, the rate of student achievement varies significantly by race. The gap in achievement in reading scores between White and Black students ranges from a low of 38% in 2005 and 2010, to a high of 50% in 2006 and 2009, with no significant closure of the gap between these two groups of students in any given year. A similar pattern emerges for Latino students, though due to the low number of students tested (n=14 in 2007, 15 in 2010, 26 in 2011, and 16 in 2012), trend data is less reliable. Additionally, this data reflects a decreasing trend in reading test scores for all groups represented. When compared to the overall reading achievement gap rates of all grade levels across the state, the achievement gap rate of 47% at

6 I have chosen to not include data about other races than Black, Latino, and White students, as the racial make-up of the program during the semester of my study is specific to these groups of students.
Pradera High School is significantly higher. The overall achievement gap rate between Black and White students for the state on the reading standardized test has diminished from 34% to 22%.

This same trend has not been witnessed at the high school level in Pradera.

![Figure 5. Average percentage of Pradera High School students “meeting or exceeding” state reading standards grade 11 in years 2004-2012 by income.](http://iirc.niu.edu/)

Figure 5 shows a significant and relatively stable gap between those low-income and non-low-income students in reading on the state achievement test at Grade 11. The gap ranges from a low of 37% in 2004 and 2007 to a high of 55% in 2005. Achievement for all students has seen a decline since 2004, but this trend is more pronounced for low-income students (14%) than for those who do not come from homes with low-income (12%).

---

7 I have compared low income and non-low-income students here as a large percentage of students in POWER the semester I was conducting my study are from low-income homes.
The achievement gap between students of different racial groups is more pronounced in mathematics at grade 11 at Pradera High School than it is for reading. The percentage of White students meeting or exceeding standards has remained relatively stable, ranging from 66% as a low in 2010, to 79% in 2006. Black students fared significantly less well in mathematics as compared to their White counterparts with as few as 18% meeting or exceeding standards in both 2008 and 2009. Latino(a) students fared slightly better than their Black peers, but again, the number tested makes these statistics less meaningful. Much like those of the reading scores, overall student achievement has seen a decline over the nine years in which data has been provided with White students seeing an overall drop in students meeting or exceeding state standards of 11% and Black students, 15% between 2004 and 2012.
Figure 7. Average percentage of Pradera High School students “meeting or exceeding” state math standards grade 11 in years 2004-2012 by income. Source: Illinois Interactive Report Card (2012) [http://iirc.niu.edu/]

When compared by income, the differential of student achievement rates in mathematics is large and has remained relatively stable over time. In 2004, when this data first became readily available to the public, low-income students were achieving at their highest rate, with 49% of the students meeting or exceeding standards in mathematics at Grade 11. This number dropped significantly in 2005, to a nine year low of 15% in 2005 and has slightly increased since to 29% in 2012. For non low-income students, math achievement has remained relatively stable, ranging between a low of 68% meeting or exceeding standards in 2005 and 2012, to a high of 73% in 2006. It should be noted that regardless of subgroup, the Pradera School District is failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress towards the 100% meets/exceeds rate that is enforced through the No Child Left Behind Legislation of 2001.

As can be seen in the Figures 4 through 7, the achievement gap on the state standardized test for Pradera High School is significant in terms of both race and income levels. As Figure 3 indicates, 42% of the students at Pradera High School are White, whereas 46% are Black,
Latino(a), and multi-racial. Also important to note is that 56% of the students at Pradera High School are within the category considered as low-income. Though the presented numbers in no way suggest that all students of color, and all low-income students are failing to meet state standards, a large majority fall into this category, and it is within this localized context that POWER exists.

Figure 8. Racial makeup of Pradera High School professional staff (including teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers, and psychologists). Source: Illinois Interactive Report Card (2012) [http://iirc.niu.edu/](http://iirc.niu.edu/)

In the foreword to *The Segregation of American Teachers* (Frankenberg, 2006), Gary Orfield opens his comments to this report on the growing segregation of the American teaching population by suggesting that White and Asian parents would not tolerate a school where the majority of teachers were Black and Latino(a), spoke a different primary language, and did not understand their culture and family values, yet, he suggests, this is the state of American schools today, but in reverse. Parents of Black and Latino students have no choice but to tolerate a school where such conditions exist. He goes on to suggest that the No Child Left Behind Act recognized the “centrality” of highly qualified teachers, but has done nothing to stem the
underrepresentation of teachers of color within the teaching population (p. 5). This segregated teaching force spoken of by Orfield in 2006 can be witnessed in the Pradera schools in Figure 8, which shows that 87% of Pradera High Schools faculty is White. When compared to Figure 3, the contrast of the racial make-up of the student population to the faculty population is grand.

While some 43% of Pradera High School students consider themselves to be Black, Latino(a) or of mixed race, only 13% of the school faculty considers themselves to be such. As I will discuss in later chapters, this fact has a significant impact on the students who participate in POWER, as most of their teachers are White. The teaching population demographics of the Pradera School District has remained relatively stable since the initiation of the consent decree for the District, and this is despite national recruiting efforts on the part of the district with the specific purpose of diversifying the racial make up of the staff.

![Circle chart showing race distribution of students at Pradera High School](image)

**Figure 9.** Percentage of students in upper level and Advanced Placement reading courses at Pradera High School by race during the 2010-2011 school year. Source: Pradera School District Accountability Data (2011).8

---

8 Data for the following figures, labeled, “Pradera School District Accountability Data” was gathered by request by myself to the Superintendent of schools. Due to my former position with the district, and my on-going commitment to working with the district on diversity and equity issues, data was handed over without having had to complete Freedom of Information Act forMiss
In Figure 9, the percentage of students in upper level and Advanced Placement (A.P.) courses is listed by race. As a matter of access, one would expect to see the percentages of students by race at large in a school reflected in its numbers in specific placements, such as honors and A.P. courses. Pradera School District administrators and teachers have taken great strides towards parity, with efforts such as clustering students of color in advanced classes to help them feel less isolated, providing additional tutoring help, and meeting with elementary and middle school teachers to discuss increasing numbers of students of color into honors courses in the earlier grades (Rakha, 2012). But, as can be seen in Figure 9, the percentage of Black remains lower than is expected at 18% as compared to their percentage in the school population overall which is nearly double, at 34%. This is not the case for Latino(a) students. While six percent of the overall school population is Latino(a), 7% of the students who make up the upper level and A.P. course population are Latino(a).

![Pie chart showing race distribution in advanced courses](image)

*Figure 10.* Percentage of students in upper level and Advanced Placement math courses at Pradera High School by race during the 2010-2011 school year. Source: Pradera School District Accountability Data (2011)

Much like that which can be seen in Figure 9, Figure 10 shows a similar trend for students in upper level and A.P. math courses at Pradera high school. Latino(a) students are
represented at the rate that would be expected given their prevalence in the school population, White students are overrepresented by nearly one and a half times, and Black students are underrepresented by over half of what would be expected. Some discussion in the District about algebra serving as a gatekeeper to upper level math courses led to a change at the middle school level in the district within the past four years, with more students of color being “pushed in” to honors level algebra courses through the AVID program\textsuperscript{9} but, at present, the numbers are not reflecting a large percentage shift in the amount of students of color in advanced math courses at the high school level.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{chart.png}
\caption{Figure 11. Percentage of students in special education at Pradera High School by race during the 2010-2011 school year. Source: Pradera School District Accountability Data (2011).}
\end{figure}

As a reverse to Figures 9 and 10, Figure 11 illustrates the number of students in special education programs at Pradera High School by race. Whereas 49% of the school population is White, 27% of the students placed in Special Education programs at the High School are of that same race. Much like that with honors and A.P. course placement, it is expected that the percentage of students of one race, in any given school, would be representative in the number of

\textsuperscript{9} AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination. It is a college readiness program adopted by the Pradera schools to increase learning and performance and college readiness for low income and first generation to college students ("AVID: Decades of college dreams," 2012). Each of the feeder middle schools in the Pradera School District have AVID programs.
students in special education, but this is not the case at Pradera High School. Black students make up 56% of the special education population at the High School, but only 34% of the population in general. The prevalence of Black students in the special education program at Pradera high school is 22% higher than would be expected given their prevalence in the population in general. This is the case and has been the case for as long as I have been able to trace in the District’s history. Concern about the overrepresentation of Black students in special education settings was documented in the district as far back as 1969, when the first complaints to the district on this matter were brought to the school board by the CCP. Since the initiation of the consent decree, the district has made significant changes to its special education placement procedures, including changes in the steps for referring students for testing, but the statistics provided show a persistence in the imbalance of students by race.

![Figure 12. Number of discipline referrals at Pradera High School during the 2010-2011 school year by race and consequence. Source: Pradera School District Accountability Data (2011).](image)

According to District data, suspensions have been reduced significantly throughout the district over the past four years (A. Smith, 2012), down from 734 for both of the district high
schools in 2008-2009, to 533 during the 2011-2012 school year, but as can be seen in Figure 10, the number of suspensions for Black students remains significantly higher than for any other group. Black students are suspended from class, and therefore, not given access to the learning environment, at a rate of nearly 11 times that of their White counterparts. Since the introduction of a consent decree on the district, there have been many changes to the disciplinary procedures of the District. Disciplinary actions have been codified, and disciplinary referrals have been closely tracked. Teachers are now regularly shown disciplinary data by school, grade level, and by individual educator.\footnote{As an educator in the district, I experienced this somewhat public humiliation. At weekly staff meetings, it was not uncommon to see one’s own Disciplinary Referral numbers compared to one’s peers.} The latest climate survey, completed in 2009 (Aber, 2010), found numerous comments suggesting that teachers feel that the approach by the district has left the students in charge of the schools, with little ability to discipline students, particularly students of color.

In addition to the disparities found in staffing, participation in upper level and special education courses, disciplinary rates, and achievement rates (see Figures 4-12), findings from the second climate survey which was conducted in 2009 as a follow-up to the first climate survey conducted in 2002, suggest that perceptions of the racial climate of the district have, if anything, deteriorated, with loud cries of “reverse racism” echoing throughout the open ended responses by teachers and students alike\footnote{On this climate survey, teachers, students, administrators and community members were asked to answer a series of Lichert-type questions about the racial climate of the Pradera School District. In addition to these questions, there were two opportunities for respondents to write responses. These responses are what I am calling, “open ended.”} (Aber, 2010).

\textbf{Conclusion}

As can been seen from the literature review on the achievement of students in our nation, American schools, on both a macro- and micro-level, are failing to educate our students in a way
that will, in the end, provide equal access to all that our nation has to offer, both economically
and socially. This problem has been well documented in the multitudes of studies on the
achievement gap, and I have attempted to further this understanding looking at one school
district that has made attempts to remedy this problem. It is within this context that the program I
have examined exists. After school programs, such as POWER, the focus of this study, are not
school settings, but they have come to be seen as a potential solution to the many problems faced
by schools around the country.

As I have illustrated, this problem is well documented in the research on the achievement
gap, and I have attempted to further an understanding of the nature of this failure through an
analysis of one district’s attempt to make a remedy. It is within this context that my study site,
Project [em]POWER exists.
Chapter 2

Project [em]POWER and Review of the Literature on After School Programs

In order to set the stage for the description of what I observed, I describe Project [em]POWER, beginning with its history. In this chapter, I will also discuss the philosophy of the program and the details of how the program is run. The final part of this chapter is devoted to the research that has been done on after school programs. I will describe the history of such programs, the research on their impact, and will end the chapter by describing features researchers have found to determine a potentially effective after school program.

History of Project [em]POWER

Within the school district of Pradera, Project [em]POWER (POWER) was founded in the Spring of 2010 by Sunita Jones out of a need she saw within the community. At the time, Miss Jones, a working mother of three highly active, academically accelerated children, realized her youngest son needed some extra academic support within his predominantly White, gifted elementary class. Even though both she and her husband held professional positions within the community, Miss Jones could not find suitable support for her son. Individual tutoring was available within the community, but at a price the family could not afford, and the after school programs available at the schools were not academically focused. The programs offered for free within the community seemed to Miss Jones, to be for “poor Black kids,” and she worried they would come, as was her past experience, out of a deficit perspective in their ways of working with students. She worried that her son would be seen as having problems, as opposed to gifts. Miss Jones wondered why there seemed to be no programs for her son, and youth like him, that

---

12 My knowledge of the history of POWER comes from both formal and informal discussions with Miss Jones about the program while writing grants for POWER and while doing this research. I have asked Miss Jones to look through the history of the program and make sure I have accurately represented what occurred.
could help with basic schoolwork, and at the same time, validate and enrich his own identity as a young, Black man.

Miss Jones had worked in the past for the local Freedom Schools program, so she was well aware of how one might run an after school program. After spending months researching programs throughout the community, Miss Jones determined that she would start an after school program that focused on cultural understanding (of one’s own as well as that of others), in addition to education, and leadership. She would start a program that went beyond tutoring, fun and games, and after school caretaking. Originally, Miss Jones wanted to start an after school program in conjunction with the local schools. Though she received some offer of collaboration, the schools requested she pay for the extended use of space and janitorial services that would be required by the program. Miss Jones didn’t have such money. Indeed, as her focus would be on reaching families like her own, low- to middle-income families, she doubted the program would have much money at all.

Given that running the program through the local schools was not initially an option, Miss Jones set out to find a partner. She decided to try to make a connection to the intellectual and social capital to be found in her own backyard—that of the local university. For months she attempted to make connections. Certainly, she thought, with the university’s mission of community outreach, someone would be interested in helping children within the community better their opportunity for a brighter future. Time and time again, Miss Jones was asked the same questions, “What department are you with?” and, “What grant are you associated with?” Miss Jones told me that each time she was asked these questions it felt as if she were being told, “You are just a community member.”
I met Miss Jones in March of 2010. At the time I was a graduate assistant for the Youth Community Informatics Project at the local university. With the encouragement of our faculty directors, Bertram Bruce and Ann Bishop, and graduate assistants Slates, Nam, and I worked with Miss Jones, helping to writing grants, foster university connections, and creating a digital photography curriculum for the department’s summer academy. Through this initial connection and the tenacity of Miss Jones, POWER is now connected to over 14 departments at the university, and is now funded through the U.S. Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Center’s Grant.

**Summer Leadership Academy**

In June of 2010, POWER began its first six-week program summer enrichment program, held in the basement of a church foundation on the university campus. Eleven elementary students and five high school students (who served as mentors) participated in literacy activities, community service projects, and culturally focused enrichment activities. All of the students who participated in the program during this first summer were students of color. Three additional high school students participated in the afternoon, assisting teachers and mentors. These students were paid by the Library Department, Youth Community Informatics Project. The three students had been a part of a summer program through the Library Department a year earlier in which they created a digital asset map of the northern part of Pradera. From 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. every weekday for 6 weeks of the summer of 2010, the scholars learned leadership skills and read books relevant to the students’ cultures. They learned about money management and

---

13 In this case, culturally focused activities included reading books about, cooking food from, learning about the art and dance of, and values of cultures the students represented as well as other cultures.

14 For six months, students interviewed community members within their communities, looking for all the resources within that community that may not be known, such as houses that had daycare centers, offered tutoring, and had candy for sale. They used Global Positioning Software and created an on-line, interactive map of these community assets.
budgeting, cultural understanding, health and nutrition, web design, and digital photography. Community members, university faculty members and graduate students, and 4-H staff members taught the activities. The program was organized and supervised by Miss Jones with the help of a local English as a Second Languages teacher from one of Pradera’s elementary schools.

The summer enrichment program ran again during the Summer of 2011, serving 30 middle and high school low-income, primarily Black and Latino(a) students. In addition to focusing on literacy through the use of books drawn upon the cultures of the students, the students learned leadership skills (using the model of “Servant-Leadership”\(^{15}\)), took classes taught by university faculty members and graduate students, and participated in numerous fieldtrips including one that involved horseback riding and swimming in a local lake.

**Project [em]POWER’s Vision**

While working with this project since the Spring of 2010, I have endeavored to understand its bones—what lies beneath that which can be seen through observation. According to its website ("Project [em]POWER," 2013), Project [em]POWER is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to helping develop the academic and social success of young scholars.\(^{16}\) Its mission is to promote academic achievement, leadership skills, and cultural awareness by providing their scholars with “an equitable opportunity for intellectual, social, and emotional growth.” The long-term goal of the organization is for all of its scholars to become college- and career-ready (Program website). By applying the model of the organization, it is the vision of the organization to empower its scholars to become the, “Next generation of leaders.”

\(^{15}\) Servant Leadership is a leadership model that contrasts to autocratic leadership. At its core is the tenant of leader as servant, one whose goal it is to care for and help everyone being led reach their greatest potential.

\(^{16}\) For POWER, participants are called scholars. This is purposeful, according to Miss Jones, who wants all of the participants to be seen as capable in every way.
Project [em]POWER’s Philosophy

What underlies the mission of this organization is its philosophy. I have worked with POWER for almost 4 years. As I have worked with this organization, and in my research, I have attempted to understand the ideology that drives its direction, its motion, and its work with the community and its youth. At the center of the philosophy of this organization is the idea of, “Thinking in a new perspective.” This is said to be the philosophy for all situations, whether for attempting to form new collaborations with school districts or working with students. It is the idea that all people deserve to be cared for and respected. In practice, with students, in part, it means that students are to be given room to be themselves, yet respectful guidance enough to make good choices. It is a recognition that POWER is not school, even though there is learning going on, and that students should not be treated as if they are at school. There have been numerous attempts by the staff of POWER to explain this philosophy. In the manual for the program is a list of ways this philosophy plays out for the organization. The following is an excerpt from the staff-training manual:

We take care of our staff, our volunteers, our families, and the children themselves.

♦ We care about the well being of our students which means:
  ▪ Students are always engaged
  ▪ Students have the freedom to explore learning and activities
  ▪ There are ample choices for the participants readily available at all times
  ▪ No child is left sitting bored without something to do
  ▪ Adult tutors, leaders, or yourself will participate in enrichment activities such as game playing and exploring new skills
  ▪ If you see a student is not connecting with a tutor, you make the connection
  ▪ We are not teachers, but we are tutors, mentors, and caring adults
  ▪ Communication between our program, school, and families is key
  ▪ When you see students exercising leadership skills, or pro-social behaviors, it is your responsibility to point them out to the students and to communicate these strengths with parents.
  ▪ Our pillars are leadership, literacy, cultural awareness, and service learning
  ▪ Keep cultural awareness in mind and find ways to incorporate this into the program (books, programs, research topics, activities, enrichment, guest speakers, etc.)
We care about the well being of our staff and volunteers which means:

- If doing enrichment, the leaders and volunteers have the tools they need
- With enrichment volunteers, follow up before and after a session to check in; sit down and discuss ways to improve activities to make sure all students are being served well
- If tutors are struggling with a student or topic being taught, they are supported by leaders or yourself
- If tutors are not doing their job appropriately, they are spoken to in a respectful and caring way (away from other people) and are given a chance for remediation
- If tutors or leaders are not consistent in their attendance, this concern is brought to them in a respectful and caring manner (away from other people) and are given a chance for remediation.
- If tutors or leaders are not understanding the “Project [em]POWER Way” of interacting with students, these tutors are signed up for immediate retraining.

We value leadership. To this end, we see leadership this way:

- Leadership does not take on the same form for everyone
- Leadership needs to be taught
- Students may not always be aware when they are acting as a leader in a situation, therefore, it is important to let students know when they are demonstrating leadership skills
- Leadership can be misused
- Leadership involves knowing how and when to follow
- Leadership involves the building of caring relationships
- Leadership needs to be nurtured and encouraged

We value relationships. To this end, we see relationships in this way:

- This program is founded on deep, caring, meaningful and authentic relationships. Leaders and volunteers are expected to demonstrate this characteristic
- Our students and their parents are to be seen as being “resource full.” They are not to be looked at as having deficits, but rather, strengths upon which we can build
- Our participants and their families have special knowledge, skills, talents, and history that deserve to be nurtured and respected
- Our students and their families deserve to be heard
- Our students deserve to be given an opportunity to improve if they make mistakes
- Our students deserve to be successful and it is our job to help them accomplish this
- Our students deserve to be in an environment in which they feel safe, therefore, no violence (verbal or physical) will be allowed to occur, including bullying
- We exist to serve others, therefore, we keep this in mind in all of our interactions with school staff, parents, other staff members, and our students.

This excerpt from the staff-training manual starts with the notion that those in the organization must, “think in a new direction,” the direction of caring for others. Everything starts
with the idea that everyone deserves to be valued and respected. This is not contrary to the philosophy of many organizations. In essence, it is the “Golden Rule.” But, in my own understanding of POWER, it takes this rule a step in another dimension, to tenacity. As an example of how this expanded philosophy plays out organizationally, is in its dealings with the partner university. In the history section of this chapter I mentioned that when Miss Jones was initially attempting to form a collaboration with the university, she was asked which department and what grant she was with. Having none, she felt as if she were seen as “just a community member.” It might have been easy to walk away and seek some other avenue for collaboration. But, in keeping with her philosophy of, “thinking in a new direction,” Miss Jones did not give up. Instead, she thought hard about who she knew within the university community. She approached many people before finding a connection to the Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences (GSLIS). As Miss Jones put it,

> My experiences mirror the experiences of others in the community. I didn’t know what GSLIS was. I’m educated and was clueless. If I’m clueless, what about others? There is a whole lot we as a community do not know about the university.

> In using her philosophy of thinking in a new direction, Miss Jones was able to see beyond the roadblocks and push beyond her lack of knowledge, and beyond her self-admitted fear of being looked down upon for not being credentialed as an academic, and create a partnership that continues to be central to the organization.

Another example that exemplifies how this philosophy works in action is with how the adults in the program work with students. This example also brings to light an issue with this philosophy. Miss Jones is highly committed to the students who participate in POWER. One example of this is in her dealings with Alfred (Bi-racial, Black and White male). Alfred is a sixth grader at Pradera Middle School. Upon first glance, Alfred is not unlike many his age. He is
energetic and can be quite charismatic, but he also has difficulty getting and staying focused, and can be loud and a bit defiant. When first attending the after school program at the middle school, there was nothing to suggest that he would not fit in. But that sentiment did not last for long. Within a few weeks it was apparent to the site-coordinator, Mr. Eddie, as well as to the high school-aged leaders, that Alfred was not fitting in. There were repeated incidents of Alfred “playfully” hitting other students, not following directions, refusing to cooperate with students and adults, and generally, as it is termed by the organization, not following the “[em]POWER way.” Mr. Eddie, as was expected, communicated his concerns to Miss Jones. As this is an after school program, and not in school, there are no formal disciplinary procedures, no principals to send students to, and no discipline referrals or detentions to hand out. In keeping with the philosophy of the organization, Miss Jones reminded Mr. Eddie of the commitment POWER had to its participants and suggested that he needed to try a new perspective. Could he support Alfred, “love him,” and hang with him until his behavior would come around? She reminded Mr. Miles and the program leaders that the idea was not to control the students, but to help them control themselves. She reminded them that this was not school, and the students were not to be treated in a way that they may have been treated in school. She then dedicated time each week at the program site for getting to know Alfred and, when needed, lovingly redirecting him, often hugging him tightly to her lap. In getting to know Alfred, Miss Jones realized she was seeing some of the same behaviors in him that she had seen in her own son. She called Alfred’s mother and was told that he had severe Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, but, that he loved coming to the program. Over the next month, Alfred’s behavior did not change, but the staff remained committed to the idea of supporting him and caring about him in order to promote his success.
Though Mr. Eddie knew the philosophy of the program and according to him, believed in it, the situation with Alfred caused him great stress. It got to the point that Alfred was talking back to the adults and students in the program on a regular basis, and once corrected, however respectfully, his behavior would escalate to the point where he often had to be asked to move away. According to Mr. Eddie, “This is such a nice group of kids. Sometimes when Alfred acts-up, he takes other kids with him. I know it is not fair, but I just wish we could do something. He is ruining what could be such a great thing here. I know it is not in keeping with the POWER way, but I just don’t think he is a good fit.” Mr. Eddie seemed to understand the philosophy of the organization, but putting it into practice with this student who stressed the environment was a great challenge for him and seemingly for the rest of the staff and volunteers.

In talking with Alfred one day about his behavior, he asked me, “Where is Miss Sunita? I miss her. She is the only one around here who cares about me. Where did they find that Mr. Eddie anyways? He hates kids.” I asked him why he felt this way and he told me, “I don’t like him. I don’t know why. Miss Sunita is nice. She is nice in all ways.” I asked him how the two are different and he responded, “She is able to calm me down when I am upset.” In Chapter Four, I will delve further into this, but I do think this situation is one that demonstrates the philosophy of POWER. On his own, Mr. Eddie would have admittedly, removed Alfred from the program. But, because the philosophy of the program required him to “think in a new direction,” Mr. Eddie was forced to rethink how he interacted with this student who seemed to push not only his buttons, but those of the other adults and many students as well. Not everyone could do this. In fact, over the course of the year I did both informal and formal observations and wrote-up this study,

---

17 I spent about two weeks observing the program at the middle school during the winter of 2012. It was during this time that I witnessed Alfred’s behavior and the staff interaction with him. I spoke often with Mr. Eddie during this time both formally in the form of an interview, and informally, during the daily debriefing times after the students left.
situations such as this led to the turnover of several staff members who in theory, believed in the philosophy of the program, but found it too much of a challenge to put into practice.

**Program to Student “Fit”**

In order for the philosophy of the program to work, the students must be able or at least willing to control their own behavior. In addition, students are expected to be in good academic standing, with, “passing grades” and a shown desire to learn. As can be expected, this leaves some students, like Alfred, out. This point is one that has been often discussed within the leadership of the program. The fact is that POWER is not a program for the students who are failing school or who are causing great problems in their classes. This matter has great consequence when students like Alfred sign up, because it leads to great complications with the students as well as the staff. The problem arises within the embodiment of the philosophy, for at its core, there is a belief that all children deserve respect and that participants are to be seen as being “resource-full.” They are not to be looked at as having deficits, but rather, strengths upon which program leaders can build. But, in practice, this is hard to do with students who do not follow directions or who do not try to do their best in the classroom.

This philosophical dilemma led to a problem with retention of staff for the program. Because believing a philosophy is one thing and embodying it is something different, there were two different site-coordinators who left their positions. When it came to implementing a philosophy that centered students’ needs with students who were behaviorally challenging, these adults fell back into more traditional adult-student power relationships, employing more authoritarian methods of working with the more challenging students, and eventually, were asked, or chose to leave.
Logistics of the After School Component

During the summer of 2011, Miss Jones and I collaboratively wrote and received a 1.35 million dollar grant through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program, which is a federally funded grant through the U.S. Department of Education. This funding allowed the program to expand from a summer enrichment program to an after school program at three different sites in Pradera. The funding will be spread to each site over three years.

Since the fall of 2011, POWER has been running 21st CCLC sites at three locations in Pradera. In collaboration with the Pradera School District, there are now programs for two of three middle schools, and one of two high schools. When Miss Jones contacted the school district in preparation for writing the 21st CCLC grant, which required a school partnership, the district determined the schools that would most benefit from the program. Though I spent time at each of the three sites, the primary focus of my observations was at Pradera High School.

Each of the three sites are centrally and independently coordinated from the POWER office in a church foundation on the University’s campus. The Executive Director, Sunita Jones, oversees the workings of the organization: Seeking further funding, hiring, training, and managing staff, writing grants, building collaborations throughout the community and University, and managing the 21st CCLC grant. It is her passion and vision that drive the organization. Audrey Phillips serves as the Director of Programs and Operations. She is in charge of overseeing each of the three sites.

At each of the three sites there are site-coordinators who are in charge of running the programs at their respective schools. These site-coordinators are responsible for maintaining active relationships with the participants’ teachers and families, and serve as liaisons between the
school and the after school program. Each site also employs two to three “leaders.” The leaders in the program are high school and undergraduate students who primarily serve as tutors and mentors to the program participants. Miss Jones seeks out young people to work for the organization in leadership capacities. It is not uncommon for organization meetings and gatherings to include people as young as 15, contributing to discussions on topics such as behavioral interventions and program philosophy. In addition to the leaders, the program is heavily dependent upon volunteer tutors. Tutors are recruited through university service learning courses, university volunteer services, and through the university’s College of Education. Most tutors work one day a week for two to three hours. Everyone in the program receives two to four hours of training in the philosophy of the organization, program organization and expectations, and cultural understanding. The volunteer tutors receive additional training on how to work with the scholars. This training is done in the form of role-playing and discussion. It also involves having students speak about their experiences in school and ways they like to be treated by adults.

Although each of the programs has their own particularities that fit the environment of the specific site, they do have many things in common. One aspect of the program that is central to POWER is the philosophy of the organization. Also, each of the programs run from the end of the school day (approximately 3:00 pm) to 6:00 pm., Mondays through Thursdays on days school is in session. The programs also each begin with announcements, followed by an, “academic hour” where students are tutored by the leaders and volunteers, receiving help on homework as needed, being retaught, or doing other academically oriented activities such as reading or playing educational games on the computer. The remainder of the program is spent
doing enrichment activities that vary from site to site depending on student interest and academic need.

The students in POWER attend the program voluntarily and are free to attend on whichever days they choose. The fee for the program is $125.00 per month, but this fee is waived for students of color, those who qualify for free and reduced lunch prices, and those whose families qualify for the state’s child health care system (which allows for students who come from lower-middle income homes, such as those whose parents are teachers, to attend for free). It is my understanding that none of the participants who have been a part of POWER’s after school program have had to pay for attending the after school portion of the program.

Though POWER is not a program solely for low-income students of color, the population of the program is predominantly this group. In the first two years of the program, it was the practice of POWER to interview each student who was interested in participating in the program to assure a good student to program fit. This process did not occur the semester that I did this observation.

**Pradera High School Program**

As I stated earlier, POWER has three sites where programming takes place. As the major focus of my observations took place at the high school, I will describe this particular site in detail. Pradera High School was built in 1976 and looks like many of the vast high schools built during the 1970s with its elongated, sealed windows and pebble-covered concrete exterior. The students in this program meet in an old auditorium styled room that is adjacent to a small computer lab. During the day, these bare rooms are used for academic tutoring and meetings with school counselors. Both rooms are painted stark white and sport no art, student work, or posters upon the walls. The auditorium styled room holds some 60 broken down metal desks
with flip up desktops (many of which are broken or are non-existent). The desks are bolted to the tiered concrete floors, with a worn-down carpeted, rather steep incline leading to the front of the room. In the front of the room is a green chalkboard, a moveable white board, and a small table where the leaders often sit and talk while they await the program participants. Florescent lights illuminate the space, the flicker adding to the coldness of the room. Besides being used as a gathering space for the announcements that settle students into the routine, few students use the auditorium-styled room during the program. Those that do find themselves sitting awkwardly in the desks, some forward, others back, trying fruitlessly to form some kind of “group.”

The adjacent room is similarly bland. Twenty older computers ring the room, sitting atop white plastic tables, facing the empty white walls. In the center of the room, elongated tables form three arcs that face the front white board. The gray tiles on the floor show the wear of the thirty rolling chairs that serve as both seats, and entertainment for the high school students.

The high school program serves an average of 15 students per day, though there is capacity to serve over 30. There is a core of approximately 10 students who come regularly, with the balance coming in and out as needed or desired. Their teachers who learned about the program at a staff meeting recruited the students. Though the program is open to all, the population is composed primarily of low-income, Black and Latino(a) freshmen. Most are enrolled in at least two honors level courses, and if they are not, they are considered by their teachers to be, “capable” of doing well academically in school. Though most of the students have chosen to participate due to a desire to increase their grades, these are not students who get into significant trouble in their classes, and they are not students with significant behavior problems or special educational needs.
The school day ends with the sounds associated with freedom—a metallic tone emanating from loud speakers in each room indicate the end of the day at 3:05, followed by shouts, laughter, sounds of running feet, and slamming lockers. While the program leaders and volunteers await the incoming students, they talk about the day, any particularities from days past that the tutors need to know, and the enrichment activities that will be taking place. The students meander into the auditorium, often still talking with friends, anytime between 3:10 and 3:30. The sounds of loud running footsteps down the auditorium ramp are often accompanied by shouts of “hello” to the leaders in the program. The students check-in and grab the snack the school has provided, usually grumbling about the humble offerings of chips and milk, or perhaps an apple. As the students trickle in, they laugh and joke warmly with one another, the tutors, and the leaders. The room is filled with loud talking before the ubiquitous, “EM!” futilely shouted by the site-coordinator or one of the leaders, followed by a usually lackluster, “POWER” that follows, mockingly spoken by the few students who are listening. This exercise is the way the program begins each day. A call and response, often having to be repeated, four, sometimes six times, in order to get the students settled down for announcements. The settling is often short-lived, as the leaders attempt to remind students of their purpose (to do homework and study) and the enrichment activities planned for the day.

After a few, often painful minutes of announcements interrupted by students’ talking and adult corrections, the students move over to the computer lab, cluster themselves and “settle” down to work. Over the course of the next hour, students talk, walk, or wheel around the room, and do their work. Tutors and leaders make themselves comfortable with a small group of students clustered with friends, or an individual, answering questions and chatting as the situation fits. The “academic hour” has a rhythm. Some students check their grades (or Facebook
pages) on the computers, while others move around the room talking with friends. Small groups form, then disband, or not, working at times, talking at others. Leaders meet in the front of the room to reteach a misunderstood concept in algebra to a few students, or perhaps to study for an exam on Ancient India, using the scarred white board as a platform for a timeline. Students work on their math, Spanish, biology, or English homework, oftentimes helping each other, and sometimes receiving help from the tutors or leaders in the room. The site-coordinator checks in, sometimes staying for long periods, talking with students about their academic progress, problems with friends, or just about life. It is a loud space, one that may look chaotic to an outsider or one who does not work with youth of this age, but amidst the chaos, there is some work being done, by some, but usually not all, of the program participants.

At around 4:15, a new set of adults wander in. Depending on the day, or on the activity for the day, different people arrive for enrichment, often dragging in large boxes filled with equipment or materials. Some of the scholars in the room, seemingly engaged in other tasks, take notice of the new arrivals and few rush to help with the move. On the somewhat rare occasion that everyone is running on time, at 4:30 the students are instructed to move towards the location where enrichment is taking place. If it is an activity like the duct tape project, the enrichment takes place in the computer lab. Other activities like cooking, or dance take place in other locations around the building. The students can choose to participate in the enrichment activity, or not, depending on their interest and the amount of homework they have to complete. One day a week, Tuesdays during the semester I observed, students get on a public bus at the end of the school day and travel 30 minutes to the university where they do their studies and receive tutoring, then do science, math, and technology related enrichment activities along side university students, led by university professors. On these Tuesdays, the group is often much
smaller (averaging eight students) than on regular days. According to the students, the travel time eats too much into their study time, so several choose not to participate.

On days the students are not on campus, they work and do enrichment activities until about 5:30, when they have their second snack, this one provided for by the program with food from the local food bank. They sit together, often back in the auditorium room, talk about their day, people they love and hate, and the latest gossip. They text, Tweet, Angry Bird, talk, joke, tease, and eat. When they are done, alone or in small groups, they leave the program and head for home after checking out for the day. The feeling of the time together, like an unfinished symphony, is cacophonous and at the same time, melodious, with its changing rhythms, tempos, and timbre.

The History of After School Programs

After school programs vary widely and go by several names. Generally, “after school programs” is a term used to describe any array of safe, structured programs that provide children and youth in grades Kindergarten through 12, with a range of supervised activities intentionally designed to encourage learning and development outside of the school day (Little, 2009). Seen as a mechanism for keeping students safe after school, these programs saw a dramatic resurgence in the 1970s due to the large influx of women into the workplace (D. L. Vandell & Shumow, 1999). In 1998, in response to a research study conducted by the Carnegie Foundation on what youth needed in order to be productive citizens, the U.S. Department of Education launched the 21st

---

18 The Carnegie Commission's Turning Points (Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, 1989) asked what qualities they envisioned in the 15 year old who has been well served in the middle years of schooling. The commission asked, “What do we want every young adolescent to know, to feel, to be able to do upon emerging from their educational and school related experiences?” The answer the commission came up with included the five characteristics associated with being effective human beings. According to the report, a 15 year old will be an intellectually reflective person, a person en route to a lifetime of meaningful work, a good citizen, a caring and ethical individual and a healthy person (Pittman et al., 2001).
Century Community Learning Centers grant initiative. Its historic public-private partnership with the C.S. Mott Foundation set out to build and support the capacity of after school programs to deliver quality care and programming to youth throughout the nation (Little, 2009). Until this time, the primary goal of after school programs had been to provide a safe space for youth, and to prevent youth problems such as smoking, drug use, delinquency, and pregnancy. The Carnegie Commission’s, *Turning point* (1989) along with The Grant Commission’s, *The forgotten half* (1988) led to a “paradigm shift” (Pittman et al., 2001). No longer was prevention and safety the law of the after school land. These reports led to a new focus—preparation. In the past 15 years, after school programs have expanded exponentially (Yohalem, 2010), and for many, they have come to be seen as a way to expand the learning opportunities for youth within the current educational context (McLaughlin, 2000).

**Purpose of After School Programs**

In the literature and in the field, it is not uncommon to see the terms, “out-of-school time,” “expanded learning opportunities,” or “after school enrichment” all being used to describe programs that serve the needs of school-aged youth during non-school hours. According to Larson and Verma (1999), 50% of school-aged children’s waking hours are spent out of school, and how they spend this time is dependent heavily upon what types of supervision they have. It has also been well-documented that children’s after school hours are an important part of their day (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997; Bryant, 1989; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Meece, 1999; Posner & Vandell, 1999). Further documented is the negative impact that a lack of supervision has on the academic achievement of youth (Posner & Vandell, 1999; Vandell & Shumow, 1999).
With the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, the research study I have conducted becomes salient. For many, after school programs have come to be seen as a way to provide additional learning time to students who are failing to achieve at acceptable levels on academic achievement exams (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; A. B. Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010; Lauer et al., 2006; McLaughlin, 2000). According to Lauer et al. (2006), “The rising popularity of after school programs results primarily from new demands for accountability in education and the need for after-school care for children of working parents” (p. 1). Other reasons cited for the vast expansion of after school programming include: a growing need for safe places for youth when they are not in school (Halpern, 1999); a belief that after school programs can, “equalize the playing field” by providing youth from low-income families the same enrichment opportunities that are available to middle and upper income families (Deschenes & Janc-Malone, 2011; Posner & Vandell, 1994); an increased concern about juvenile delinquency (Halpern, 1999, 2000; Little, 2009; McLaughlin, 2000); and a generally held belief that schools and families alone cannot meet the needs of the whole child (Little, 2009; McLaughlin, 2000; Pittman et al., 2001).

**Impact of After School Programs**

The research on after school programs tends to focus on two primary areas. One is that of the impacts of programming on its participants, and the other on the programs themselves, and what constitutes an environment that is most beneficial for participants. The research on program impacts is vast, and the findings, varied. Also varied is the type of outcomes researchers have sought to find through their work. There is a body of research that suggests that after school programs have a positive impact on students’ academic achievement (Eccles, 1999; Fiske, 1999;
Further studies have indicated specific academic impacts. Several researchers found increased math achievement on standardized test scores for students who participate regularly in “quality” after school programs (Black, Doolittle, Zhu, Unterman, & Grossman, 2008; Lauer et al., 2003; Lauer et al., 2006; Little, 2008; D. Vandell et al., 2007; D. L. Vandell, Reisner, et al., 2005; Welsh et al., 2002). Welsh et al. (2002) completed a study through Policy Studies Incorporated on the TASC program in New York City. In their findings, the researchers suggested that Black students were especially likely to benefit from active participation in TASC programming in that they found that these students made gains in their math achievement test scores after just one year of participation. Further, these researchers noted that after two years of participation, Latino students made these same gains.

Though not as prevalent, some researchers found that students who participated in after school programs also posted gains on achievement test scores in reading (Little, 2008; Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005; D. Vandell et al., 2007). Several researchers found that participation in after school programs had a positive effect on students’ grades in core academic areas (Clark, 1990; Eccles, Barber, & Jozefowicz, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Goerge, 2007; McLaughlin, 2000; Posner & Vandell, 1994, 1999; Schinke, Cole, & Poulin, 2000; D. L. Vandell, Pierce, & Dadisman, 2005; D. L. Vandell et al., 2004; D. L. Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007; Welsh et al., 2002), although Goerge (2007) found that these effects minimized over time and that two years after participation, the impacts on grades were gone. According to Kane (2004), low-income children have been shown to experience the greatest gains in academic
performance when they participate in after school programs, particularly when they attend regularly and the programs are academically focused. The importance of regular participation in after school programs is echoed similarly in several researchers’ work (Little, 2009; D. L. Vandell et al., 2007; Welsh et al., 2002). Lamare (1998), in her evaluation of the Sacramento START program, found statistically significant improvements in participants’ standardized test scores. Though not as significant of findings, Little (2008) echoed this point in her research.

Two researchers that I found have done studies that have shown that quality after school programs indeed shrink the achievement gap rates between Black and White students (Fashola, 1998, 2002, 2003; Fleming-McCormick & Tushnet, 1996). Several researchers have looked at after school programming effects on the development of factors that are correlated with academic achievement. Among these factors, researchers have found that quality after school programs increase participants work habits (Little, 2008; D. L. Vandell & Reisner, 2008; D. L. Vandell et al., 2007; D. L. Vandell et al., 2006), task persistence (Little, 2008; D. L. Vandell & Reisner, 2008; D. L. Vandell et al., 2007), attendance rates (Clark, 1990; Goerge, 2007; Little, 2008; McLaughlin, 2000; Posner & Vandell, 1994, 1999; Reisner et al., 2004; Schinke et al., 2000; Welsh et al., 2002), homework completion (Clark, 1990; Little, 2008; McLaughlin, 2000; Posner & Vandell, 1994, 1999; Schinke et al., 2000; Welsh et al., 2002), positive attitudes about school (Clark, 1990; Little & Harris, 2003; Posner & Vandell, 1994, 1999; Schinke et al., 2000; Welsh et al., 2002), positive behavior in school (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Miller, 2005; Posner & Vandell, 1999; D. L. Vandell et al., 2007), in-class engagement (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Miller, 2005), graduation rates (Cooper et al., 1999; Goerge, 2007; Little, 2008), and expectations for educational success (Miller, 2005).
Another body of research that has implications for academic success is that which has examined the psycho-sociological impacts of after school programming on those who participate. Several studies found that participation in after school programs leads to increases in a student’s sense of self-efficacy, self-worth, and individual identity (Eccles, 1999; Eccles et al., 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; McLaughlin, 2000). These same authors agree that participants increase their resiliency. Larson (2000) conducted a study examining the concept of initiative suggesting that task persistence over a period of time on a challenging subject of interest was what created this initiative. He found that after school programs, even more than school, create this set of circumstances for youth in programs that are designed to do so. Posner and Vandell (1999) found that participating students were better emotionally adjusted and had better relationships with adults and their peers than were those who did not participate in after school programs. The finding about improved relationships was also found by Larson, Hansen, and Moneta (2006) and Eccles and Gootman (2002). In the study completed by Larson et al. (2006), additional findings included increased ability to work as a part of a team, conflict resolution abilities, social competence, and leadership skills.

Despite these numerous positive findings, a few studies found that the academic impact of attending after school programs was minimal, or null (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001; Hollister, 2003; Miller, 2005). In a study of the 21st Century Learning Centers Programs, Mathematica Policy Research Institute found no statistically significant gain in participants’ academic outcomes. 21st Century Learning Centers Programs are the largest funders of after school programs in the nation. There are several reasons that may account for the variability of findings in this large body of research. Bodilly and Beckett (2005) suggest that the research that has been done has been lacking rigor, using control groups of students who did not choose to
participate in the program with those that did make that choice (or had it made for them by their parents). Much like the work of Bodily and Beckett, in his work in 1994, Larson discussed how much of the research done on after school programs was correlational and couldn’t account for selective participation. M. I. Honig and M. A. McDonald (2005) agree with this assessment as they discuss selection bias and the difficulty with finding adequate control groups in programs such as these. These authors further state, “The research by in large does not indicate how programs are actually implemented, thereby omitting information essential for interpreting results . . . such studies cannot clarify whether positive or negative program results stemmed from an after school program as designed or as implemented” (p. 3). Larson, 2000 suggests that longitudinal studies may better be able to assess the long term impact of after school programming, but in doing so, he also warns that these types of studies are complicated, few and far between, and also suffer from the inability to adequately control for the possibility that prior, unmeasured third variables were driving the relationships found. Fashola, 1998 discusses the fact that at the time of her review, most of the studies done were being done on middle-class, White students, therefore rendering them ungeneralizable to low-income, minority youth. In an attempt to explain why the Mathematica Policy Research Group found no statistical academic benefit from after school programs sponsored by the 21st Century Community Learning Center initiative, Riggs and Greenberg (2004a) suggest that this study had significant flaws in evaluation design. The Mathematica study was conducted after just one year of program implementation, and it lacked randomization as well as a control for baseline differences.

Several researchers that found positive outcomes in student achievement and generally positive youth development outcomes also suggested possible reasons for these positive outcomes. As noted in two different studies, oftentimes, the culture of those adults who work in
after school programs more accurately reflect the race, ethnicity, and culture of the students who participate in them, unlike those who work in the schools the students attend (G. G. Noam, Miller, & Barry, 2002; Rhodes, 2004). Several researchers found strong, caring, and lasting relationships to be a part of the reason for positive after school program impacts (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Little, 2009; J. L. Mahoney, 2000; G. G. Noam et al., 2002; Rhodes, 2004). These relationships were found to empower students with social capital (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson et al., 2006). Another factor that some researchers found in these programs that impacted students who participated in them was that they provided enrichment activities that were often hands-on, relevant to the lives of students, and experiential in nature (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Little, 2008, 2009).

Even though the research is equivocal, the preponderance of research, common wisdom, and the amount of governmental, corporate, foundational, public, and private money that goes into building and supporting out-of-school time opportunities for youth suggests that they do indeed benefit participants.

**Effective Practices of After School Programs**

The research on what makes for an effective after school program is not definitive. Despite this, it is possible to examine the qualities observed by POWER in comparison to what the researchers, though not in full agreement, suggest are what makes for an effective program. Many of the researchers suggest that one important factor, in particular, is of particular importance to program quality, and that is the quality of relationships between the adults and youth in a program (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005; Deschenes & Janc-Malone, 2011; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Fashola, 1998, 2002, 2003; Hall, Yohalem, Tolman, &
Wilson, 2002; Lippman & Rivers, 2008; Little, 2008, 2009; McLaughlin, 2000; Miller, 2005; G. Noam, 2008; Rhodes, 2004; D. L. Vandell et al., 2007). As is evidenced by the stated philosophy of the program, POWER places relationships at the center of the project. I will discuss qualities of the relationships I observed in Chapter Four.

Other qualities that researchers have found to be of importance that are in line with POWER include a focus on academics (Birmingham et al., 2005; Deschenes & Janc-Malone, 2011; Lippman & Rivers, 2008; Little, 2009; G. Noam, 2008; D. L. Vandell et al., 2007); having an academic focus but not functioning similarly to the traditional school environment (Fashola, 2003; M. Honig & M. McDonald, 2005; Little, 2009; Rhodes, 2004; D. L. Vandell et al., 2007); providing opportunities for enrichment (Birmingham et al., 2005; Deschenes & Janc-Malone, 2011; Fashola, 2003; M. Honig & M. McDonald, 2005; Little, 2009; Pederson, de Kanter, Bobo, Weinig, & Noeth, 1998; D. L. Vandell et al., 2007)); having trained supervisors, tutors, program organizers, and volunteers who are knowledgeable about youth (Little, 2008, 2009; G. Noam, 2008; G. G. Noam et al., 2002; Pederson et al., 1998; D. L. Vandell et al., 2007); staff and volunteers having knowledge of and respect for the culture of the students (Birmingham et al., 2005; Hall et al., 2002; M. Honig & M. McDonald, 2005; James, Jurich, & Estes, 2001; G. G. Noam et al., 2002; Pederson et al., 1998); and providing opportunities for hands-on, experiential, project-based learning (Birmingham et al., 2005; Fashola, 2003; Oakes & Guiton, 1995) that are centered on the interests of the students (Deschenes & Janc-Malone, 2011; Fashola, 2003; M. Honig & M. McDonald, 2005; Lippman & Rivers, 2008; McLaughlin, 2000). Other qualities mentioned by researchers that are a part of POWER include: providing an intentional learning environment (Deschenes & Janc-Malone, 2011; Little, 2008, 2009; G. Noam, 2008; Pederson et al., 1998); involvement of parents (Deschenes & Janc-Malone, 2011; Miller, 2005; Pederson et
al., 1998); and having strong, knowledgeable, passionate, and well-trained leadership (Deschenes & Janc-Malone, 2011; G. G. Noam et al., 2002; Pederson et al., 1998; Quinn, 1999). Having these qualities does not, in and of itself, insure a strong, high quality program. In the chapters that follow, I will further describe some of the elements listed above as they relate to the experience of the students in program POWER.
Chapter 3

Theory and Methods

In this chapter I will first explain the theories I used that helped me make sense of my research. Following this, I will discuss the specific methods I used for this study. For this study I utilized qualitative inquiry in order to attempt to answer the following question: What are the qualities of experiences, interactions, and learning opportunities provided by Project [em]POWER and how do the students engage with and take advantage of them?

In order to answer this question, I observed and interviewed participants over the course of the spring of 2012. I also reviewed program documents and interviewed several program staff. As I will discuss at more length in the methods section of this chapter, many rich conversations with students occurred outside of traditional interviews during their program time. In order to understand the context of the school day, and better understand what the students said to me in our interviews, I also observed those participants I interviewed in a two of their classes. In order to experience what the students did for enrichment, I participated in several field trips and weekly trips to the local university for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) instruction.

Socio-Cultural Learning Theory

Learning happens within a social context and students are not merely vessels into which knowledge is poured. This is a basic tenant of socio-cultural learning theory (SCLT) which draws heavily on the work of Vygotsky (1986). Vygotsky argued that individual learning must be understood in terms of the social, cultural, and historical processes of people’s activities. One key feature of this view of human development is that learning occurs through social interaction.
In order to understand human development, we must examine the social world in which humans exist. Theorists such as Wertsch (1998), and Rogoff and Chavajay (1995) further this argument by suggesting that indeed, context matters, as does a person’s everyday experience. This work stems from cross-cultural research and research from a variety of settings that seem to foster learning (Honig & McDonald, 2005; Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995). I looked at the context of the program and used this theory to help me understand how it is similar and different from the formal learning context of the classroom. I used this framework in order to understand the context of POWER and look carefully at the conditions in which students were experiencing the opportunities of the program, “because the context of one’s observations make a difference in what is learned, it is important to work in contexts that matter” (p. 867). Following the work of Rogoff, Baker Sennett, Lacasa, and Goldsmith (1995), I attempted to understand the historical and institutional context of the activities I witnessed.

According to SCLT, a person is, “part of an activity in which he or she participates, not separate from it” (Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995). A person grows intellectually through participation in an activity, as they change to be involved in the current situation in ways that contribute both to that which they are participating in and to the person's preparation for involvement in other, similar events. With the guide of SCLT I looked at development as a process of transformation through participation in social activities. This encouraged me to look deeply at program participants’ level of involvement and engagement in activities such as tutoring, and enrichment activities.

Much like the work I participated in, Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1989) focused their research on examining students’ every day activities in schools as well as in after school programs. Their work aims to understand the interpersonal and mediated ways that learning
occurs in cultural institutions. I examined POWER as a cultural institution. Is its culture so different than that of the schools from which the students attend? If so, how? And what impact does this have on the learning experiences of these students in and outside of this institution, if any? After school programs such as POWER are designed to be different from school, yet aim to further academic outcomes that impact student in school. To compare the settings ofPOWER and a school classroom as if they were the same would be unwise. In my analysis, I attempt to see the contexts historically, but also look at the social nature of the interactions of these different learning environments. Because SCLT suggests it is important to look at the culture of an institution in order to understand how people learn within it, understanding the culture within POWER was a part of what I examined in my data. Because my research primarily examined the experiences of minority students, this quote by Rogoff and Chavajay (1995) afforded me further support for deciding to approach my work keeping culture and the role of context in mind.

For many years, researchers focused on comparing the behavior and skills of minority children with mainstream children without taking into consideration the cultural contexts in which these groups develop. This approach involved “deficit model” assumptions that mainstream skills and upbringing are normal and that variations observed with minorities are aberrations that produce deficits. (p. 870)

Honig and McDonald (2005) argue that socio-cultural learning theory helps sort programs by their impact on learning and demonstrates the, “less equivocal finding that afterschool programs with certain features tend to strengthen student learning while others demonstrate less or no success in this area” (p. 2). In other words, looking at a program through a socio-cultural learning theory lens helped me to understand what was going on in the environment, in the context itself, which helped this program engage students in learning opportunities. These authors further argue after school research may indeed focus on the wrong units for analysis. Many researchers look to answer the question of whether or not after school
programs are effective, rather than looking at different programs differently. This is what I have done with my study. I have conducted a micro-analysis of one program and SCLT guided me as I looked at the day-to-day context of what was going on that promoted, or detracted from learning.

SCLT posits that how a program is implemented and how and when students participate are essential to understanding environments that achieve in their goal of educating (Honig & McDonald, 2005a). These researchers suggest that SCLT helped them to identify key features of environments and interactions in those environments that support learning. In SCLT, participation refers to engagement in genuine, meaningful work. As I examined the engagement of students in POWER, I looked at when and how students participated and for evidence of meaningful work (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Centering the students’ voices allowed me to further use this theory to understand what “meaningful” means to them. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that meaningful work is valued, relevant, and authentic and that it involves collaboration, centers the student’s interest, and includes cycles of planning, performance, and assessment.

SCLT helped me examine whether this meaningful work does indeed exist within this program. This theory is also relevant as I looked at relationships as it posits that it is not enough to just have adults present, but that the quality of their presence, and the interactions, fosters learning (M. Honig & M. McDonald, 2005). In their study of afterschool programs from a SCLT perspective, Honig and McDonald (2005a) found that social interactions vary in ways that matter, to support a student’s learning. They go on to suggest that in settings where students are involved in environments that promote human interactions, students have stronger support for their learning. In order to understand what human interactions looked like to them, I observed the students interacting with one another and with adults, but I also talked to the students about the qualities of the relations they have with the adults and with each other in the program. I used this
notion of SCLT to help me interpret what the participants told me. I also observed within the classroom in order to help me understand and interpret the students’ interactions with teachers and other students within the regular school day. What are the qualities of these relationships? Are they similar in some ways to those at POWER? Again, as POWER is purposely designed to support the schools’ goals of academic success without *feeling* like school, I suspected that there was going be a difference in the quality of relationships in these two different spaces before actually seeing them. I analyzed my data looking for similarities and differences in these relations.

Also on the note of relationship quality, I looked for ways in which a student’s culture is valued or devalued by the adults in both settings. POWER intentionally centers a student’s race, gender, ethnicity, and culture. All adults who work within this program, at least in theory, are trained to be racially sensitive and culturally aware. They are trained to work with people that may be different from them. They are expected to act with kindness and respect, and to problem solve with students if there are problems. My aim has not been to place judgment on the different settings, rather to compare the relationships within each in a rich way that will help readers of my research understand what the students experience in these different environments.

Part of SCLT expands on the notion of a community of practice. Communities of practice are characterized by structures that allow people to transfer, or generalize their knowledge across settings (Villarruel, 1994). Given the notion of communities of practice, one could expect for after school programs that have connections to schools to have a greater impact on student academic performance than those who do not. SCLT extends this notion by suggesting that it is not the environment, per se, or the structural similarities between schools and afterschool
programs that is important, but rather, whether students have opportunities to wrestle with what they have learned in multiple settings (M. Honig & M. McDonald, 2005).

SCLT embraces a range of learning outcomes related to acquiring mastery that don’t necessarily occur in school such as service and leadership (Honig and McDonald, 2005a). In my research, I looked at learning outcomes, not from the traditional perspective, but I looked for outcomes that were related to acquiring mastery on academic skills, not necessarily the academic skills themselves, as these were illusive to my research. Tucker and Herman (2002) situate the discussion of research on the specific cultural group being studied within a racial, cultural, historical, and social context. The researchers suggest that most of the factors that hold-back the academic achievement of Black students are irresolvable, at least for the near future. Working from this belief that racism and disparities in income will continue to hold-back poor children of color regardless of reform efforts, “then one is left with a single conclusion: African American students must be taught to achieve under whatever sociopolitical conditions exist” (p. 766). I kept this notion in mind as I conducted my research and analyzed my findings.

In their review of research on after school programs and their effectiveness, Honig and McDonald (2005), created a framework based on SCLT in order to help them understand why some programs are more effective than others at increasing student learning. Rather than providing a framework for understanding my data, this theory will help me look for critical program components, and in doing so, allow me to understand my observations and the context in which they occurred.
Supportive Relationships

Though not originally a part of my research plan, in looking at the data as a whole, I found that one tenant in SCLT that of the centering of the importance of the quality of the relationships between the students and adults in the program, was of particular importance to the students themselves. As I found a significant difference between how the students engaged in learning opportunities in POWER versus in school, I sought to understand what about these environments fostered differentiated levels of engagement. Time and time again, the students spoke of how they feel in class as compared to the program, so for this reason, I decided to look at the specific nature of the relationships I had observed. In my observations, one thing that stood out to me was the centering of caring that occurred within POWER. In order to better understand what caring meant to the students and its potential impact, I found the work of Nel Noddings, whose many writings suggest that students learn when there is an ethic of caring in the learning environment (Noddings, 1988, 2005b). In reading the work of Noddings, I came to understand that indeed, in POWER, there was an ethic of caring. As Noddings work tends to be more philosophical, it did not provide me with a framework for understanding the relations and caring that I witnessed in both the setting of the program as well as the classroom. It did not provide me with a guidepost of what to look for.

Research has been done looking at the increasing level of impersonal structure and atmosphere between middle school and elementary school (Davis, 2006). In a study done by Lynch and Cicchetti (1997) found that there was a significant difference in how students beyond their elementary school years experienced relationships with teachers (and other adults, such as parents), feeling that their middle school teachers were less friendly, less supportive, and less caring than their elementary school teachers. Given this, as I looked at my data, I was less
surprised by the students’ comments that reflected this same feeling of growing anonymity from their teachers in the classroom setting. Yet, the data spoke so strongly of the need for caring, in particular, I wondered if the race of the students and teachers involved in this study was salient. I kept this question of race in mind as I analyzed my data.

In *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, by Eccles and Gootman (2002), the researchers create a framework and research agenda to promote the healthy development of youth. Using available data on community interventions and programs designed to promote positive outcomes for adolescent development, the authors created a framework of features of positive developmental settings. These features include:

- Physical and psychological safety and security;
- Structure that is developmentally appropriate, with clear expectations for behavior as well as increasing opportunities to make decisions, to participate in governance and rule-making, and to take on leadership roles as one matures and gains more expertise;
- Emotional and moral support;
- Opportunities for adolescent to experience supportive adult relationships;
- Opportunities to learn how to form close, durable human relationships with peers that support and reinforce healthy behaviors;
- Opportunities to feel a sense of belonging and being valued;
- Opportunities to develop positive social values and norms;
- Opportunities for skill building and mastery;
- Opportunities to develop confidence in one’s abilities to master one’s environment (a sense of personal efficacy);
- Opportunities to make a contribution to one’s community and to develop a sense of mattering; and
- Strong links between families, schools, and broader community resources.
This framework gave me a starting place for looking at adult-student relationships. It seems logical that when students feel cared for, they will put more effort into what they are asked to do. This is human nature, and it is something I witnessed on a regular basis as an educator, but this notion of caring is illusive. What does it mean to care? What does it mean to have good relations with your students? If there were a formula, wouldn’t everyone do it? Noddings (2005) suggests that there is no and can be no formula for caring. In their Carnegie Foundation report, *Turning Points 2000*, Jackson and Davis (2000) echo this point of the importance of having “quality” adult-student relations when they suggest that positive support from teachers is related to greater educational success.

In their research on what factors contribute to meaningful adult-student relations, Eccles and Gootman (2002) state, “Whether you ask a researcher, a theorist, a practitioner, or an adolescent, the quality of relationships with adults comes up again and again as a critical feature of any developmental setting” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 94). The authors looked to Blum and Rinehart (1997), Brooks-Gun and Paikoff (1993), Dryfoos (1990), Eccles et al. (1998), Ford and Harris (1996), Grotevant (1998), Lipsitz (1980), and Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2000) to see what these researchers suggested are critical features of positive youth-adult relationships and found that they spoke of warmth, connectedness, good communication and support. They also looked to theorists such as Bowlby (1969), Fursteburg et al. (1999), and Vygotsky (1978) who talked about adults who provide secure attachments, are good mentors and managers, and provide scaffolded learning. Additionally, they heard the voices of practitioners and students in the field who spoke of caring, competent, and “cool” adults. In looking at the varied voices in this arena, Eccles and Gootman (2002) determined that together, these descriptions suggest, “a family of
related qualities that make for good relationships with adults” (p. 94). This family includes qualities of emotional and instrumental support.

Importantly, Eccles (1993) notes that the perception of such support by adolescents, and their experience of interactions, both past and present, are more important than the relations themselves, thus suggesting that relations are not the same for all people, and therefore, not easily definable. Though the authors do offer a list of qualities that are found in emotionally and instrumentally supportive relationships, they recognize that relations are complex interactions, mediated by experience, history, and context, thus tying this notion with SCLT. Eccles and Gootman (2002) note, “This point is also important because it suggests that, inasmuch as their is an underlying essential element here, it consists of attentiveness and responsiveness to adolescents’ subjective worlds” (p. 94). This point cannot be emphasized enough. In her work on creating an ethos, or ethic of caring, Noddings (2005a) suggests that the hallmark, (note, not the essence) of care is listening attentively and responding as positively as possible, echoing this idea proposed by Eccles and Gootman of responsiveness. What I am suggesting here is that though there is a framework of “critical elements” that contribute to meaningful adult-student relations proposed by Eccles and Gootman (2002), the elements are dependent upon context, and student interpretation and history, but that these elements are only functional or “critical” when they are a part of an environment, or relation, that is responsive to the current situation. One is in relation with another, and there is no formula for what this looks like in all situations and with all people. Noddings (2005) suggests that care means you look at the individual and respond to that individual within a context and history, and see what she needs in the moment. Eccles and Gootman (2002), in their effort to look for critical elements of positive adult-student relations do importantly note, “Different cultural groups have different models of adult-adolescent
relationships, and hence support needs to fit with the cultural model of the adolescent’s social group” (p. 96). In the setting of POWER, this last point is particularly important. Though Eccles and Gootman (2002) have proposed elements of positive adult-adolescent relations, as I have analyzed my data, I have looked for ways in which these elements have fit, but have also looked for additional elements that emerge from the data, that are not a part of this framework. Eccles and Gootman (2002) describe the qualities of supportive relationships as having:

• Warmth
• Closeness
• Connectedness
• Good communication
• Caring
• Support
• Guidance
• Secure attachment
• Responsiveness

Methodology

Though I am framing my research with socio-cultural learning theory, that reminds me to look carefully at the culture, history, and context of learning, and Eccles and Gootman’s (2002) qualities of supportive relationships, which allows me to look carefully at the nature of the relationships between teachers and students, I have approached my research and data analysis using a grounded theory methodology. I have not gone into this research to prove a theory, rather to propose one. Grounded theory is a methodology that allows the researcher to develop theory
from the data that is collected and analyzed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I am framing the way that I look at my research in this methodology because, like Corbin and Strauss, I understand that this program and the interactions and experiences of the youth I have observed and talked with, are all very complex. As I anticipated, my data suggested, “multiple factors coming together and interacting in complex and often unanticipated ways” (p. 8). Given this complexity, I also understand that what I observed, and now “know” is only part of a much greater picture. For instance, even though I spent some nine hours a week with the students of POWER, I was not a part of their lives, and their lives are undoubtedly, tremendously influential to their interactions. I did not know what had happened during the day, or whether or not the student I was observing had eaten, or gotten into an argument with a teacher, or if their dog ate their homework. All of these factors may have had a significant impact on what I saw, yet they are factors that for me, were unknowable. One example of this is with Ranaja. Ranaja is a quiet Black female who often demonstrated high levels of maturity in her interactions with the adults and students in the program. She often interacted with the other program participants for at least part of the academic hour, to work with others on homework. Several weeks into my observation last spring, I noticed that Ranaja was absent for two days in a row, and that was very unusual for her. When she did return, I noticed that she physically isolated herself from the rest of the students. My initial thought was that she must be mad, or upset with some of the students. I asked her if she was okay. She told me that her apartment had caught on fire, and everything she and her mother had was lost. It took her over a month before she returned to her routine of working with the other students during academic hour. This is an example where I could have easily misunderstood a student’s actions. There was a situation, ever so present in Ranaja’s mind, that was impacting her life and her behaviors, and it would have been easy to miss. This is but one
example of the many times I asked program participants to help me understand what I had witnessed, to get their perspective on things. In this way, in doing my observations, I was able to get a better understanding of what I was seeing, checking to see if I had missed something, misinterpreted an event, or if there was something going on that influenced what I had seen of which I was unaware.

Though grounded theory seems to suggest that there is an objective external reality and aims toward unbiased data collection and interpretation (Charmaz, 2000), I am not of this belief. I understand that I am biased. I also understand that even as I was observing, I was interpreting what I saw. I could only be in one place at a time, my attention was limited to seeing and hearing only one thing at a time. Where I chose to put my attention, in and of itself was an interpretation. In this way, I decided what was important, and what was not.

As I observed, I tried to be very conscious of the fact that I was primarily observing and interviewing Black and Latino(a) youth. I am neither. I am also many years older than these students and am not embedded in their present popular culture. It often struck me how little I knew about these students’ lives outside of the program. I don’t listen to their music, watch their TV shows, eat Hot Cheetoes, or play their video games. What I saw often needed to be interpreted for me, as culture does matter, and the fact is, I am not of the culture of the participants of POWER. I attempted to be very aware of my own position as a researcher, a woman, an adult, a person who some see as being White and others, Asian, still others, “mixed.” I kept in my mind that, “There is no clear window into the inner life of an individual” (Denzin & Strauss, 2008).

I recognize that I cannot separate myself from my research. I have chosen to do a study within my own school district. But, this was not a reason not to do this study,
instead, this realization forced me to be reflective in my observations and to recognize the influence my own experiences and knowledge had on what I was seeing. For me, this reflexivity was particularly important when I was observing students in the classroom. As a teacher, I have incredibly strong opinions about what constitutes, “good practice.” There was no way for me to put these feelings aside. To help with this, I kept a research journal, recording my feelings and opinions about what I saw so that I could attempt to understand the implications of these feelings and opinions on my interpretations of what I witnessed. For, according to Corbin and Straus (2008), “our findings are a product of data plus what the researcher brings to the analysis” (p. 33).

Grounded theory encouraged me to begin analysis of my data while in the process of collection, as what I saw and thought about, changed what I was seeing (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I used my on-going analysis to help direct interviews, informal conversations with students, and observations. While I was collecting and analyzing my data, I used open coding to help me interpret what I saw and to help me look for patterns. In turn, I grouped these codes into categories. I returned to the data, after each observation, looking for connections and making comparisons. I analyzed the data for common events, phenomenon, or actions that occurred on multiple occasions. Doing these comparisons helped me decide what types of questions I should be asking or looking to answer. For example, as I was observing primarily Black and Latino(a) adolescents, I expected that some students may have experienced negative school experiences due to their race. As I listened to the students, I heard them tell stories that suggested experiences of racial micro-aggressions (small, seemingly ignorable incidents of racism). I also heard of similar experiences from the site-coordinator, and when I interviewed students about their schooling experiences, several talked about feeling isolated or treated differently by both
students and teachers, due to their race. In this example, I created a code for experiences of racism. As another example, as it became increasingly clear that what I was coding “relationships” was showing up a lot in my data each day, I decided to add sub-codes under the heading of “relationships.” In this subset of codes, I included: caring, encouragement, touch, guidance, belonging, and respect. I detail this analysis process in the section in this chapter entitled, “Data Analysis Method.”

This research process guided me to examine all the possibility for understanding what is being studied (Charmaz, 1983). It is when a theme, event, notion comes up time and time again, in observation, in interviews, that it becomes relevant to the theory and this is one way to guard against bias (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Methods

For this study, I used tenants of qualitative inquiry in order to better understand the complexity of POWER and the opportunities it provided to its participants. The kinds of questions I wanted to answer dictated the use of qualitative methodology, as I was seeking to understand a complex set of questions that could not be answered employing checklists, test and grade analysis, or extensive surveys. Because SCLT required me to examine and understand the context of the learning environment, and Eccles and Gootman’s framework for quality adolescent-adult relations allowed me to look for qualities within relations, observing and taking careful note of what I saw and heard were vital to my research, as were my many casual conversations with students. In my work, I attempted to step beyond the known and enter into the world of the program participants. I wanted to see the world from the students’ perspectives and in doing so, make connections that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
My goal in using these methods was to describe the experiences of the students in this program in ample descriptive narrative as to allow readers to vicariously experience the happenings of POWER and draw their own conclusions (Stake, 2000). In my explanation, I use thick descriptions to help illuminate the experiences this program offers its participants (Geertz, 1973). In order to get at the deeper reasons events occurred, particularly when I needed to interpret a nonverbal behavior, I paired my observations of students with interviews. In my interviews, I asked students to confirm my interpretations. I have attempted to move away from my own assumptions, to see if there may be other factors, rather than those I assume that may be at play. I recognize, along with Corbin and Strauss (2008), that the world is very complex and that I must, in my research, capture as much complexity as possible. I recognize that the experiences I witnessed are located within their larger social, racial, and cultural context, and I have aimed to explain these contexts in my data chapters.

Participant observations. For my study, I utilized variety of qualitative methods to do my investigation, and although not a case study, per se, I have used methods embedded in this methodology including careful, participant observation, document review, and interviews. Included in this inquiry are participant observations of students participating in POWER. I observed at all three POWER sites (Pradera High School, Pradera Middle School and the site that is located in a church foundation located on the local university campus) to get an idea of how the program works as a whole. I did most of my observations at the high school program. My initial research plan was to focus my observations on the middle school program at Pradera Middle School. I spent two weeks at this site. During this time, I sat with students and had many informal conversations. In analyzing these conversations, I felt that the age of the students, who were mostly sixth graders, would keep me from getting the depth of information I would be able
to get from older students. After consulting with my dissertation advisor, I decided to complete my remaining observations at the high school. I observed POWER afterschool sessions three times per week (Monday through Wednesday) from 3:15 to 6:00 pm, on days school was in session. I had originally planned to videotape my observations, but failed to get permission from several of the students to do so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Church Foundation Middle School Program</th>
<th>Pradera Middle School Program</th>
<th>Pradera High School Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Observations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Hours</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 13. Participant observation hours.*

In addition to observing at the program locations, I also attended two field trips, both to the local performing arts center.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Church Foundation Middle School Program</th>
<th>Pradera Middle School Program</th>
<th>Pradera High School Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Attendance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Regular Attendees</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 14. Program attendance.*

I used attendance data for the program to determine which students I would focus my observations upon and at the high school, found that there were 16 that attended the program on a regular basis. In this case, “regular” was defined as attending the four-day a week program for three or more days per week.
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Church Foundation Middle School Program</th>
<th>Pradera Middle School Program</th>
<th>Pradera High School Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Regular Attendees</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Males</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Females</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Males</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina Females</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Males</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Females</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Males</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Females</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 15. Average number of students attending each program by race and gender.*

As can be seen from Figure 13, the church foundation site was the smallest, serving only 10 students per day, all of whom were females. The program at Pradera Middle School had the highest average attendance rates even though both this program and the High School program had capacity for up to 30. As also can be seen in Figure 13, a majority of the students attending POWER at each of the three sites are Black females.

The program at the high school ran daily, Mondays through Thursdays, from the end of the school day until 6:00 p.m. On Mondays through Wednesdays, on days school was in session, I arrived at the school at 3:00 p.m. in order to talk with the program coordinator, leaders, and volunteers. I used this time to get a feel for what the day would bring, and to get feedback from my previous observations. I would also ask if any of the adults observed anything to which I should be aware. As scholars arrived, I would sit in one of the front row desks in the auditorium. Along with the leaders, I would greet, and be greeted by the scholars. After the scholars “settled” and announcements were given, I would follow the bulk of the scholars into the computer lab where most of them would work. Instead of sitting apart from the scholars, I would choose a place to sit, either with a student who was by themselves, in the front of the room where re-
teaching often took place, or with a group of scholars. While they worked, alone or in groups, with tutors, leaders, or each other, I would take notes of what I was observing on my computer. Oftentimes, the scholars would ask me for help, ask me questions, and talk with me about school and life. Quickly, the scholars came to see me as a part of their program, even asking me to go with them, on three different occasions, to ask a teacher a question or get help on an assignment. Throughout the academic hour, I often moved from group to group, individual to individual, observing, taking notes, and asking questions. I took detailed notes during my observations, and at the end of each day, I looked over my notes, attempting to code them and find connections and themes. I would also write my thoughts about what I had seen while observing each day.

**Interviews.** After having observed at the high school for two weeks, I made an announcement during program on three different occasions, inviting any students who were interested in being interviewed and observed in class to sign assent forms (Appendix A and B.) I made this announcement on three different occasions so that all interested students could be included. Of the 15 students who took assent and consent forms, eight students returned them signed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>9th Grade</th>
<th>10th Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Males</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Females</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Males</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina Females</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of Interviewees</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 16. Demographics of interviewees.*
The high school program originally targeted freshman, so there was only one sophomore in the program the semester I observed. Although I was originally solely interested in interviewing and observing Black and Latino(a) students, I did encourage students of all races to turn in their assent/consent form. None of the White students chose to be interviewed.

My original plan was to interview students on three different occasions, towards the beginning, middle, and end of the program. In the end, I completed just one formal interview with each student, mostly during the months of March and April. I ended up having much more productive conversations with the students within the natural context of the program than I did doing semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place during the after school program within the school building, usually in the hallway, which was not ideal. Oftentimes, teachers and students would pass by as we were doing the interviews. Depending on how much the student had to say, the interviews lasted between 35 and 50 minutes each. Through my semi-structured interview questions (Appendix C), I sought to understand why the students attended the program, their impressions of it, what they felt they gained by being a part of the program, how race impacted their schooling experiences and their experiences with POWER, and their relationships with other students and the program leaders, volunteers and site-coordinator. I determined my set of guiding questions based off of an interview protocol used by Dr. Reed Larson in his study of after school programs (Appendix C). I added and subtracted questions based on the goals of my study. Many of the questions used in Dr. Larson’s study were relevant to my study as he was looking to understand student perspectives about a specific after school program. I used my questions as a map for my interviews, and as the students provided answers, I changed the direction of my interviews as was needed. I also asked follow-up questions when students provided answers that required further probing.
I found interviewing the students to be quite difficult. A few of the students talked a lot, but most of the students provided short answers and didn’t want to expand on their answers, even when probed. I found this to be interesting, as these same students were quite talkative with each other and with me when we were within the program room. Because of this, I often found myself asking questions in a more informal way while sitting with the students while they worked or participated in an enrichment activity. For instance, I had a great conversation with a group of students about their schooling experiences while the students and I made chocolate chip cookies in cooking class one day. As I mentioned earlier, finding a private space for our interviews was impossible. Either teachers were in their classrooms, or the rooms were locked. This may have been one of the reasons the formal interviews didn’t work out as well as I had hoped. In a sense, it felt as though the interview itself created an artificial environment. But, there were two different times when something unexpected happened. On two occasions, while doing an interview, a small group of students from the program asked if they could join us. The first time this happened, I was not sure what to do as the students just sat down and started talking, asking what we were talking about. As I was audiotaping the interview, I stopped the tape and explained what we were doing. Both times, the students wanted to stay and join in the conversation. I had already received assent and consent forms for the additional students, and they agreed to allow me to tape the interview, so I went with the flow of the situation, and let them stay. I found that these group interviews provided a much more rich dialogue as the students fed off of each others’ ideas. On one of these occasions, while the students were having a spirited conversation about their Biology class, a teacher joined in the conversation. On this occasion, I turned off the tape while the teacher was talking, but immediately wrote up what was said when she left. I later
showed what I had written to the teacher and asked her to sign a consent form so that I could use what was said. I will discuss this conversation in Chapter Four.

As I have sought to understand POWER, the relations within it, and the students’ experiences with the program, I have done this in ways that are not traditionally used in research—that of the voices of the students themselves. I want to use my research to give power to the voices of the youth. With only few exceptions, youth voices are sorely missing from the research on after school programs. It seems logical to me that “academic success” can be defined in many ways, but the notion that is privileged is that academic success is based on grades, test scores, and graduation rates. I wanted to know what the students thought about this. I also wanted to understand what they thought of the opportunities they were given by POWER and what they thought of the notion of opportunity in general. Youth of color in our country are so often looked at from a deficit perspective. I want to give them power to speak back to this perspective.

In addition to interviewing students, I also completed semi-structured interviews with the program director, site-coordinator, one of the program leaders, and had a short, informal conversation with five of the teachers I was able to observe. I based my questions on what I had observed and mostly let the interviewees tell me about the program and the students. I spent many hours talking with the program director, Sunita Jones, trying to understand the program from her perspective, and asking specific questions to help me understand the structure and goals of POWER. Each of the other interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours. I had planned on interviewing the teachers in whose room I observed but found all but one were unwilling to talk with me.
Classroom observations. In my proposal, I proposed observing two times in each of the interviewees English and Math classes. Unfortunately, by the time I was finally able to get student schedules, have teachers respond to my observation requests, and schedule in observations, I was able to observe in each class only once. For the one sophomore interviewee, I was unable to get consent to observe in his math class, so I observed his science class instead. It was this teacher that I was able talk with briefly, after observing within his class. I completed these observations in order to understand if there is a fundamental difference in the way in which the students interact within the school versus after school setting. These observations also gave me a better understanding of the environment and types of teaching that took place during the school day. While doing these observations, I took extensive notes (approximately 40 pages) on my computer of the classroom environment, the students’ behavior, and the pedagogy. Much like I did with my observations within the program, I followed my classroom observations by coding what I had seen, and looking for connections.

Data analysis method. I carefully examined the data from this study. After each session of observing, I read through my notes. It became clear from early on that there were some patterns in activities. After spending 2 weeks in the field (approximately 27 hours), I went back into my data,\(^\text{19}\) coding my notes in broad terms: tutoring, relationships, student motivation, enrichment, cultural competence, leadership, and organization, trying to get an idea of what was in my data. After having collected all of my data, including classroom observations, and interviews, I went through all of my notes and further delineated each of the broad categories. These are detailed here.

\(^{19}\) When I was in the field, I kept detailed notes on everything I was seeing, hearing, and experiencing. I typed, verbatim, conversations, lessons, interactions, and impressions. I am under no illusion that I saw, heard, or experienced everything.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization:</th>
<th>Enrichment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Setting</td>
<td>• Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student population makeup</td>
<td>• Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Philosophy</td>
<td>• Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accountability</td>
<td>• Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Program organization</td>
<td>• Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Routine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enrichment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Program challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collaboration with schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unintended consequences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Impact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships:</th>
<th>Student Motivation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Adult-adult</td>
<td>• Internal motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adult-youth</td>
<td>• External motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Youth-youth</td>
<td>• Drive for excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social environment</td>
<td>• Interest in school/scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Youth behavior</td>
<td>• Helping each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Staff behavior</td>
<td>• Perception of teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encouragement</td>
<td>• Perseverance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Proximity use</td>
<td>• Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High expectations of excellence / scholarship</td>
<td>• Frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respectful language</td>
<td>• Reason’s for attending program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trust</td>
<td>• Student’s motivating each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sarcasm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal knowledge of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use of humor by adults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Public Praise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Touch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Guidance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Evidence of caring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutoring</th>
<th>Cultural competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Work being done</td>
<td>• Knowledge of student culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Help given</td>
<td>• Acknowledgement of racial inequities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tutor behavior</td>
<td>• Discussion about microagressions/race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tutor initiated help</td>
<td>• Racial/ethnic identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student initiated help</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Figure 17. Detailed codes for collected data.*

I went back into the data, and created three columns. The first column was the notes that I had taken, the second, the detailed code I assigned, and the third, my musings and connections, or more information, as needed. Below is an example of my notes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. C. has gone to join her twin, D., and S. They talk, they work, it feels like a natural, high school flow.</th>
<th>Relationships: youth to youth Tutoring: work being done Organization: challenge</th>
<th>Issue? Balance and finding it. Just yesterday, the students were told they can’t use cell phones or listen to music. There was push back “we were told this was different than school!” “that sucks!” “this is stupid,” but today, B. E. has in her earphones, and A.H. is blatantly using his phone. No one is commenting on this.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.H. is telling the table of girls with S. that he is not going to the field trip because the gas prices are too high. “I aint goin’ across town when gas is so high. My mama ain’t gonna drive me across town for that.”</td>
<td>Mini-case: A.</td>
<td>He’s got a point. Gas has gone to 4.00 per gallon. He is referring to the Nikki Geovanni reading on Friday. He did end up going, along with 17 other students from the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a lot of fluidity in the room. Many things going on. Tutoring, work, talk, grade checking, work on computers, play on computers, walking around the room.</td>
<td>Program: routine</td>
<td>It seems like the leaders/volunteers just do a lot of hanging out with the students. Sometimes helping, sometimes talking, but maybe what they are doing isn’t as important than the mere fact that these are adults and they are present. Is this a way of building relationships as well?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.K. has joined the group of girls at the 2nd set of tables. They are talking, then will go back and work for a few minutes, right now talking bout boys and someone liking them. S. looks bored with the whole thing.</td>
<td>Organization: routine Tutoring: help being given Relationships: adult to youth</td>
<td>Later, towards the end of April, we will see that indeed, A.H. does bring up that bio grade to a c. He was thrilled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.C. had A.H. check his grades. He is doing very well in Avid. “I love Avid,” but is failing Biology and Math. “they are hard.” “that’s what were here for, we can reteach you and help you understand.” L.C.</td>
<td>Organization: Accountability expectations Collaboration with schools Relationships: Adult to Youth</td>
<td>The students are being quizzed orally. There are other ways. I wonder if these leaders and tutors are aware of this. Perhaps this should be a part of training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is 4:40, M. is still practicing for his test on India with L.M. W.A. has finished her homework and is doing something on her phone.</td>
<td>Organization: routine Tutoring: work being done Help given</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 18. Example from notes at high school March 6, 2012.*
In examining the combination of observation data and interview/conversation data with students in POWER, I looked for common themes. The search for common themes was done by doing on-going reading and rereading of notes from daily observations and taking notes on what was found, taking notes during conversations and interviews, transcribing interviews, rereading transcriptions, and talking to participants for confirmation of my thoughts. Using this coding method was a tool to help me understand what I was seeing. It was not a tool for looking for causation, or correlation as codes are often used in qualitative inquiry. I was able to find major themes using this coding method, and it was also a way for me to organize my data. In the end, I went through the non-coded data, including all notes from meetings, observations, document reviews, and interviews and interpreted the data more holistically than this coding method implies.

Conclusion

Throughout my study I have seen myself as an observer, and as one who can only see what I see as I observe. I have relied on Miss Jones to help me make sure that I am understanding what I have observed, and when needed, have asked her to member check my observations and analysis of data. I have also shared my findings and stories with the students. I have endeavored to represent them and tell their story in a way that is respectful of them and gives them a voice—not my voice, but theirs.

As a seasoned teacher, I came into this study wanting this program to work. I wish there were a magic program that could level the playing field of American education. I am fairly certain that I have not found anything magical in my research, but I believe this study can give
teachers, after school staff, researchers, and policy makers some ideas about approaches and can help us as a nation do a better job of teaching and reaching our youth of color.

Within the context of a school system that has demonstrated a lack of ability to effectively change policies and practices that unfairly discriminate against Black and Latino youth, I have endeavored to better understand the experiences provided by POWER and how the students interact within this program that centers students and an ethic of caring. To return to Tucker and Herman (2002), I have wondered, “If schools can’t change, perhaps how students approach their schooling can.”
Chapter 4

Student-Teacher Relations

In this chapter, I discuss the relations I observed within POWER. I begin by discussing the complicated notion of opportunity. I then turn to discuss examples of relations in POWER. In this section, I discuss what I am choosing to call syncopated relations. I go on to discuss how students experience care and caring both in POWER and within their regular school day.

Relations and Opportunity

In order to probe the research question about the opportunities POWER provides its students and how the students engage and take advantage of these opportunities, I had to first look at the research on opportunities in order to more fully understand how scholars look at this notion. Much has been said about educational opportunities over time. In 1966, Coleman released a book entitled, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. In this study, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare as a part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Coleman and his team set out to access the level of equal educational opportunities for children of different races and ethnicities. To the surprise and chagrin of many, the findings of this study suggested that the differences in access to equal educational opportunities were minimal. In this case, Coleman was examining “educational opportunities” in such a way as to suggest access to possibility. Similarly, Oakes (1990, 1995), while looking at issues of equity in schools, defined educational opportunities in terms of access. Rosenbaum (1976), similar to Oakes (1995) studied tracking in high school settings, and in Rosenbaum’s book, set out to describe what he called and “opportunity structure,” suggesting that there was a hidden curriculum involved in the process of tracking that gave some students more access to educational opportunity than others. In this
sense, Rosenbaum is also suggesting that opportunity equals access. In discussing educational opportunity, Irvine (1990) suggested that though our society seems to embrace the notion of equal treatment and equality of educational opportunities, certain practices such as hidden curriculum, tracking, and discriminatory disciplinary practices are in direct conflict with this notion. In this way, Irvine too is looking at educational opportunity in terms of access to possibility. I am mindful of the fact that Coleman (1966), Oakes (1995), and Rosenbaum (1976) are speaking more literally about access to possibility, meaning access to chances such as access to high level curriculum and certified teachers, than Irvine (1990) is. Irvine is speaking more to opportunities, or access to have options in life, possibility for the future. In this way, Irvine’s “definition” of opportunity in more in line with what I am thinking as I look at educational opportunity. These students have access to educational opportunity. Most are in at least one upper-level course, and all have certified teachers, but access in this case does not equal opportunity. One must take advantage of this access, engage with it, in order for access to become opportunity. Opportunity for the future. Opportunity for choice. Opportunity for options for the future. It is with this notion of opportunity that I looked at my data to ask what opportunities POWER provided to its students and how they take advantage of them and engage them.

In this nearly year-long process of data gathering, analysis, reflection, writing, and member checking, I found that what served as opportunities for students was different than what I had expected them to be. I had expected that such activities as tutoring, enrichment centered on student interest, access to the partner university (its facilities, activities, and instructors), and field trips would, as Miss Jones had hoped, “open the world of opportunities” for the participants in POWER. In a sense, I was thinking of the term “opportunity” in much the same way as
Coleman (1966), Oakes (1995), and Rosenbaum (1976). I was thinking, as was Miss Jones, that access equaled opportunity. But instead, I found that these opportunities, without engagement by the participants in the program, were merely activities. The data in this study suggests that engagement in opportunity is key, and that factors that lead students to be engaged is more important than the opportunities themselves. The data chapters that follow will discuss and lay out the data findings related to the four themes around engagement in opportunities that emerged as I analyzed my data:

1. Relations: Students were more engaged in the learning environment when there was a perception of care and of positive relations.

2. Belonging: Students were more apt to take advantage of learning opportunities when and where they had a sense of belonging, and this sense of belonging was impacted by issues of race.

3. Engaged Learning: Students had many opportunities to be engaged in formal and informal learning by a variety of people.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss caring relations within the context of the program and classroom. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the data on belonging and race, and in Chapter 6, I will describe several scenarios where and when engaged learning was taking place.

**Human Relations Matter in Teaching and Learning**

In the extensive research that has been referenced in the literature review on care and human relations, it is clear that the relations one has with teachers has a significant impact on how students, particularly, students of color, experience schooling. In discussing caring and literacy for Black children, Joseph Sanacore (2004) states, “At the very least, students need to know that adults in their lives truly care for them” (p. 744). This idea was echoed in the data and in the experiences of the students of POWER. This chapter will be devoted to describing and
analyzing situations where human relations mattered, and where belonging impacted student engagement with learning.

**Students Are More Engaged When They Are in Positive Relations**

This observation, done at Pradera High School, evidences different ways adults in POWER, engaged in positive relations with one student in particular, Myles. Myles is a Black male. He is a freshman at Pradera High School and considers himself to be a “good” student. He has participated with POWER since its inception at the high school, in January of 2012. His reason for joining this after school program was like that of most of the students, to get help with his grades. Myles attends POWER approximately two times per week, and often, while there, engages students cordially, and spends most of his time on the computer, practicing for his keyboarding class, in which he has his lowest reported grade. Myles likes school, “ok,” and hopes to go to college. When asked how he intends on meeting this goal, Myles is vague. On two different occasions while observing the program, I witnessed a scene where Myles was challenged, once by another student, and once by the program coordinator, to retake a test he had scored below a B on. Both times, Myles adamantly refused stating, “a C is good enough for me.”

**Episode reflecting the syncopated nature of caring.** March 5, 2012, 3:45 p.m. In the florescent lit computer lab that serves as one of two rooms for POWER, three female students sit, two side by side, and the third facing the other two on the other side of the narrow white Formica table towards the back of the white-walled room. Program leader, Miss Naomi, sits besides the group. The young women are completing a Spanish assignment. Maritza says to the group as she looks up from her work, “How do you say brother again?” The room is abuzz with talking. In the front of the room, Miss Cori is reviewing how to calculate an angle with Houston as Dre looks
on. Miss Cori is sitting on the top of the front table facing the worn white board in the front of the room while Houston draws an isosceles triangle on the board. Eight other students work or play on the computers, talking to one another in not-so-quiet voices.

“You know the answer to that. Think,” Fatima answers without looking up from her assignment.

Myles walks up to the group, puts his hands on the back of Maritza’s chair and leans down a bit. “Hola!” he says warmly, with a bright smile on his face.

“Hola,” two of the three respond.

“Do you want to join us?” Miss Naomi asks. The three girls have stopped working and are looking at him.

“No, that’s ok,” Myles responds in a light-hearted tone.

The site-coordinator, Mr. Donnovan, a tall, Black man in his mid-twenties, walks over and places his hand on Myles’ shoulder. Myles immediately straightens. “Yes, you do. Let me show you your grades. Come with me.” Mr. Donnovan walks towards the bank of older computers on the side of the room closest to the door. Myles reluctantly follows, his shoulders slumped. He pulls a blue seated rolling chair close to Mr. Donnovan and both look at the computer screen as Mr. Donnovan has Myles pull his grades up on the computer. As the grades appear, Myles’ shoulders further slump, his head hangs-low. He appears to shrink in his chair. Mr. Donnovan says something inaudible to Myles, patting his left hand as he does so. Myles gets up, pushes his chair rather forcefully back up to the computer table, and walks to the other side of the room where there is another bank of computers, each facing the blank white wall of the room.
Though the young women had returned to their Spanish work, they look up as Myles walks past their table. There is an angry look on his usually smiling face. At the computer, Myles pushes his chair hard into the table, then promptly pulls it out and sits down hard onto the chair. A few of the students look his way then continue on with their talking and work. This usually confident and well-dressed young man now is slumped low in his rolling chair. He is clearly upset. He starts up his keyboard program and begins attempting to type, hitting the white folding table hard with his left hand every once in a while, obviously frustrated with either what he had seen when he looked at his grades, or at the task at hand.

The room has its usual pace, almost a rhythm. Students work, talk, laugh, joke with one another, return to work. In the front of the room, Miss Cori continues her geometry lesson with Houston. Five students work and play on the computers, one reading a story written by a high school student, three reading their Facebook pages, and the last using the Internet to complete an assignment for his French class. The three young women and Miss Naomi have moved on from Spanish to study for an exam on Ancient India. “Can you tell me about the Vedas?” I overhear Miss Naomi say to the group. The room gets loud every once in a while, then, either naturally, or with a gentle reminder from one of the leaders or the site-coordinator, quiets down again. It is 4:15, and Myles is still plugging away at his typing assignment. The frequency of his pounding is increasing suggesting growing frustration.

Miss Audrey, the program director walks through the door from the auditorium and is greeted warmly with “Hi, Miss Audrey,” and hugs from several students. Warm hugs are returned. Immediately, Miss Audrey walks over to Myles, indicating that Mr. Donnovan had called her and alerted her to the situation with him. She places her hand on his shoulder and he looks up at her. Her front is facing the side of his body. She is standing close to him. I move
closer, so that I am sitting next to the group of young women who are practicing for their test on Ancient India, in hopes to hear the conversation between Myles and Miss Audrey. With the noise of the room, only few words clearly float my way: “Hey, Myles. I hear you’re having some problems with your classes. I’m here to help you figure it out.” I cannot hear his response or most of the rest of the conversation, but watch as he lifts a folder out of his backpack, opens it, pulls out a paper, and shows Miss Audrey something. She pulls one of the rolling chairs over next to his, and sits down, laying her right hand on the back of his chair. She nods, taking the paper from his hands, then examines it. She nods, pats him on his shoulder, and smiles. For the first time since he was shown his grades, Myles’ back straightens.

I hear snippets of a conversation, mostly hearing just what Myles is saying: “No, I am just having some issues. It makes me not care how I do.” And a few seconds later: “I’m too far behind to catch up!” Miss Audrey places her hand on Myles and looks him in the eyes. He looks at her for a moment, then averts his eyes. She leans close to his ear and says something to him, prompting him to look back up at her.

Miss Audrey hands the paper back to Myles. He is nodding no to her. “So what are you turning in today?” Miss Audrey says to Myles as she begins to get up from her chair. “Thank you, sir.” Miss Audrey straightens up and walks over to Miss Cori, interrupts her geometry lesson with Houston, and whispers something to her, eyes still on Myles. Miss Cori shoots a smile to Myles, who smiles back.

A large Black man, riddled with tattoos on his forearms and neck walks into the room, carrying a large box. He is an artist from the community and is here for enrichment to teach interested students how to create art using an airbrush. Houston walks over to offer to help him carry his box and set up for his lesson.
Miss Cori walks over to Myles, bends over and whispers something to him, smiling. As she walks away, she says, “We’ll get this straightened out, Myles. Don’t you worry.” He smiles a faint smile.

As Miss Audrey is leaving, I stop her and ask what happened. She tells me Myles has been absent from class for several days and is missing a lot of work. They made a plan for him to work with Miss Cori to get caught up in math, and for him to get his missing work all turned in by the end of the week.

**Discussion on syncopated caring.** This vignette is an example of what I term syncopated caring. In music, syncopation is an altered beat pattern, when the emphasis is put on the off-beat, resulting in a disruption of the listener’s expectations, adding complexity to the composition. In this example of relations in POWER, several things are going on. Besides the regularly observed rhythm of the room, which includes personal conversations, re-teaching of geometric concepts, grade checking, Facebook(ing), laughter, teasing, and a sprinkling of homework, there is an emphasis being placed on one specific student—Myles, while the rest of the students in the program do what they do, paying little attention to the important scene that is playing out on its fringes. In addition, there is something syncopated going on in terms of care and caring relations here, and I wonder if it has something to do with culture. Culture, in this sense, is the way we perceive and know the world. It is the lens through which we experience. Caring cannot be easily defined as one, monolithic action. It is a multitude of actions, and means different things to different people, in different contexts.

**Qualities of caring relations demonstrated by the episode.** This first episode involving Myles exemplifies many of the qualities found in Eccles and Gootman’s (2002) features of critical relations. In this situation, there is evidence of warmth, closeness, connectedness, good
communication, caring, support, guidance, and responsiveness. But, it is important to note that Myles may not have felt cared for in this situation. At first, when Mr. Donnovan confronts Myles about his grades, Myles’ body language gives the appearance of defeat. In this moment, he may not feel very good about his relations. He may be experiencing syncopated caring. Mr. Donnovan was demonstrating what Eccles and Gootman (ibid, 2002) term, “guidance,” which is one of the critical features of caring relations. In this case, Mr. Donnovan had to know that Myles’ grades were falling, precipitating the initial visit to the computer to show Myles how he was doing. This is part of the job of the site-coordinators in POWER. They are to check regular participants’ grades on a regular basis and check-in with their teachers as well. I did not see this happen a lot during my observations, but in this case, it was obvious that Mr. Donnovan had checked in, at least on Myles. In addition, Mr. Donnovan showed Myles he cared because implicit in his showing Myles his grades was the idea that Mr. Donnovan expected him to do better because he knew Myles could do better.

Donnovan’s use of gentle touch, also demonstrated later by Miss Audrey and Miss Cori, were echoes of caring, warmth, closeness, and connectedness, four other features of Eccles and Gootman’s framework. Touch is a behavior I saw often as I observed this program, both among students and between students and teachers. Whether it was the ubiquitous “fist pump,” “high five,” gentle shove, hug, or pat on the shoulder, it was not uncommon to see people in POWER show affection to one another through touch. In this example, Myles did always not respond to being touched by showing warmth. In fact, the warmth he initially came to the group of young women with, quickly left as he learned of his falling grades. In this way, there was a syncopation of care. The adults of the program were caring for Donnovan, but his response was not overtly receptive to this care, yet, the adults were not dissuaded.
In this example, there is also evidence of good communication and responsiveness, a feature emphasized in the work of Nel Noddings (1988, 2005). Miss Audrey listened to Donnovan. She asked him questions, listened to his responses, and worked with him to make a plan to help meet his goals. Even though Myles may have felt the critique of these adults, as was evidenced by his shrunken body language, he was not chastised as much as he was encouraged. He was given help for a problem, and was also given support in the form of a tutor for his math class. As I think about this, as an educator, I cannot help but feel its importance. How many of the students at this age know how to plan, know how to get themselves dug out of a problem, and receive help so that they can have some resolution? How many students tell adults when they are confused or just plain, don’t care? In saying, “it makes me not care how I do,” Myles is sharing a concern. Something is going on in his life, or in his classes, that has made him discouraged. In this moment, Miss Audrey showed Myles support, but also guidance and caring. It seems that these teachers are being responsive to Myles, recognizing him and his present context, as well as the historical context in which he is being schooled, and in that way, acting in a way that builds productive relations.

**Teachers’ perspective on caring.** In the climate survey done on the Pradera schools in 2009 (Aber, 2009) there were several teachers who commented on caring, and these comments shed some light on different, and often complex ways care is perceived by teachers in the school district where POWER takes place.

I have always, and will always care about the education of all children . . . no matter what nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or race. I did not enter this profession to teach a few children. I feel several of the questions appear to assume that my intentions, or those of my colleagues, who work tirelessly to reach all children, are some how not good enough because our numbers of children in sped programs exceeds the community percentage. Each child is an individual and their needs must be met . . . whether that takes us over the percentage that should be in gifted/talented or over the representation in sped
programs. What is the best educational environment for that one child? That is our ethical and moral obligation. (White, female elementary school teacher)

In this case, I interpret this teacher as saying that caring is an ethical and moral obligation to teach each child as an individual, meeting their needs, no matter what that looks like. To this individual, caring is literally, “taking care” of the student according to his or her needs. She is expressing her frustration with her inability to care for students with special needs because of the increased difficulty teachers are having getting students into special education programs.

We work at a racially and culturally diverse school. The administrators, teachers, and staff generally work very hard to educate our charges and provide them with the knowledge to advance educationally and succeed in the field they intend to pursue as a career. Our teachers constantly look for the best means available to instruct whether it is an old fashioned discussion or an electronic game or whatever seems to achieve the goal of students learning. Our faculty and staff are very caring individuals who seek to improve the knowledge level and environment of all of the student who attend [Pradera High School]. (White male high school teacher)

In this case, I interpret this teacher’s definition of care as including high expectations for all students, for this teacher says, “Our faculty and staff are very caring individuals who seek to improve the knowledge level and environment of all of the student (sic) who attend [Pradera High School].” I also feel that this teacher is suggesting that teachers show their care by doing, “whatever seems to achieve the goal of student learning,” even if that means changing up how they teach.

I am furious that this process has made me feel like I don’t care about my students! Of course I care about my students. I come to work here everyday because I care. I push my students because I care. I don’t care what color my students are. I don’t see color, I see kids! (White female high school teacher)

In this final example from the informal conversation I had with Houston’s math teacher, I understand this teacher to be stating quite strongly that she sees caring as being present, holding
high expectations, and seeing children as individuals. It is not surprising that teachers would see having high expectations of students as being a way of showing one cares. The literature on “best practice” is filled with this notion (Cavazos, 2009; Cotton, 2003; Jamar & Pitts, 2005; Tomlinson, 1992). And indeed, as will be seen in the section specific to caring in this chapter, some teachers see pushing students to be excellent learners as being a primary way of showing one’s care for their students. It is also not surprising that teachers see this as way of caring about students because implicit in the expectations is the idea that teachers are believing in students, knowing they can achieve.

In each of these examples, teachers see care and caring as slightly different things. Part of this may be due to culture. We have learned what caring is, and how to be caring from our families, from our religion, and from our experiences. In the case of schooling, how one cares clearly matters. If there is a mismatch between the perception of care by the caregiver and the person receiving care, this can lead one party to feel as though they are acting in a caring manner, while the other party is left feeling uncared for. It is for this reason that I have chosen to use the term, syncopated caring. In music, syncopation is unexpected, and, just like in music, syncopated caring is when those being cared for may not feel this care because it is not what the perceiver expects, which, much like in music, adds complexity to a situation. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will use this term to describe times when care may be present, but may not be being perceived as care by those being cared for.

Students’ perception of caring relations found in interviews. In my formal and naturalistic interviews with students, this increased engagement in environments where students have good relations with adults was echoed by many of the students.

---

20 I don’t want to suggest that I don’t see the comment of “I don’t see color, I see the child.” And the notion of colorblindness as being problematic. It is just not the focus of my current argument.
Chanice. Chanice is a Black female freshman enrolled at Pradera High School. She perceives herself to be very smart, but has joined POWER in order to improve her grades. She is enrolled in all of the honors (or advanced) level courses offered by the school. Chanice has attended POWER since its inception in January of 2012 and attends regularly, at least three times per week, if not all four days the program is offered. Chanice is very cordial and emotional, often sharing her feelings with program staff and students, but can be reserved at times, keeping to herself except to elicit help on an assignment. She does report enjoying school, but recognizes she is having a hard time making the adjustment from middle to high school as she felt “a wonderful connection” to the teachers in her middle school that she has not found at her high school. Chanice plans on attending college, and hopes to do so with a basketball scholarship. In my time with the program, I often observed Chanice highly engaged in her work, and she had a special interest and ability in the sciences.21 In my interview with Chanice, she had a lot to say about this concept of relations, but one comment stood out, and seems to exemplify this theme. In her response to a question about why she had joined POWER, she talked about not feeling like she fit-in in her upper level, honors courses due to her race. She remarked,

There has been no attempt by the teacher to get to know me as a person. Yeah, they care about how I do in class, I guess, but I don’t think they know me at all. There has also been no attempt by the teacher to have us get to know one another (as students). They just sit there and talk and talk, but not with us, at us.

I followed up this remark by asking if there was a time when she felt she had a good relationship with a teacher and what that meant to her and she responded,

21 In one observation done on the local university campus, the high school students were working on an experiment, attempting to get a scripted set of materials to float while holding the largest number of pennies. While the students worked, Chanice worked in the hallway on an assignment for her English class with a tutor. She missed all but ten minutes of the fifty-minute activity. In the ten minutes she had to complete the activity, she was able to create a vessel that outshone and outperformed the rest of the students who had participated the entire time. She told her tutor, “I’m good at things like this. I love science.”
I did when I was in middle school. Ms. A. was my favorite, I would talk to her about everything, from school work to my life and worries. Sometimes we would have lunch together. She always knew when I was in a bad mood or if something was bugging me. I miss her. I wish I had those teachers from middle school again. But now, I just need to learn this stuff by myself.

The sense of isolation Chanice felt due to her teachers’ not knowing her was evident in her words here. Her last statement, “But now, I just need to learn this stuff by myself,” within the context of her talking about having teachers care about her speaks to this isolation and the impact it can have on learning for Chanice. She feels she has to learn material on her own because she cannot learn from her teachers. They do not know her, and for Chanice, this is clearly important.

**Dre.** Dre is a Black female freshman enrolled at Pradera High School. There is no question that Dre sees herself as an intelligent and capable student. This is evident in her confidence, and in the way she talks about herself (example, talking to Miguel: “Hey, you’re in honors bio. and that’s what you’re doing? I could do that stuff, no problem. I should be in honors too!”) Dre is in honors English and Math classes and joined POWER because she wanted access to tutors to help her bring her grades up and “to do fun stuff.” Dre attends the program three to four times per week, some more reluctantly than others. She often has to be cajoled into coming by her friends Houston and Fatima, and on these days, she tends to be pretty feisty, making comments about the program (“This is so boring,” “Why do I even come to this stupid program?” etc.) She does plan on going to college, but has no idea how she will make that happen. Dre has a tough exterior. She often works with the same group of two to four females, all of whom are also Black. Dre is not one to hold back her feelings about life, relationships, her feelings and opinions about issues and situations, and will also tell people what she thinks of them when they get on “her nerves,” which happened several times while I observed the program.
In her interview when I asked Dre about the types of relations she had with the adults in the program and in school, Dre told me,

I like it that Miss Cori helps me with my homework. She is a good teacher, and she can see it in my face, or something, when I don’t get something. She also knows when I’m mad, but then again, most people do (I laugh). I love Miss Cori. She’s so nice to everyone, and she’s funny. She reminds me of the kids because she’s not that older than us. I think it’s cool that they (the leaders) are so young. It is like we’re working with another student, and they know us and why we do what we do. When I’m mad, she tries to help and figure it out rather than just saying, “that’s not the POWER way.” I hate it when people say that. It really gets on my nerves. Anyways, she notices things about us. She asked me if I cut my hair today. It makes me feel special because they notice us. But, I don’t feel this way in school. In school, the only time a teacher notices me is when I’m being loud. Sometimes, I’m loud just to see watch how they act.

In this quote, Dre is talking about how she feels cared for. In her case, it is important that adults take notice of her. It is important for her to be known and recognized. Her comment about age is also interesting, suggesting that there is something about having the tutors and leaders be close in age to the students that is salient. Perhaps it is that the college-aged students have a better level of cultural understanding of the participants due to them having experienced a more similar history. Dre seems to imply that in being closer in age, the leaders and tutors, “get them” in a way that older people simply cannot.

**A Care-centered Approach to Redirecting**

As caring is one aspect in this proposed framework is one that came up as a strong theme in this research, I wanted to understand how students defined caring relationships. I found research that focused on Black students perception of caring. In her qualitative study of 100 middle school students, Bosworth (1995) found that students defined caring teachers as those with the following characteristics:
1. Saw students as individuals,
2. Helped with schoolwork,
3. Showed respect,
4. Were tolerant,
5. Explained work,
6. Made certain students understood,
7. Encouraged students,
8. Planned enjoyable activities,
9. Were polite,
10. Helped students,
11. Involved themselves with students,
12. Offered guidance, and
13. Went out of their way to improve student life.

Many of the characteristics listed above are in-line and even, intertwined with those found by Eccles and Gootman (2002) and help to further define what I looked for when analyzing my data. In the observation that follows, done at Pradera Middle School, where the academic hour is structured much more closely to a classroom setting, unlike the high school program, students have to be redirected often. I have chosen this example because the interactions found here exemplify the use and impact of care on this learning environment.

**Vignette about students being redirected.** February 21, 2012. It’s a cold, damp day at Pradera Middle School. It’s early in my observations, and I am still observing at the middle school level and not the high school. The vast room where POWER takes place once served as the Industrial Arts room, and vestiges of this use are everywhere, including the 30-foot-high
ceilings, exposed heating pipes, and the industrial-sized ventilation fan mounted on the brick exterior wall. The room is approximately 90 feet in length and 30 feet wide and is divided into three, relatively equal parts. Though there are no dividers in this room, the way it is set up clearly delineates each space. There are three entrances to this room. The one the POWER students use takes them down a slight ramp to the part of the room that is set up as some sort of auditorium-styled classroom. There are three-tiers of worn metal desks, ten in each row, that face a wall of ten-foot high windows that line the entire length of this drafty space. On the floor, in front of the desks, are three rectangular tables that seat up to eight students each. The middle of the room is a computer lab. Four rows of tables sport three-dozen older PCs. The computer lab is set up facing the opposite direction of the classroom. In the front of this space is a Smartboard. Wires snake around the floor, under the tables, in a jumbled mess. The third part of the room holds a rack of books, and three round tables as well as a teacher’s desk. There is also an area rug in this space, along with an old fashioned wooden-framed blackboard on wheels replete with white chalk and an erasure. The gray Linoleum floors show little wear for their age. Besides the ample light coming in from the windows, florescent lights hang from the 30-foot-high tinned ceiling. Pradera Middle School was built in 1914 to serve as the public high school and details such as the paned windows and tinned ceiling, run throughout this Beaux Arts classical revival-styled building.

When I enter the room, the students are just getting situated in the classroom part of the room. There are 20 students here today, all of whom are Black with the exceptions of one Latina female, one Latino male, one Asian female, one White female, and one White male. The students settle into the metal desks taking their homework out of their backpacks. They appear to know the expectations and routine.
The site-coordinator, Mr. Eddie, is a tall Black man in his late twenties. During the day he is a classroom aide in the building. “Does anyone need help with anything right now?” The students seem to take this as a clue and dig through backpacks and stacks of papers and folders for their work, or a book to read. Mr. Eddie walks over to Shaquita who is in the front row. He squats down in front of her and looks over her assignment, which is dealing with percentages. Henry, a sixth grade student, waves over one of the three tutors here today. The tutor, a White female from the local university, goes and sits next to Henry, helping him with his writing assignment.

“Ladies, what is the conversation about?” Mr. Eddie says calmly from where he is squatting. He stands. “Ashley, I’m talking to you, sweetheart. We’re going to work for a whole hour today on our studies, whether we start now or at 3:30. It is up to you. When you are all studying, I’ll start the timer. Don’t waste your time, or the time of the other scholars in this room.” His tone is cordial, his voice is conversational and not raised. As he is speaking to the students, he walks up to the top tier of desks and stands within a foot of Ashley and Johnae, who were the ones who precipitated this briefly effective lecture. The talking stops and students seem to get back to work.

Brenda, the sole White female scholar in this program says calmly, “Mr. Eddie, can I get a book to read?”

Mr. Eddie replies, “No, you have homework to do.” As he says this, he moves close to where she is sitting in the middle tier of desks. “I know you have homework to do because I spoke to your English teacher today, and she told me so.” He then adds, in a slightly louder, but still calm voice, “I know we’re fresh off the weekend, and we miss each other, but we need to get our work done. We are scholars, and as scholars, we focus and we work. Marianna, come sit over
at the front table, please. I think you will be able to focus more if you are sitting with a tutor.” He waves her over to the table in the front of the room where one of the tutors, a White female, sits. She goes, reluctantly, dragging her backpack on the ground as she does, and sits with the tutor. Mr. Eddie watches her while she walks to the front of the room. As he does, Brenda turns her back, ever so slightly, and lifts her backpack into her lap, seemingly trying to hide whatever she is trying to find, from Mr. Eddie. Her eyes dart over towards where he is standing between her quick glances into her bag. Mr. Eddie does a quick turn to face Brenda. “Brenda, what did I tell you about being slick. You are the least slick person I know.” He says, as if he has eyes on the back of his head. “Brenda, give me that gum.”

“That’s mine.” Brenda protests and she hands her stick of gum over to him, “I was supposed to eat that.”

Mr. Eddie replies with a smile, “Don’t you try to fool a fool. I’ll give it back to you later, when you are done with your homework for English. Right now, you need to focus.”

The room settles again. Students work, alone, or with a tutor, for the next 15 minutes. Brenda makes another attempt to get a book to read. “Can I go get another book?”

“Brenda,” Mr. Eddie replies, “you haven’t gotten anything done since you got here. Remember how we have to study for an hour before we can do enrichment?” She nods yes. “Well, your hour won’t start until you sit down and focus.” She looks at him with pleading eyes. “Ok, you can go get another book. We’ll start your hour when you are settled and reading.”

Brenda says with a smile, “But I’ve been studying, you just weren’t paying attention.”

As Brenda heads to the other part of the room where the book stand is kept, Mr. Eddie stops her and puts both of his hands on her shoulders and says quietly, “I’m always paying
attention. I want you to surprise me, and be the scholar I know you are.” She laughs and walks to the bookstand.

Most of the students are working on some sort of homework while a few others read. The room is quiet except for the whispers passing between the tutors and students. The three program leaders, two of which are high school students, and the third of which is a college sophomore, come in at 3:30, coffee cups in hand, and sit at one of the large tables. Mr. Eddie looks up from where he is sitting at the table in front of the desks and motions to Fred, a Black sixth grader, to come sit at the table with Marianna. “You’ll be able to focus better over here.” Fred picks up his papers without protest and moves to the front of the room. Mr. Eddie gently touches Fred on the shoulder and says very quietly, “Thank you, sir.”

The room has a tranquil feel about it. All of the students are again working. The tutors and leaders now sit next to students, answering questions or talking. Mr. Eddie walks up to Marianna and says to her, “What are you reading?” as he picks up her book. It is a picture book. “Oh no. Never again. Not in here you won’t sell yourself short like that. You are a scholar. That means you are smart, and you can read something that will challenge your brain.”

He walks with her over to the bookstand saying, “We’ll find you something good to read that will make you think.” I walk over so that I can see the process they go through to find Marianna a book. I wonder as I go whether there will be books on the stand that represent her Latina culture. Mr. Eddie asks, “Do you have a favorite book? If you can tell me a book you liked, then maybe it will help me find you another.”

She replies, “I think it was called Running out of time, or something like that.”

“Oh, so you like mysteries and adventure, maybe even a little utopia in there. Let’s see what we can find.” On the small, three-sided wire rack of books are approximately 60 books,
ranging in topic and level of difficulty, each stamped with what must be a teacher’s name. It looks as if someone has been working to create a multicultural library. There is the requisite, “House on Mango Street,” and some books by Walter Dean Myers and Sharon Flake. Mr. Eddie spies one by a Latina Author and reads the back. He hands Marianna this and other books he thinks she may be interested in. Marianna looks at some of the books, but none seem to be piquing her interest. He asks her, “Have you read Esperanza Rising?”

She replies, “No, I don’t think so.”

Mr. Eddie nods, “I’ll make sure we get you a copy. I think you will really like it. It is about a little girl who is forced to move here from Mexico and how hard it is for her.”

“I think I’ll try this one.” Marianna says as she looks at the front, then back of a book entitled, We We’re Here by Matt De La Pena. As we all walk back to the classroom part of the room, I hear Joclyn, the Black high school leader, say rather loudly to Fred, “What did I tell you about your phone?” She walks calmly up to him and says, “Let me have that.” He hands over his phone without protest and they exchange a beguiling smile. She loudly adds before walking back to the table, “I’m feeling the love!” and they share a high five. As Joclyn walks away she looks at the phone and pretends to dial and says, “I wonder how my friend in China is doing?” Several of the students, including Fred, laugh.

**Redirecting and relations.** In this short one-half hour period of time, a lot occurred, and I use this example as I feel it demonstrates many of the qualities of relations talked about by Eccles and Gootman (2002), but also because it exemplifies some qualities of caring talked about in the work of Bosworth (1995). The middle school program is very different from the high school program in some key ways, and one is demonstrated here. Unlike at the High School, the Middle School students are expected to work quietly, and for the most part, to work alone, unless
working with a tutor or leader. This, and the fact that these are younger students, means that there is a lot more redirecting going on in this program than there is at the high school. How one is redirected and the reaction to that redirection is worthy of attention.

As a teacher, I participated in more than my share of correcting or redirecting of students. In many instances, this redirection led to a larger confrontation, particularly in my early years of teaching. Yet, when I think back on some specific examples of when this happened, there is nothing in my words that were all that different than the redirection that I just wrote about. But, as the outcomes were significantly different, I think there must have been something going on here that can be teased out besides the obvious difference of formal versus informal setting. There are many instances in this short half-hour, of students being redirected, but I focus on interactions with three students in particular, Brenda, Marianna, and Fred in which caring was used in a responsive way that was both flexible and reflexive.

**Responsive Redirection.** Brenda is a White female and is in eighth grade. She perceives herself as being an “ok” student, but says she doesn’t care too much about how she does in school, saying, “I’ll do that in high school.” She joined EMPOWER at the beginning of the school year when her AVID teacher encouraged her to join, “The new program to help you with classes.” She attends POWER bi-weekly. Brenda has a tough exterior that she seems to tout. She often wears clothing that will one day, if it has not already; branded her as an outcast (all black clothing, ripped jeans, dark eyeliner on her eyes). Brenda does not know if she will attend college. On the days I observed Brenda, I found that she often sought adult attention by acting in ways that were not in-line with program expectations. Though not outwardly rude, she often had difficulty focusing, particularly during academic hour, and would regularly talk, particularly to Marianna.
Brenda and Mr. Eddie have several encounters during this observation. The first is when she asks him to let her get a book, and he refuses to let her do so. He tells her that he knows she has homework to do. Much like in the vignette about Myles at the high school, this is a demonstration of support from Eccles and Gootman’s (2002) framework. Although it is his job to do so, Mr. Eddie knows Brenda, and talks to her teachers in order to support her. He knows her well enough to know she is having similar behavior issues of not following directions and being distracted while in class. According to Mr. Eddie, he wants to help her even if she doesn’t care much about getting help right now. Again, this notion of asynchronous caring is coming up. The adult, in this case, Mr. Eddie, is showing he cares, even if the child, in this case, Brenda, does not. In addition, it is important to note that, even if Brenda does care, she may not “read” Mr. Eddie caring about how she does in class as caring about her.

Mr. Eddie next takes Brenda’s gum away from her, claiming that, “You are the least slick person I know.” This is a situation that could have gone very wrong and may have, given a different context. SCLT suggests that context matters, and this case, the social, historical, and relational context turned that comment, that could have sent a student over an edge into anger, and further escalation of behavior, into humor. When I talked to Mr. Eddie about this comment he told me that he and Brenda have a history of joking with one another, both in the program and when they see each other throughout the day in the hallways. Mr. Eddie knows Brenda, and there is a closeness between them. This closeness is evident here in that Brenda takes this comment as a joke, and also a few minutes later when he puts his hands on her shoulders and tells her that he is always paying attention. These two have a history, and they know one another in multiple contexts.
It is also important to again note that this is an informal learning environment and the students attend POWER voluntarily and can choose to leave at any time. But, in this situation, Mr. Eddie is acting as a teacher. He is managing these students much like a teacher manages a classroom of students. He is correcting, as a teacher has to correct. While I am aware that this is not school, it is a place where learning is taking place in a fairly structured setting, and where there are high expectations for both academic excellence, and behavior.

One thing that occurred a few minutes later demonstrates the quality of responsiveness found in Eccles and Gootman’s (2002) framework. Brenda asked to get a book, not once, but twice. Mr. Eddie knows that she has homework to complete, but decides, in that moment, to be flexible and responsive to Brenda and her situation. He knew that she would not do her homework if she was bent on finding a book. He also knew she liked to read. This is an example of caring and connectedness interacting with responsiveness. Because Mr. Eddie cares about and knows Brenda, he is able to be responsive to her needs in this particular situation. He cares enough about her to know her, and to respond in a flexible way to her request. This was definitely not the, “When I say no, I mean no.” way of responding too often heard by adults in positions of power.

Redirecting and respect. The interactions with Marianna are also in need of some dissection. Marianna is a Latina female and is in the seventh grade. She sees herself as a “good” student. Marianna joined POWER late in the fall after some of her friends told her she could get help but also, “Do really cool stuff like learn dance and how to do art.” She attends the program two to three times per week. Marianna is rather shy, but also, rather sly. She does not often overtly pull students away from attending to their studies, but she does spar quietly, on occasions, with Brenda. At times when she is up at the front table working, and Brenda is in the
back row of the desks, which face each other, she makes faces at Brenda and others when they look up, and often, this leads to giggling and students being pulled off-task. Like Brenda, Marianna does not know if she will go to college one day but adds, “I’d be the first in my family, and that would be cool.”

The first interaction Mr. Eddie has with Marianna is when he tells her she must move to the front of the room to work, and she reluctantly complies. Again, Mr. Eddie is showing his knowledge of the student as well as caring. Because he knows that Marianna, whose heritage language is Spanish, works better with a tutor, and because he cares about her and how she does in school, he tells her to move. In this situation, Marianna may not have felt cared for, even though Mr. Eddie felt he was caring for her through his redirection.

This notion of care meaning different things to different people also came up in one of my talks with the students at the high school. While I was talking with a small group of high school students in POWER in the hallway, the students were talking about their teachers not caring about them when a teacher came by and explained to them that teachers show they care by not letting students fail. When I followed-up on what the teacher had said, Maritza said,

I learn by doing stuff. When my teachers know that about me, and make adjustments for me based on that, I know they care. I know they care when they don’t let me fail, sure, but they can just have me retake my tests until I pass. That isn’t showing me they care about me.

This again speaks to the asynchronous nature of the concept of caring. At least in my experience, most teachers care about their students. But, the nature of how they show that care is not always perceived as care to their students. I suggest this is even more the case where there is a cultural mismatch between teachers and students. I would also suggest this is the case whenever there is a power relationship between two people. In the classroom, teachers have the power. In POWER,
this same power relationship exists, and at times, as in the case of Mr. Eddie asking Marianna to move, so does this asynchronous nature of care.

In the next instance, Marianna is reading a picture book. Mr. Eddie guides Marianna through the process of finding a book that will challenge her. Again though, relations involve more than one person. In this situation, Mr. Eddie shows knowledge of Marianna by choosing books and talking about books that he thinks she’ll be able to relate to, including one about a girl who has been forced to leave her homeland of Mexico, a familiar story to Marianna. Here, Marianna does not show that she has this same knowledge of Mr. Eddie, but she is open to his suggestions, demonstrating her comfort with him, and in a sense, demonstrating a trust that is between them. Here, Mr. Eddie is also showing Marianna respect. He is showing her respect of her knowledge, respect of her culture, and respect of her intelligence.

*Culturally matched redirection.* The final example I will examine from this vignette is that of the relations between Fred and Jocyn. Again, SCLT requires a look at context, and in this case, the age and race of both Jocyn and Fred are relevant. Jocyn is a sophomore at the time of this observation. She is 15 years old. Though quite mature for her age, she is still relatively close in age to Fred, who is 12. In this situation, it is also important to note that both Fred and Jocyn are Black. When Jocyn takes Fred’s phone, she is exercising her power. She is, after all, a leader in the program. But, she is able to take Fred’s phone without a power struggle. Cell phones are an important way of staying and feeling connected. I have witnessed many power struggles over cell phones in school. In my experience, they often turn ugly and escalate to the point of the student being removed from the learning opportunity. In this case, there was no such struggle. The student willingly complied with Jocyn’s request. What was it about this interaction that diffused rather than escalated the situation? I suggest that it has something to do with what Lisa

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power, that is, there is a “culture of power.”
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (p. 24).

In this situation, Jocelyn and Fred have one important thing in common, their culture. Jocelyn has the power in this situation, but the way she expresses her power is in a way that is culturally synchronous with Fred. For instance, Jocelyn speaks directly. She does not ask Fred for his phone; she tells him, “Let me have that.” One component of this notion of the culture of power is that of number two, “There are codes or rules for participating in power, that is, there is a ‘culture of power.’” When Delpit (2006) explains what this means, she states, “The codes or rules I am speaking of relate to linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting” (p. 25). Here, there is no cultural mismatch in the way Jocelyn is communicating. There is no [de]emphasis of power; instead, Jocelyn is direct in her request. Delpit (1993, 2006) talks about how White, middle-class teachers often attempt to reduce their exhibition of power by, “expressing herself in indirect terms” (p. 35). This work of Delpit’s is based on a study done by Shirley Brice-Heath in her book, *Ways with Words* (1983).

In addition to using language that gave Fred an opportunity to respond in a way that was appropriate, Jocelyn and Fred experience what Eccles and Gootman’s (2002) framework would
suggest was good communication. Jocelyn communicates clearly to Fred, and Fred, in turn, responds. She also acts towards him in a warm way when she jokes with him about calling China with his now-confiscated phone. This is also an example of trust on the part of both parties. Jocelyn had to trust that Fred would not react inappropriately when asked for his prized personal item, and Fred had to trust Jocelyn with the safety, and eventual return, of this same prized item. I suggest finally, that in this instance, both Jocelyn and Fred exhibit respect towards one another. In speaking in a way that Fred understands and complies without feeling powerless, Jocelyn acts with respect towards Fred’s culture. In responding by handing over his phone, Fred shows respect toward Jocelyn and the power she has in this situation. I do not think this would have gone so smoothly had there not been a secure attachment between both people.

**Students’ Understanding of Care**

As I reread my notes and interviews, the notion of care and its importance resonated over and over. In many observations, when students at the high school were working with one another or with the leaders, I heard several conversations in which students were talking about their teachers not caring about them.²²

**Example One.** Early on in the semester, Chanice (Black Female) is attempting to study for an algebra exam. I sit with her and she shows me the test she just got back in that class. She had gotten zeros on each of the questions. I look at her and say, “What’s up with that? You know how to do this math. I’ve seen you do it.”

She responds wistfully,

---

²² It is important to note here that I recognize that when students get together, they often talk badly about their teachers for both good reasons, and not. I was careful to not just quote the times when the students were talking with one another, but rather, spoke of examples when I heard students talking with adults about this perceived lack of care.
My teacher, he just don’t teach me, you know? He’s the one I told you about that told me I need to change my learning style. I don’t even know what that means. He don’t know me, and he don’t know how I learn. All he cares about is not having me fail so he looks bad. He don’t care about me, if he did, he would show me how to change my learning style.

**Example Two.** Miss Cori (White Female), Houston (Black Male), and Maritza (Latina Female) are sitting down to work together on algebra.

Houston: My teacher doesn’t help anyone. He doesn’t care if we pass or fail. I think if I didn’t act out in his class he wouldn’t even know my name.

Miss Cori: Somehow, I doubt that, Houston. You tend to stand out in a crowd. (All three laugh.)

**Example Three.** Maritza (Latina Female) is working with Miss Naomi (Asian Female) on her Spanish homework.

Maritza: What is the command form for decire? Wait, I know the command form.

Miss Naomi: You crack me up, Maritza. You are so good at Spanish, I don’t know why you think you need my help with this.

Maritza: You know, Miss Naomi, I’m from Puerto Rico, but you know what’s weird? I speak Spanish at home, but I don’t know how to write it. It’s really hard. You don’t feel like you’re from there or here. I’m not Black or White or anything like that. But I’m not living in my country or whatever it is. My teachers don’t know this about me. They look at me and see some, “Hispanic kid” (she puts her fingers in quotes). It’s really a pet peeve of mine. Just because I speak Spanish my teachers think I’m Mexican. It’s not the same, really. We have different food and stuff and Puerto Rican Spanish is like slang. They don’t know that about me though. They just don’t understand why I struggle with my Spanish class. It’s like they don’t care enough to find out anything about me, you know?

Miss Naomi: I have some idea about what you are talking about. People look at me and assume I speak some language like Korean, or Chinese, or Japanese. It is like all Asians look alike, and all Asians must speak their “native tongue” (she puts her fingers in quotes.)

**Discussion about students’ perception of care.** In each of these three examples, students are pointing out that they feel their teachers do not care about them. I am not suggesting
that the teachers do not care. I am suggesting that the way that they show they care and relate to the students is not in sync with how the students want to be shown they care and be related to. I am suggesting that care is often syncopated. For Chanice, her teacher explaining to her what she needed to change about her learning style would show her he cares. It would show her that he knows her as an individual. For Houston, caring would be a teacher taking the time to help him understand his algebra. For Maritza, her teacher knowing something so integral to her identity as her ethnicity and family origins would show her care. Bosworth (1995) examined how students defined characteristics of caring teachers. These three students’ ideas about teacher caring go along with what Bosworth found: caring teachers help students, help with school work, and see students as individuals. I will add, from my interpretation of what Maritza said, caring teachers do not base their assumptions about students on stereotypes.

**Discussion of Care in Student Interviews**

Having heard so many students say their teachers did not care about them prompted me to talk about care with the students in our interviews. I asked the interviewees the following questions: Do you feel your teachers care about you? What makes you feel cared for by a teacher? And, when you feel your teachers care about you, how does that affect your performance in that class? I asked the same questions about the students and leaders in POWER. The responses from the students were mixed.

**Ranaja.** Ranaja is a bi-racial Black and Mexican\(^2\) Female and is a sophomore at Pradera High School. She transferred from a large city where she had attended a neighborhood school with an all Black student population. Ranaja sees herself as a strong student. She is in honors

---

\(^2\) I had originally thought Ranaja was Black, but after reading her profile, she corrected my misunderstanding. She prefers to be identified as being both Black and Mexican, not, Black and Latina.
English class. She joined POWER in January of 2012 when the program started because she wanted help with her homework that her mother could not give her. She also thinks that being a part of POWER will help her get scholarships to college. Ranaja attends the program at least three times per week whenever she needs help on an assignment or if she wants to study for a test. Compared to her peers in the program, Ranaja is quiet. She often sits in the auditorium room rather than in the computer lab where most of the other students sit. She has formed a friendship with Andre (Black Male, sophomore), and spends most days in the program sitting with him or by herself. She only rarely asks for help, and when she does, it is from Miss Naomi. Ranaja does plan on attending college and hopes POWER will help her do so. In the middle of the semester, Ranaja and her mother’s apartment had a fire, and everything they had was lost. POWER staff raised funds to help her buy new clothing.

Some of my teachers are nice, but my English teacher just talks and talks. He’s a good teacher, he’s really nice, but he needs to talk less. But, I know he cares about me because he asks me how I’m doing and checks to see that I get my work done. In general, I do not feel my teachers care about me as a person, but I have had this in the past because things they tell me that they don’t tell other students or if they ask me personal questions. When my teachers care about me it impacts how I do in that class. Like if my teacher tells me I’m doing a good job it makes me want to do better. I won’t put as much effort in if the teachers don’t care.

**Dre.** (Black Female, described on page 116):

Teachers don’t care about us as a person. None of them care about us. Yeah, they bug us about doing our work, and I guess if they didn’t care, they wouldn’t care if we fail. I guess I have had teachers who care about me. They care about our grades and they push us. They ask us how we are doing or if we understand. When a teacher cares about me, at least when I was younger, I try to do better in that class. It would change the way I act in that class. I wouldn’t try to make them mad.

**Chanice.** (Black female, described on page 119):

I do not have any teachers that show that they care about me as a person. If you do good on something they say, “ok,” and if you do bad they’ll say, “come in and retest.” But that doesn’t make us want to do better, because, who cares? When I have teachers who care about me, I work harder. In middle school I was in honors math with Miss A. (Black
Female) and she gave me this worksheet and I gave it back to her and said, “I can’t do this.” She sat me down and told me I could do it. She actually cared about my grade . . . she cared about me. The teachers here don’t take time to know their students. It’s different here. The teachers have so many students! I feel lost sometimes. I’m actually really struggling with my classes because I don’t feel like either the teachers or the students care about me. I don’t belong. I usually just lay my head down on my desk and think about other things. I don’t want to be there.

That’s why POWER is so important to me. At POWER, I don’t think they expect everything from you. If you do something wrong, they’ll help you do better on it. I wish my teachers did that . . . I might do better if they did. No, I take that back. I know I would do better. In Miss A’s class, once I knew she cared about me, I would go in and see her during lunch all the time and get help, and eventually, I actually understood and ended up with a B.

**Ricardo.** Ricardo is a Latino and Black male sophomore at Pradera High School. He is a strong student, and perceives himself to be so, but “not an A student. More like Bs,” is in honors English, Math, and Science classes. He eagerly joined POWER on its first day because, “Well, last semester I had trouble at the end slacking off. I needed a wake-up start. I talked with my mom and she thought the program would help me get back on my feet.” Ricardo attends POWER daily, only missing on the few days he is absent from school. He is very engaged with the program in all ways. He is very social and can always be found working with a group of students, often serving as the tutor, particularly in Spanish and Math, which he feels are his best subjects. Ricardo is also very friendly with the staff and volunteers with the program, coming in daily offering hugs and shouts of, “hello! I’m so glad to be here today.” Besides talking with friends, Ricardo works. He has a lot of homework on a daily basis due to his load of honors-level courses. He also participates in enrichment activities, and has attended each of the “field studies” the program offered throughout the semester. Ricardo plans on attending college in California to be a school counselor. He is working hard so that he can make his college costs low by getting scholarships.
Well, that is a hard question because, I know they care. If they didn’t care, why would they put up with us! (he laughs.) But, it depends on the teacher. Once I got to know my teachers, I started asking questions more, but it is really hard. It is not like it is in middle school. There, the teachers took time to know you, and you got to know the kids too, but not as much here. It seems like some of my teachers assume they know me when I walk into their room for the first time. In sixth grade, my English teacher, Mrs. W. (Black female) pushed me. She wouldn’t allow me to get any less. I didn’t know I could do that. She knew I was struggling. She urged me to stay after school to relearn and reteach. I used to stay until six if I needed to. That benefitted me. It really helped me. She really helped me. I was so sad when she moved away. She was the best teacher I ever had. I was so sad when she moved.

If a teacher is going to show interest in me and show me they care they are going to see what kind of learner I am. I am a kinetic and visual learner. I am not a good listener. But if I see it then I start to process it through my mind then I learn it and do it hands-on. Most of my teachers know this about me and it shows me they care.

When my teachers pay attention to me it sometimes changes my behavior. Like, the teachers that . . . when teachers are really nosey, I get really irritated and sometimes I snap but I don’t get in trouble because they know how I am. They actually know me. It actually feels good, they won’t kick me out of class.

**Zaria.** Zaria is an Black freshman female that is enrolled at Pradera High school who joined the program in January of 2012. She joined POWER because she felt like it would give her a break from her 12-year old brother and provide her with a quiet place to do her schoolwork. Also, Zaria wanted something to do outside of school, as most of her time when not at school, is spent at home. Additionally, Zaria said she wanted help with her “academics” and to have a place to “hang out with her friends.” She describes herself as an “A, B, C student” and is not in any honors level classes, but intends on being in them next year. By her own admission, Zaria gets bored in class and often doodles. She and her mother want her to go to college, and in order to do this, she has enrolled in advanced classes for her sophomore year. She is also looking into participating in the Upward Bound program next year. Zaria attends POWER two to three days per week, and when there, she spends most of her time by herself, working on her homework or reading stories written by other high school students on the Internet. Her best friend, Shelly, also
attends the program, and the two often sit side-by-side when on the computers, reading the same stories and talking about them. Zaria is quiet and reserved, and at times seemed less worldly than the rest of the students in the program. I would like to suggest that she seemed “sheltered,” but recognize that I only saw her in this setting and in two of her classes. In my observations, I never saw her get involved with any of the drama of the other students, and rarely saw her ask for help from any of the adults in the program, even when offered.

Most of my teachers treat all the kids the same, so I would guess they kind of care about us. I mean, it is kind of loud in most of my classes. Sometimes the teachers stop it, but really, some students in my classes stop the teachers from teaching so we don’t learn very much. I guess that is why I get so bored. The students in POWER are not like that. They are not disruptive like the kids in my classes. I get along fine, though. My teachers, they are ok, but I think they think I’m like the rest of the kids. But I’m not. I’m goofy.

Some of my teachers, like my science teacher, is really laid back. But in that class, the kids cut-up. Like one day, my science class started out okay. It all was quiet, til this one boy comes in and starts making jokes. Then it takes 15 to 20 minutes to send him out then start back on learning. I have more than one class like this. But my teacher is nice, I can talk to him. But, I have to be very serious. I guess he cares about me, or he wouldn’t talk to me. Like I said, I like to doodle a lot . . . when I’m bored, and that is most of the time.

Some of my teachers try to get my attention and they even try to help me. See, but like when they ask me if I need help or when they see me doodling, they see what they can do to unbore me. Some of them know when I’m struggling. I guess that shows that they care. They are paying attention. Some of my teachers notice that I am bored and hand me a worksheet with practices on it, but it gets boring too. They try to see what they can do to challenge me and that makes me want to work harder for them.

In these interviews, the students expressed a mix of feelings about their teachers. All but Zaria and Ricardo expressed that they did not feel their teachers cared about them as people, but there was a consensus that the teachers did care about them as students. It is hard to know exactly what the students mean when they say that the teachers care about them as students, but not as people. A clue may be the comment discussed by Maritza earlier in the chapter. Maritza talked about her teachers knowing about her life and her culture. She spoke about being known.
This speaks loudly about a person’s need to be understood and recognized. I believe that the comments by students suggest that this recognition is critical. Recognition as a human being who has feelings, joys, can concerns. Recognition as a person of color and recognition that race impacts a person’s existence. Recognition as a student who is capable of learning. This understanding and recognition involves knowledge of a person as an individual. Chanice echoed this idea when she talked about teachers giving her a chance to retest if she did poorly on a test, but then goes on to say, “but that doesn’t make us want to do better, because, who cares?” Ricardo gives me additional insight when he talks about teachers knowing his learning style. By knowing how he best learns, his teachers show him care.

What there does seem to be consensus on is how care impacts the students. In each of the interviews in which the students talked about the caring of teachers, the students spoke of its positive impact. The students were in agreement, when their teachers showed them that they cared about them as people, and knew them in some personal way, they tried harder in class. These finding echoes the work of Bosworth (1995). Much like the students that this author interviewed to determine what care looks like for Black students, the students in my study spoke of teachers caring about them as individuals; helping with schoolwork; explaining work; helping them; and making sure they understand.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have given examples of different qualities of relations between students and “teachers.” I have centered the voices of the students on caring, so that their words can shed light on how students perceive caring relations and their importance in learning. I have also given examples of different ways in which caring relations are played out, even in complex
scenarios, such as when students are misbehaving. As my research question was looking into the quality of opportunities provided by POWER, and how the students perceive and interact with them, I have begun my data analysis with relations. I have done this because my data was clear. Students feel and from my observations, are, more apt to engage in an opportunity when they are provided in a way that is caring, and in an environment where students feel they are cared for. This data speaks to the syncopated nature of caring, which makes coming up with a prescription for caring impossible. Each person perceives care and shows care in a different way. But, what I feel confident asserting, is that feeling cared for matters to the students in POWER, and in this setting I saw caring exhibited through relationship building and recognition of students as whole beings.
Chapter 5

Opportunity and Its Relation to Belonging

In this chapter, I discuss the complicated relationship between race and belonging. I begin by looking at belonging in the research. In the following sections, I describe two classroom observations where I witnessed varying levels of engagement and discuss this in terms of relative isolation and belonging. Next, students discuss isolation in honors-level courses, and this chapter concludes with discussion about race and how this complicates student engagement in the classroom.

Opportunity and Belonging

In thinking about opportunities, it strikes me that there are plenty of opportunities for students to learn in school. Even more so now, due to a concentration on the K-16 Pipeline, and in Pradera, with the advent of the consent decree, there is a greater access to educational opportunity for students of color than ever. In Pradera, there has been a large push, due to the consent decree and a social justice agenda by some of the teachers and administrators, to get more students of color into the honors-level and A.P. courses at the high school level. Technically, any interested students can sign up for these college preparatory courses, thus, increasing student access to equal educational opportunities. Additionally, Pradera High School offers a myriad of additional learning opportunities through extra-curricular activities such as sports teams, music groups (such as marching band), and over 25 clubs, including an African American Culture Club. Some of these activities, such as basketball, have fees involved, but others, such as participating in a school musical, have none. Though not as prevalent as they used to be, students at Pradera High School do still go on fieldtrips to places such as the local
cultural center to see World-class performances. All of these are examples of educational opportunities, and none of which, on their surface, exclude any of the students who chose to attend POWER. Yet, it seems that these are not where the students I observed, are engaging. It is this lack of engagement with the opportunities that I am calling an “engagement gap.” As discussed in Chapter 1, several prominent researchers have said that the myopic focus on the achievement gap misplaced because of the historical lack of equal opportunities given to students of color (Anderson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Span, 2009). In this chapter, I propose that in addition to a gap in opportunities for students, there is also a gap in engagement, and without both opportunities and engagement, students will continue to be provided an unequal chance at positive academic outcomes.

**Research on Belonging**

The need to have a sense of belonging in school has been well documented in the literature (Gibson, Bejinez, Hidalgo, & Rolón, 2004; Hargreaves, 1996; Osterman, 2000; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Much of the work on belonging comes from the arena of psychology and suggests that belonging is an important factor in understanding student behavior and performance (Osterman, 2000). In speaking of belonging, Roser (1996) suggests that what makes students feel like they belong is their perception of the quality of relations between students and teachers, harkening back to Chapter Four of this work. In this way, relations and belonging go hand-in-hand. Where students feel they have positive relations with their teachers, they are more likely to feel like they belong. Gibson et al. (2004), in their study of a high school club for Mexican-descendent students, found that for participants, a sense of not belonging and not being respected by their peers permeated many aspects of their lives and impacted many of the students
decisions such as whether or not to speak-up in class or ask for help when it was needed. This work further suggests that a sense of membership in the school community (which, in the literature is used interchangeably with the term, “belonging”) directly influences how committed students are to their schooling and how willing they are to accept educational values. Osterman (2000), in her literature review on belonging, finds that in learning contexts where students experience feelings of rejection, alienation, and isolation, participation, engagement, and performance declines.

**Examples of Varying Levels of the Engagement Gap in the Classroom**

As I analyzed my data, I found that students often spoke in their interviews about feeling isolated. Osterman (2000) suggests that this sense of isolation leads to a decline in engagement and participation for students. The data I collected for this study suggests that for students in POWER, there were varying levels of engagement in the learning environment during the school day on the days I observed and in speaking with the students, I understood that lack of engagement was often due to this sense of isolation they felt, particularly in honors-level courses where there were few students of color. In this chapter, I will describe how the students were engaged within the school day. I will present a few excerpts from lessons I witnessed within the classrooms of Pradera High School, where the students in POWER were both engaged and disengaged. I spent a small amount of time in the classrooms in order to better understand what the students were telling me about their everyday experiences. SCLT suggests that one way to understand what is going on in the learning environment, is to understand the everyday experiences of learners (Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995). I will give examples of student behavior that indicated different levels of the engagement gap. I will also use my data to show that students engage differently when they feel isolated, primarily due to their race.
At the outset of this study, I was aware that race mattered to students and to student learning. I knew this from my experience as an educator, and from my studies. What the students of POWER taught me was how race impacted their engagement. This chapter will center the students’ voices about their experiences with race and racism in school, and how they feel this impacts their engagement in the learning opportunities provided to them.

**Example one: Mr. Washington’s honors-English class.** May 16, 2013—This honors English classroom is tucked away in a corner of this concrete high school, built in 1976, with its requisite two long, skinny, non-opening windows. It is a small room, maybe 25 feet square. The walls are decorated with posters of book covers. Twenty-three students are packed into five rows of desks. The rows, with three dilapidated metal desks on each side, face the center of the room, creating a center aisle. The teacher’s desk is in what would be considered the front of the room, located next to the door, and opposite of the windows. There is a jumble of papers on the top of the teacher’s desk, making it impossible to see the tabletop. Behind his desk and towards the center of the front of the room is a projection screen, behind which is a green chalkboard that slides to reveal a set of bookshelves. The population of students in this honors English class is racially mixed, with four Black females, three Black males, one Latino male, one Latino female, one Asian female, eight White females, and six White males. The teacher is the only Black teacher that I observed while in the classrooms at Pradera High School. It is 8:00 in the morning, first period. I am here observing two Latino(a) students that are in POWER, Ricardo and Maritza.

The teacher, Mr. Washington, begins the class. “Please sit. I’m going to give you an example for how this should flow.” The students settle in as the teacher begins to speak about the paper they are in the process of completing. Several students talk as Mr. Washington types on his
computer. As he types, the words appear on the white projection screen in the front of the room. He types, "College Dropout" as he says, "In the article, ‘College Dropout,’ Andy Blevins struggles with motivation to return to college. Although personal choice plays a major role in this decision, his lack of motivation could be caused by the ascribed social class he was born into.” He types slowly, “social class.”

As the teacher speaks and types, drafting a paper on social class that all freshmen at Pradera High School are to complete as a culminating project on a grade-wide unit about social class, the room is filled with talking. Five White students are talking to one another fairly loudly. Two more talk more quietly behind me about a formula for algebra (I am sitting in an open desk, in the front desk in the last row of seats by the window). The teacher pauses often throughout this lesson, I assume waiting for students to be quiet, but there are only a few times throughout this lesson that the room is relatively quiet. The students have segregated themselves with the Black and Latino(a) students sitting on one side of the room with one White female, and the White and one Asian student sitting on the other. The groups of students, in their neat rows, face one another.

The teacher presses on despite the noise level in the room, the screen now showing a few paragraphs of writing, with the type a bit too small for my eyes to see.

This is my first draft. What I realize looking through this now, it wasn’t so much about him going to college, but rather the success he had back at home, so I need to think about that. . . . How many of you have decided which article you want to use?

Five students raise their hands. One of the students who does so is Ricardo. “You should use those articles so you can begin looking at problems in that article.” The teacher adds to his paragraph, “A potential solution to this problem.”
Mr. Washington goes on to explain that the students will need two problems in order to get a four (or top score on the rubric) on the essays and that the problems should each be a separate essay. He talks about the components the students will need in their essays, explaining each one. As he explains the assignment, many of the students on both sides of the room are talking. I am hearing bits of a conversation that is being had by the four Black male students in the back corner of the room. One student says, “What is ghetto anyways?”

Another responds, “It is a place.”

A third chimes in, “No, she is mixed. She is not Black, Black, Black like me and us . . . Black.” At this comment, several students from the same side of the room comment. The room is now nearly fully engaged in this discussion.

Ricardo participates by making comments like, “I know. Right?” now and then, but Maritza seems to be trying to pay attention to what the teacher is saying and writing when he is doing so. She is not looking in the direction of the conversation that is overtaking the sound of the teacher’s voice.

The teacher types, “The Trio program assists first generation college students with social and academic issues they are faced with. For instance . . .”

While he types, the conversation about race continues. “He’s goin’ to say something racist. He did in 8th hour, every day.” (Black male one)

A Black male student responds, “Are we talking about Tony?”

The first Black male says, “Yes. He’ll say anything. Hey Tony . . . (Tony, White male, looks up.) Do you like Black girls? Would you date Black girls?”

Tony (White male) replies casually, “Probably not.”

The student who posed the question says, “See. What did I tell y’all.”
Ricardo chimes in, “That doesn’t make him a racist. Not really. I think he is just keeping it real.”

The student who asked the original question says to Ricardo, “You crazy Ricardo. That’s some racist shit.”

The teacher says, “Shhhh.” He then types, “For instance, Andy mentioned that he was homesick at college. Trio has seminars that help students overcome homesick feelings to keep them focused on college.” As he types he explains what he has written. Ricardo and Maritza are now watching Mr. Washington as he speaks, while a few of the students around the room continue to talk, more quietly now. “I have now completed components one through three.” He asks if there are any questions.

“Isn’t the girl from the Glass House rich?” Maritza asks.

Mr. Washington replies, “Yes, she ends up that way.”

Mr. Washington continues on with the lesson, listing, “systemic problems” on the screen. As he does this, the students continue to talk. Several, including Ricardo, pull out their Yearbooks and are leafing through them and passing them around the room to be signed. Maritza continues to watch as the teacher constructs his essay. At any given point, some five of the students appear to be paying attention, Maritza being one. About 25 minutes into the lesson, Mr. Washington tells the students to get started working on their essays. “If you have identified a problem, you can be thinking about some potential solutions so you’ll have some idea of what to research when we go to the computer lab tomorrow.”

The students talk. The room is loud. There is approximately 15 minutes left of class. Maritza stands and walks over to the teacher’s desk and says to him, “Can I sit here? She points to a desk that is directly in front of the projection screen, and adds, “I’m not learning anything
right now over there. It is too loud.” He nods and she moves her backpack and papers to the front desk. She begins to write. While Maritza writes, all but five other students pass around their Yearbooks and talk. One draws. Mr. Washington looks through the papers on his desk.

**Maritza engaging and belonging in the classroom.** I chose this classroom to describe different levels of belonging and engagement in the learning environment for a few different reasons. First, this was the only classroom I observed in that was led by a teacher of color. Also, this was the one of only two advanced classes that I observed within that had a fairly-balanced population of students. In this class, the percentage of Black and Latino(a) students (35%) more closely mirrored the percentage of Black and Latino(a) students in the school (40%). Thirdly, I felt that this example showed both engagement, and disengagement fairly well, and this was typical of my observations in the classroom setting. Finally, I thought using this example would show the complexity of looking at something like engagement and belonging and would bring out the multiple realities of the experiences of the students.

Interestingly, Maritza spoke about Mr. Washington to me in her interview. I asked her if she asked questions in class and she responded,

I’m not at all connected to my Lit. teacher so I don’t ask questions. I’m perfectly fine asking questions. I think it has to do with the relationship. He’s usually sick a lot so he’s not there a lot. So I didn’t get to know him a bunch.

Here, Maritza points to the importance of relations with teachers in relationship to classroom engagement and trust. When I later asked her about being engaged in her classes, she told me,

I try very hard to pay attention in class, even when it is loud or when other kids do not. I want to do well in class, and if I don’t try to pay attention, I won’t understand what the teacher is saying.

I asked Maritza if she felt like she belonged in her classes, and she told me, “Absolutely! I am as smart as they get. It is just that my teachers don’t always know it.” Here, Maritza seems
to be implying the importance of being known as an individual within the learning context. She said something similar when speaking to Miss Naomi in POWER one day when she spoke of teachers assuming she was Mexican because Spanish is her heritage language. Of the students in POWER, Maritza was one of two whom I got to know well that did not feel the need to connect to other students or teachers. According to Maritza, belonging was not a primary concern of hers. She, along with Anaja, spoke to me in their interviews about their ambivalence towards relationships with teachers. Both students had strong family ties that were of greater importance to them than teachers or even other students. But Maritza somewhat contradicted herself when talking about her classes, about which she said,

> In classes, the environment . . . I don’t get to learn as much as I would like. The people in my advanced Bio. class act-up. I’m like, “Come on. Grow up.” I can’t learn what I need to know because it is a disadvantage because I am distracted in my classes. There are students I can relate to in some of my classes, but not really my teachers. I have a few teachers, like Mr. Washington, who I don’t feel very connected to, so I tend not to ask them for help when I need it.

During this lesson, Maritza was one of the few students in the room that seemed to be engaged in the entirety of the lesson (the others being four White students, three females and one male). Her comment about disengagement in class seemed to be more related to the distractions from other students, rather than anything having to do with belonging. Though Maritza said she tended not to ask questions of some of her teachers, on the day that I observed her in this English class, she was the only student to ask a question. She also seemed to trust her teacher and her classmates enough to ask to be moved, appearing not to be worried about being mocked for wanting to work when most others chose not to.

As I sat in this classroom, I felt quite frustrated. I wondered why the students, in general, were so disengaged from the teaching. Was it the topic? Was it the teacher? Was it the pedagogy? Was it that the teacher was a Black man? I have no way of knowing. What I do also
wonder about is teachable moments. Towards the beginning of this lesson, several students in the room engaged in a rather loud conversation about race and racism. What I saw was a golden opportunity for a conversation that related to the topic at hand. While the students were talking about Tony being a racist for admitting he would not date Black girls, Mr. Engle was talking about the Trio program, which is for students of color. I wonder what would have happened had Mr. Engle thrown down his lesson, or, in this case what seemed more like a script, and had a conversation about race and racism with the students. I wonder how engaged the students would have been in that conversation.

*Ricardo (dis)engaging and belonging in the classroom.* Ricardo is a bit different than Maritza in this case. In this example from his honors English class, Ricardo manages to only partially engage in the lesson. He is distracted from the lesson by conversations around the room and by his Yearbook. His engagement mirrored that of most of the others in the class. He did however, show he was paying attention to Mr. Washington when he answered his question about having chosen an article. There were also times in this 20-minute lesson that Ricardo was looking the direction of the projection screen and the teacher. When it came time to work on the essay independently, Ricardo did what most of the other students did, and engaged with his Yearbook rather than the assignment at hand.

In our interview, Ricardo spoke about belonging. I asked him about the racial make-up of his classes and how that impacted his interactions and learning, and he responded,

My upper-level classes are for English and Bio., and they are mostly White. But history is multi-racial. At first, I felt so isolated. “Oh no! Not with all these White people.” I didn’t know any of the Latinos or Latinas in there. As I have opened up, I have gotten to know people and many of them are really nice to me. In first hour (Mr. Washington’s English class), I mostly just hang out with Maritza. We are the only Latinos in there and we try to help each other.

I asked Ricardo if he could tell me about his teachers and he responded,
I think my teachers, at least most of them, know me. I learn by doing and I am not a good listener. If I do bad on a test or if I’m really struggling, some will ask me to stay after to explain to make it easier. Some of my teachers actually pay attention! I feel that some of my teachers do a better job at helping students of color like me. Some of them seem to value my culture. We did a compare and contrast in my English class. We talked about gender and race. We talked about what is different and what is alike. In history we will maybe talk about the Mayans. They come from Central America and that is where my family originally came from so that is where I definitely feel that strong part. In AVID I’m the only Latino student, actually. And it is like I’m the only Latino. We don’t just talk about one race. We talk about Black people, Hispanics, White people. Everything. We were talking about the Travon Martin thing. We were watching a video and this guy was talking about Latinos and Black people wearing hoodies and sagging. And I was like, “I’m a good kid and so that makes me ghetto? That makes me a target?” It feels good that those conversations happen, and they wouldn’t if it were not for the teacher, who is not afraid to talk about race and racism. You have a voice and can express how you feel. I would feel better if more of my classes were like that. That way, I could feel like I’m not invisible most of the time.

_Invisibility complicating one’s sense of belonging._ I followed-up on Ricardo’s last response by asking him what he meant when he said he feels invisible. He responded,

That’s a good question. That’s a beautiful question! I actually don’t know how to answer that question. To me, I’m not just Latino. My dad is also Black and White, so that is in me too. It is just that when I’m in most of my classes, I’m the only Latino, and it feels weird, like people don’t see that I am different. It is not that I want them to treat me different. But I am. I am different. When I am in the store, people treat me different. When I am on the street, people treat me different. When I am at home, I speak a different language, eat different foods, watch different shows. But in class, I can’t express my culture. I want to learn about other peoples’ culture, I think it is interesting how they do it and how it is different from me and how I do it. But since we don’t talk about it, except in a few classes like AVID, I feel like everyone lumps me into the group. My race is important to me, but I feel like in the advanced classes, where there are no other or just a few other kids of color, it is ignored. I feel like the other students pretend like I’m White, but they can’t. I don’t know . . . .

Speaking of invisibility of race is significant to Ricardo. Because he feels that in some classrooms, his race is ignored, it makes him feel like he does not belong. In a sense, others including him, perhaps despite his race, make him feel like he is _not_ included. He recognizes he is different and that his experience as a Latino is important to him. At home, he told me, his family speaks Spanish. They attend a Spanish speaking church. His friends are Latino(a)s. It
frames his identity, and this fact about him being ignored makes him feel like he doesn’t belong as much as he would seemingly like to. He seems to suggest here that he wants to feel like he belongs not in spite of his race, but rather, to have himself be recognized and known as a person of color and still belong.

*Belonging in POWER.* When I asked Ricardo if he feels like he belongs when he is at POWER, he said emphatically,

Yes, I love it here! I feel like I can be myself here and that my culture is valued. When I first came to this school I was scared. I really didn’t feel like I fit in. I felt like this school was a whole different culture and I was scared. But then I started POWER second semester. Here, I feel like I can express my culture. Before, I really only knew Latino kids. But then I joined POWER and I met Black kids and a few White kids, and there are a couple of Latino students in there and I can speak to them and that feels good. I do everything here. It is not like school. In school, sometimes I check out. I don’t ask questions like I should when I am confused. I don’t trust those people. Well, most of them. But not in POWER. I’ve done every enrichment activity, and go to every fieldtrip. I loved seeing Nikki Giovanni. She was a preacher! She was not afraid to express what is on her mind and I like it when people do that. I was loving her. I was just clapping and clapping. My school never would have taken us to see her. She talked about being Black. She talked about racism. I was loving her. I wouldn’t have done that without POWER.

Though he did not directly say so, I infer from this answer, as well as from my observations of Ricardo, that he is more engaged in POWER than he is in school. This may or may not be due to his race, but he did tell me that his race makes him feel invisible at times. Of course, there could be many complicating factors that my observations did not take into account, and I did not observe him in class over time. I did, however, observe him regularly at POWER. There was not a day that he missed. And, while at the program, Ricardo was highly engaged. Though he was highly social with the students as well as adults in the program, he tended to use most of the time at the program to do his studies. It was not uncommon for him to complain that he had so much work to do that he wished the program lasted longer each day. I think something else Ricardo brought up here is salient. Ricardo thinks conversations about race and racism are
important. He wants to engage with them, he seems to want to talk about his struggles that stem from his race. He wants to talk about the racism that people face in this country. As if, by not talking about it, by, in essence, ignoring it, he felt he too was ignored.

**Identity and belonging in the classroom.** Throughout the program and in their interviews, both Maritza and Ricardo spoke of being proud of being Latino(a). Maritza spoke of her struggle with being Puerto Rican, and what that means. She didn’t have words to describe her race and how that interacted with her ethnicity and was complicated by the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States, but she clearly identified as being “something other.” Ricardo also demonstrated this same struggle with identity when he spoke of looking Mexican, but also having a father who was both Black and White. To both of these students, their identities matter. I interpret some of what is going on here as being a struggle for these students to be able to be “different,” to be who they are, with all the complications of race and ethnicity, with all the cultural implications of being Latino(a) in a White-centered world, while still wanting to fit in and be able to take advantage of the opportunities provided to White students. In these classroom spaces that are dominated by people who are White, and that privilege White ways of knowing and being, these students want to be able to be themselves, be recognized and known as themselves, even if their way of being in the world is different than most of the other students in their honors-level classes. It may be that these students, and perhaps other students of color in similar situations, want to be able to be who they are and still be accepted, even though being themselves means that they are not like the White students in their classes.

**Example Two: Mr. Engle’s honors-English class.** April 25, 2013. It is fourth period on a beautiful spring day. In order to get into this interior English classroom, I ask three different teachers directions and eventually am instructed to walk down an oddly placed hallway that
reaches between two classrooms. There is a deep rumbling sound filling the room, which I can feel in my bones more than hear. The classroom is oddly shaped, an irregular hexagon with light blue walls. The near ceiling height bookshelves are filled to the brim with orange textbooks.

I am here to observe Chanice in her honors English class. Chanice is one of five Black students in this class of 25 (20%). In the classroom there are 10 White females, six White males, two Asian females, two Asian males, three Black females, and two Black males. The room is set up with five rows of five and six newer-looking desks facing the only large wall in this oddly shaped space. On the front wall is a large white board, which is empty. Two of the Black females sit together in a back corner, and Chanice sits by herself in the front row, closest to the classroom exit. I wonder if the class has a seating chart, and when I ask at the end of the class, I am told there is none.

The teacher, Mr. Engle (White male), begins the class, “Thank you for getting settled. First of all I want to know your opinion about how the film depicted each class, whether fair or unfair. With examples from film, think about how you feel they depicted people. Do you think they showed enough? Did they just show enough to make people mad?” The students look on as the teacher speaks. The room is quiet except for the dyne of whatever is making the rumbling sound and the quiet whispering of the two Black girls in the back of the room.

The teacher hands out a worksheet and asks that the students work in pairs to answer the questions. As he hands out the worksheet, he asks, “What do you think overall? Do you feel the film was successful in depicting the media in America? Any questions? Did everybody get a chance to see the film? If you missed parts, you may want to watch some on the computer.” As the papers are passed around, the students turn to their neighbors. A few of the students walk around the room to find a partner and get started on the assignment. They move desks to form
their groups of two. Mr. Engle instructs the students to talk about their opinions and develop ideas for working on a performance piece. The assignment is due the following day.

All but three of the students pair-up. Chanice stays put. Each of the Black students find another Black peer with whom to work. One Asian female remains seated as two White females pull their desks up to hers, creating a group of three. All groups pair by gender.

Chanice sits by herself. She takes a pencil out of her binder and picks up the paper, appearing to examine it. The room is filled with quiet voices. On the walls are posters—a drawing of Shakespeare, a poster for the Glass Menagerie, Raisin in the Sun, the River, Night, a Tale of Two Cities, Hamlet, and To Kill a Mockingbird. There is one poster showing photos of writers from the Harlem Renaissance.

Mr. Engle walks around the room to check on the groups. Each of the pairs appear to be working. He stops at one group (Black females) and asks them how they are doing. He asks them to put away the Yearbook for now as it is, “kind of a distraction.” He checks their work and says, “So far so good, keep it up.” After spending close to a minute looking at her assignment, Chanice lays down her pencil and lays her head on her arm that is resting on the desk. Her eyes close.

The teacher stops to speak with a pair of White males and probes their answers, asking them to explain what they have written. I overhear him say, “How do you know that? Is there any other way you can look at that example?” After about five minutes, Chanice sits up, flips through her notes, but does not write.

The teacher checks in with a White female, “Lauren, how are you doing? Do you have any questions? I think you are doing a good job here, but I want you to think harder. Your answers are too simplistic.”
“I’m good.” She replies. He goes on to check in with two other groups of White females in a similar manner. While he is doing this, Chanice lays her head back down on the desk, her eyes remain open, but she does not look at her assignment. She remains this way for the next 10 minutes as the teacher walks around the room helping students. Mr. Engle passes by her desk no less than four times during this time, saying nothing of her immobility. She has yet to write anything.

A group of two White males sit with their hands raised, waiting 2 minutes for the teacher to answer their questions. After another 5 minutes have passed, Chanice lifts her head, takes out a notebook from her backpack and flips through it. She lays back down with her head now on the notebook. Twenty minutes into this work period, the teacher checks in on the first students of color in class. He squats down next to the group and says, “How about your responses? I’d like to see some responses.” The students hand him their work. “Okay, good.” he says as he looks at their notes. “Now think about where you are going. I want you to work independently now, and stay on topic.”

While Mr. Engle is checking in on this group, Chanice tosses her notebook onto the floor next to her backpack and lays her head back down on her desk. She sighs. After leaving the last group, the teacher walks over to Chanice, lays his hand on her desk, and says, “Where is your work?” His tone is different than it was with the other students. Chanice sits up but does not make eye contact with him. Her eyes are focused on her desk. He puts his hands on his hips and says sharply to her, “You are not helping yourself.” She does not look at him. He moves to the front of her desk, squats down, and talks to her at her eye level. He is whispering and I cannot hear what he says. When she finally looks at him, her face seems hard. It is not the face I see when she is at POWER. He is pointing at her assignment and appears to be explaining to her
what she is supposed to be doing. He appears to be asking her questions, and she is shrugging her shoulders while she looks at the paper. He stays and talks to her for at least a minute, finally rising. He speaks to her now from a standing position, again in front of her desk. She looks up at him. The expression on her face has softened a bit. He asks her to tell him what she knows she can write, and as she talks about what she knows, her shoulders get less hunched. He leans on her desk, one hand on his hip, his face two-feet from hers. “Well,” he says rather loudly given their proximity, “you just told me the answer, put it here.” He points to where she is to write the answer. He stands and says to everyone, “Okay, collaboration is done, please move back to your seats and work independently.”

As he walks off, Chanice’s head goes back down on the arm she has resting on her desk, but this time, she writes. The room gets a bit louder as the students talk to one another, but comparatively, much less loud than I have witnessed in other classes. The students have not moved back to work independently, as requested. The teacher does not seem to take note of this and instead walks over to the pair of Black females and sits down on top of a desk next to theirs. He leans over and appears to be helping them with their writing. He works with them for 2 minutes. During this time, Chanice continues to write. Before leaving the pair, the teacher says to them, loudly enough for me to hear, “I’m going to be back to check on you two, so no messing around.”

With that, Mr. Engle returns to Chanice to see what she has written. He says, “Good. That’s great. So now you want to say how this example supports your theory. Good, good.” He walks away, and as he does, she lays her head and her pencil, back down on the desk. The teacher returns to his desk and is looking at some papers. Several of the students appear to be continuing to work, or talk, in pairs. The room is filled with quiet talking for the next 7 minutes.
Two minutes before class ends, several students, along with Chanice, pack-up their backpacks and wait for the bell to ring. When it does, the students quickly rush out the door, talking loudly to one another. Chanice speaks to no one.

Of all of my observations, this is the one that surprised me the most. Chanice attends POWER nearly daily. While in the program, she works. At times, she engages with other students and adults in the program but more often than not, she sits, sometimes with a tutor, other times alone, and does her homework. In my observations of Chanice at POWER, I have never known her to be anything but gregarious and friendly. I have not seen this disengaged, seemingly hard side of her, or anything even resembling it. Here, in an honors English class, she seemed to be almost completely disengaged.

Chanice joined POWER right at the start stating, “I’m just glad we finally have a program I can come to that I can get help.” When confused, Chanice will sit down with a tutor, or Miss Cori, when she needs help with math or science. Given this, her lack of engagement in class and self-isolation was a surprise to me. After class that day, I stayed back to ask the teacher a few questions between classes. He didn’t have much time, but when I asked about Chanice’s behavior in class he responded,

Oh, that’s typical for her. I don’t know what her problem is, but I can’t get her to pay attention or to work for me. She somehow gets her work done, but I am pretty sure it is not as good as it could be. She has this attitude with me and I don’t know why. Sometimes she looks at me with the meanest look on her face.

I asked him what he has done to try to help her and he replied, “I talk to her every day. I have talked to her about her bad attitude and lack of effort, and she just looks at me as if she is angry.” He had no more time to talk with me as he had to get prepared for his next class. He also had no interest in having me interview him. “Too busy.” He told me. I was to hear that often.
This conversation with Mr. Engle left me wondering about how well he knew Chanice. He didn’t seem to know the polite, intelligent, caring girl that I came to know in POWER. I wondered if he knew how much she loved history, or that she had a sister that was much older, and lived with her younger brother and nephew, who often distracted her from her studies. It made me wonder if he was seeing Chanice, not as an individual, but as a part of a group to which the stereotypes of “angry” and “lazy” are all too often imparted. He knew the disengaged Chanice, the one who was seemingly unknowable, at least to him.

**Race Complicating One’s Engagement in Learning and Sense of Belonging**

In my interview with her, I asked Chanice about her behavior in class. She responded:

I feel like the teachers here think that since they have like more White kids they might think that everyone in that class is smart. But then if they have a few Black kids they just look down on them kind of because they are not used to that. Last year in middle school, about half the students in my honors classes were Black, but now, I have classes where there are a whole bunch of White kids and they look at me with surprise. That makes me feel kind of uncomfortable. It made me feel like I could do better. I was motivated by them looking at me funny. I wanted to prove to them that I was smart. At least, at first. In my upper-level courses there are only a few Black kids. The other kids kind of look at us like, “Oh, you’re in accelerated class.” When they think of Black kids they think of loud, obnoxious, they can’t achieve nothing. They just look at you like you’re not anything. They just act like they are scared to talk to you. I don’t have a problem with them, it is just that their body language is a little weird. No one has ever said anything to me directly. Sometimes I feel welcome in a group, but when my teacher makes our groups I do not feel welcome. We don’t work together. We work individually. But that is not how the other groups work. If they don’t know me they won’t talk to me and if I don’t know them, I won’t talk to them either. There has been no attempt by the teacher to have us know one another.

I followed-up on this response by asking Chanice whether her perception of belonging impacts how she interacts in class with her teachers and she told me,

It kind of depends on who the teacher is. Some teachers expect you to know everything and get mad at you if you ask a question. That’s like my English teacher. His expressions and his tone tell me he is frustrated because I ask a question. I don’t like that about him. I like teachers I can go to and who won’t get mad at you for asking a question. I’ve always been told to ask questions, but sometimes I can’t ask questions and it doesn’t feel right. I don’t feel comfortable talking to him, or talking in class. I just sit in class. I don’t do
nothing most of the time. If I don’t know how to do something, I just sit there. I am getting better though, and POWER has taught me that it won’t hurt to try, but I just don’t feel safe to make mistakes.

Of all of the students I came to know during my study, Chanice was the one who best articulated this sense of isolation. She spoke to me about not feeling welcome in a group, but also about her own responsibility in that when she said, “If they don’t know me they wont talk to me, and if I don’t know them, I won’t talk to them either.” But what followed that statement was interesting, “There has been no attempt by the teacher to have us know one another.” This last statement seems to me to be a re-articulation of what Ricardo said when he spoke of feeling invisible. To both of these students, being known and recognized as an individual was of the utmost importance. Vygotsky (1986) talks about education as a social rather than individual process. He recognizes the importance of collaborative activities for learning. For Chanice, at least in her honors-level courses, working collaboratively is not an option. She does not feel welcome in a group, particularly when the teacher arranges the group composition.

Chanice also articulated her feelings about being Black in predominantly White spaces. She seems to be suggesting that teachers and students in her upper-level courses don’t expect Black students to do well in these classes. She also speaks about not feeling welcome by the students, suggesting that they may fear her.

As a teacher of honors English for many years, Chanice’s comments made me think back. Did all of the Black students I brought into my class feel the same isolation? In order to make sure I understood what Chanice was saying, I attempted to triangulate this information. To do this, I showed Chanice what I had written, both about her in class, and the transcript from her interview. I asked her if I had understood her correctly to say that she feels isolated because of her race, particularly in her upper level courses. She responded,
That’s it. You’ve got it. Well, I want to make sure you understand that I don’t always feel this way, and I don’t even always know why I feel this way. I just do. Sometimes I can’t put my finger on it, it is just that . . . well, I just don’t feel I belong. Not all of the time, but a lot of the time, particularly in my honors classes.

**A college student’s experience with isolation in high school.** I wanted to understand this experience and make sure I was accurately interpreting what I saw and heard, so I had a conversation with one of my former students, a Black woman, who was once a student in honors level courses at Pradera High School, and who at the time of our conversation was a Senior at our local university. As we sat and went over a scholarship application of hers for graduate school, I asked her if I could share the findings of my research and get her insight. She was happy to oblige. I also asked her if I could use what she said in my dissertation, and she agreed. I had her sign a consent form (which I had on my computer) and explained my research to her.24 I assume because of her age and time to reflect, she was able to further help me understand what Chanice may have been attempting to articulate when talking about isolation in her upper-level courses.

Shameem: You were in several honors-level courses at Pradera High School, right?

Peg: Yes, several.

Shameem: One of my students talked about feeling isolated in class, particularly when it came to working in groups. Did you have any experiences like that?

Peg: Nobody wanted to be in a group with a black kids. At the end of day, I didn’t want to work with them either. I would beg my teachers to let me work by myself. I knew they didn’t want to work with me. No one wanted to work together but we had to work together. I was more pushy, I would tell kids when they were wrong. I think they were afraid of me. I hated group work. But my sister was more quiet, so kids were less afraid of her, and she did better with group work, but she didn’t fit in either. You can ask her. We still talk about what it was like.

---

24 This was clearly not a part of my research design, but I wanted to get some insight from an older student who had been in a similar situation to the students in my study. I knew that Peg had some insight into the impacts of race and racism, so I asked her for her input.
Some of the kids in my classes were pretty cool, others not. They were so privileged, talking about the car they are going to get, and I’m on the public bus. One time in class, they were talking about philanthropy. Everyone was talking about not wanting to give to the poor. “All they want is a government check.” So I say, “Who is they?” I stood up. “Y’all know nothing about the real world. One thing about Black people, we can survive in any condition. Bet if I gave you a Link Card and dropped you off in Cabrini, you would die. Don’t nobody get checks. We get stamps, but we don’t get checks.” I don’t be playin’ that. They know not to say that stuff around me anymore.

Shameem: When you were in high school, did you have a program or a space after school where Black and Latino scholars could gather?

Peg: That was AVID for me. It would feel so good being with my own people. I can’t begin to tell you how much I didn’t fit into my honors classes. Like, when class would first start up . . . That first five minutes as everyone settles down, everyone talks, but you just sit there. I had nothing in common with them. They would sit around and talk about One Tree Hill, or whoever they saw on their TV the night before. What was I supposed to say, “Did you watch the BET concert last night?” I couldn’t sit and chat with them like that. So I would put on my headphones and sit, waiting for class to start each hour. No one would talk to me. It was weird. Sometimes the teachers would make us share our experiences with the class. I hated that! I’d share my experience with life and it would be so much more horrific than theirs. I lived with grandma. This is normal for me and my friends. Grandma was mom. In White culture, grandma is grandma, and when she dies, nobody cares, so they didn’t understand why I would cry and cry when my grandma died. Like my friend Sienna? Her daddy’s locked away for life. Was she supposed to share that? In those classes, nobody can relate with you. Teachers don’t get it. The only ones who do are the Black ones and the Spanish ones. Don’t nobody want to understand you because it is too complex.

Shameem: How did you act in those honors classes? Did this feeling of isolation impact your behavior?

Peg: Hell yes. I acted out! Particularly after grandma died. I acted out and instead of asking me what was going on, people just judged me. I remember people sayin’, “I think she’s bi-polar.” “I think she’s crazy.” I felt so bad, so horrible when grandma died. But no one asked me why I was acting crazy, and if they had, they wouldn’t have understood. She was my mama. That woman raised me when my mom couldn’t.

In a way, I felt they used me. It was kind of like they put me in these crazy classes so that they would have Black kids in them. They didn’t believe in
I overheard teachers talking one day, “Black people not capable of learning.” So when they said they did believe in me, I didn’t trust them.

Shameem: I have a sense from my observations in the classroom that the students of color were afraid to ask questions and weren’t really engaged with the teaching that was taking place. What are your thoughts on that?

Peg: Well, like I said, and like you know, I’m pretty opinionated, and am not afraid of nobody, so when someone said something or did something stupid, I’d say something. Like this one time, I was taking a test. You know I read pretty slow, so I was taking longer than the rest of the kids. So, they all finished and were sittin’ there, talking with the teacher. It was loud, so I stood up and said, “Hey, don’t you see that I’m taking a test? You are being rude and disrespectful. I don’t do that to you. I was quiet when y’all was taking the test, and you being the teacher. You’re sitting there conversing with them, you should be telling them to be quiet. If it were me, I’d bet you’d fail me for talking.” The teacher apologized, but I think I put the fear of god in them talking to the teacher that way. In general though, I didn’t talk a lot in class. My opinion was not valued. I hated being the only Black person. You know when a Black person is not there. White kids all blend in. Anytime you miss, or say something wrong, they notice. There is no hiding. If I had something I wanted to say in class, I would raise my hand, but I wasn’t trying to talk with them. Sometimes, I was so mad in class that I wouldn’t listen. But then I’d get mad at myself when I couldn’t do my work because I wasn’t listening. But I couldn’t help it. If you think they think you nothing, then sometimes, I would just not care.

Shameem: Did you ever think about moving to a non-honors class to be out of this type of situation?

Peg: I wanted to be with my friends, but I didn’t want to put myself back. I wasn’t prepared enough in middle school. In my honors classes, I was often confused because they knew more than I did, and they probably had help. It wasn’t that they were smarter, but they were more advanced. We didn’t have the same foundation, but I didn’t want to let them know. Those kids, they had money, you know? We didn’t have any money for special tutoring. If they felt behind, they got help. I don’t know, maybe they had parents who could help them, or they went to Sylvan or something, but I didn’t have anyone to help me. The only one who would help was my older sister, but she wasn’t in the advanced classes. I was lucky, you know? I am pretty smart and I was able to understand a lot, but I missed stuff from when we moved around all the time. Then, they put me in these upper courses and expected me to know stuff I had never been taught, particularly in math. I would never have survived without tutoring, but there were times when even the tutors couldn’t catch me up on the stuff I missed.
Shameem: So how did you cope with feeling behind all the time?

Peg: I would go to tutoring before and after school. If I needed some help, I would go up into teachers’ rooms. Lots of black kids would do this before and after school. In the library we had African American club that had tutoring. I also had tutoring through AVID. That helped, but not enough, really. I really struggled through some of those classes. For me, I went to the teachers to get help one-on-one because I didn’t feel like I understood. Sometimes the teacher was going so fast, so that there was no time for her to explain the parts I was lacking on. I didn’t have extra background, and I just didn’t want to raise my hand in class because they would think I’m stupid. I didn’t want to feel stupid because no one else was asking questions.

Shameem: So in my research I’m going to talk about students not feeling like they fit in and suggest it may be due to their race. Would you agree with that conclusion from your own experience?

Peg: You feel like an alien outcast. They don’t’ know your struggle. “We fittin’ to eat, getting Link today” (she said, laughing). They don’t get that. They wish they had. I may have done even better. It’s hard to think about what a teacher is teaching when you’re always worried about what the situation is at home. It would have made it easier had I had that support at school.

Reflections on the impact of race on students’ sense of belonging. The observation I had of Chanice, the brief conversation I had with her teacher, Mr. Engle, the interview I did with Chanice, and the conversation I had with Peg have given me a lot to think about. I wonder if there is anything schools can do to remedy this situation. It is so complex. It appears that Chanice doesn’t engage in her classes, not because she doesn’t want to, necessarily, but because she is worried about how she is perceived by her peers, and perhaps her teachers as well. It also appears that both Chanice and Peg had repeated experiences with being treated differently due to their race, both blatant and subtle, that reinforced these feelings. These are high school students. How does a school or a system control what students say, or how they act? If the students and teachers knew that they were doing things to make students of color feel isolated, would they change their behavior, or is our society so embedded in racism that they would not? Is part of this just perception on the part of the Black students that I observed and talked to?
Throughout my time with the students, several spoke of being known, being understood, and being recognized. I wonder if these students would feel more inclined to engage in the learning environment if they felt known, understood, and recognized. Could this be a salient factor of POWER? Is one factor that it is small enough, and the time long enough (almost three hours per day, up to four days per week) for the teachers to get to know and understand the individual students in the program, and for the students to get to know and understand each other as well? To find out some of the answers to these questions from the perspective of the students, I talked with the students about their experiences with racism in school in our interviews.

**Students Talk about Race**

At the end of the semester, the students in POWER got into a fight with Mr. Donnovan over making a video. As a part of the final, “showcase” for the program, the students were asked to make a video where they would each be videotaped saying what the program meant to them. I was not there for the argument, I had been consulting and therefore, arrived 20 minutes late. When I got to the program that day, the air was thick with tension. “Shameem, we’re so glad you are here. We need to talk to you,” Dre said as she saw me enter the room. I looked at Mr. Donnovan and raised my eyes and shoulders, asking him, in my own special way, if it was ok if I spoke to the students about whatever was bothering them.

Mr. Donnovan replied to my non-verbal request by saying, “Go ahead and talk with them. They are mad at me.” His tone was dark. He walked out of the room. I asked the eight students who sat together that day if I could record their conversation, and they all agreed. I turned on my tape recorder. It seems that the students did not want to make this videotape, and they did not want to be forced to go to the showcase for the program, which was being held at
the middle school. We talked through the conflict. The students shared their feelings, telling me that they felt forced to say something good about the program and they clearly did not want to be on tape. I wondered if this was why so many students had asked me not to videotape my observations when I first asked for permission to do so back in February, so I said, “You remember when I first came in and had you all fill out consent forms for my research? (Nods, and “Yeses.”) Several of you checked that you didn’t want me to videotape my observations. Why was that?”

Fatima responded without hesitation, “Because Shameem, we didn’t know it was you.” The others agreed. With that confirmation of my thought, I suggested that the students compromise and that they create a video that had their voices, but instead of video of them talking, have overlays of photos they had taken throughout the semester. The students agreed that this was a good compromise.

When the students seemed to be done talking about the video incident, I asked them if I could talk to them about school and about the program. They agreed. What follows is a transcript from this conversation.

Shameem: How do you perceive yourselves as students?

Ricardo: Rude, ghetto, talk backitive, talkative . . . I see myself that way. I’m being dead serious, especially in math. Not to all my teachers, just the ones who get on my nerves and the ones who don’t like me or the people I hang out with.

Shameem: Why do you think you see yourself so differently than the way I see you when you are here at POWER?

Ricardo: I have more respect for people in here. I pretty much know everybody and they know me. I can basically trust everybody. Where in my classes I cannot trust people. They do not know me and they don’t want to know me, so I can be rude.
Jessica: I view myself as a quiet student who does not answer questions. I fear that if I answer questions I may be wrong. In here I’m different because I talk a lot. In here I engage more. I see myself as a scholar. But, I’ve always seen myself as smart. But that name, “scholar?” that’s pretty cool.

Shameem: Do you think it makes a difference that most of the students in POWER are Black and Latino?

Jessica: Actually, the fact that most of program is Black made me want to run away from it. I’ve known a bunch of the Black students in here a long time. If you walk in here and you are a different race, what you goin’ to think? They are just loud and ghetto. That’s what people automatically think about us. But, I’m glad I stayed.

Chanice: I think it is a really good thing that we have a program like POWER for students of color. If you look at the graduation rates, it is lowest for the Black kids. I think it will help our class. It will help the Black kids in our class to graduate because they have people who can help them and people who really care. I feel like teachers are there to teach you, not help you. I just think they don’t care. I don’t have good relationships with them. Here I can be myself. I can be smart and Black at the same time. In class, I don’t feel smart, and I don’t care. In other classes, I feel embarrassed because I am smart. Some of the Black kids make fun of me for it. But here, I can be both. Black and smart.

Anaja: In school, I don’t feel like kids are treated equally. Education-wise, maybe. Social-wise, no, I don’t think so. Some teachers have favorite students, and I don’t see those favorites being Black, or Latino. So for instance, they may give a student some food after class.

Fatima: I think it matters a lot. It makes a difference because there is a group of students actually doing something rather than just being a group of Black kids not being educated or anything. Here, we learn together, and if we don’t get it, instead of just sitting there like we do in class, we can get help. Sometimes we help each other and sometimes we get help from Miss Cori, Miss Naomi, or one of the tutors. But, you know that.

Dre: I think it matters that this program is mostly for Black kids, but, when we talk about things it is not fun. Talking about Nikki Giovanni . . . it was boring. I want to learn about civil rights and stuff. I want to talk about the stuff we go through in class because we not White.

Fatima: The only reason I don’t do good in school sometimes is because I don’t try enough. I could do good, but in some of those classes, I just don’t care. They don’t care, so I don’t. I know that hurts me, but when I don’t fit in, I don’t care.
This conversation shed some light on belonging for me. I interpret what these students are saying to mean that there are circumstances where they don’t feel they engage as they should because they don’t feel they fit in, or belong. I am in no way suggesting that all students feel this way at all times. I am also not suggesting that POWER is a panacea for this problem. But, I feel confident asserting that there is something about providing a space for students of color to come together and learn, where they can feel like it is safe to be themselves, and to *not* know something, that is important. I also hear in these students words the echoes of care again as well as the importance of being known, not just as a student, but as a whole human being. It strikes me that as a group of freshman (the only sophomore was not present for this conversation), these students were articulating a complicated set of issues around race. They have had experiences with racism, and recognize them as such. POWER seems to provide one thing that schools just simply cannot—time. Here, the students and teachers can get to know one another. They seem to feel safe to be themselves, and, there is time for understanding. There is time to sit and work. There is time to play. There is time for the social interaction that is sorely missing in some of these students’ classrooms. Perhaps this is what is meant in this setting as community. In coming together at POWER, these students have united. Each student, belongs.

In interview after interview, students talked about their race as being salient to their educational experience. When I talked to Chanice about POWER and how and why she engaged differently in the program than at school she told me,

> At POWER, I can come in here and talk to people and people will try to help me. I like that because at home, I don’t have anybody I can talk to. It is great to have people I can talk to about life. Some other kids might be going through similar stuff. It affects me when I have something bothering me. I have to tell somebody. I come here and I talk about it and feel better.
The adults here are very smart. They are really smart. They help me on a lot of stuff and they are caring people. They are people who love working with teenagers. They seem to like that I’m Black. That makes me want to work hard. Usually when I think of people working with kids I think of preschool teachers and stuff, these people are so good at working with us. They teach you stuff. We learn from them. We need a role model. I don’t get that in class. In class, sometimes I am surrounded by kids who don’t care. This influences me a lot . . . in a bad way. They sit there and say, “I don’t care. Whatever. I’m not going to do this.” They don’t ask for help or do anything. That rubbed off on me a bit. Sometimes it still does. If I think I can’t do something I just sit there and say, “I don’t care,” when I actually do.

At POWER, I can rely on the adults here. I trust them. Not like in class. In a lot of my classes, my teachers don’t know me. I think they think I’m like all the other Black kids. Here there are people I can talk to. They listen to me. Sometimes when you tell people stuff they just don’t be listening, but here, they listen to you. They give you advise on things. I need advise on a lot of things. I ask them questions. Some questions they’ll laugh at me, but they will still give me advise on what to do.

I asked Chanice how she related to the students in her classes and she responded, “I sometimes feel like I can relate to students in my classes, but not really. I don’t really talk to them unless I have to. But they talk to each other. It feels isolating.”

For Chanice, it seems, that one reason she feels isolated in her classes is because of her race. She mentioned being one of only a few students of color in her upper-level courses on more than one occasion. In her response, she is saying a lot, but one thing I am interpreting from her words is that being known, being able to trust, and being respected as a Black female is important to building Chanice’s sense of belonging at POWER, and that lack of these factors greatly impacts her sense of belonging in the classroom, which in turn, impacts how she interacts with the learning opportunities provided in them.

When discussing Example One in this chapter, I mentioned that Maritza and Ranaja were the two students who seemed to care least about relationships in school. In her interview, I asked Ranaja about isolation and her level of engagement in class and at POWER. This was her response:
I don’t really act different in class than I do here. I feel like I fit in ok, well kind of. I was only at my middle school for one month, so I didn’t know a lot of people when I came here. But there, I saw more people of color, which made me feel more comfortable. You know it makes make me more comfortable. I don’t really feel isolated in class because I am more independent so it doesn’t bother me if people ignore me or leave me alone. I’m strong and independent. That is why I keep to myself. I don’t want to be part of the drama.

But, there are times when the race thing is weird here. I come from Chicago. There, most of the people were Black. I used to have a few White friends in Chicago, but the White people I’ve met here at school . . . I haven’t made even one White friend here. They seem like they are on a pedestal. Even if I act myself or make a joke, or if, god forbid, I’m loud, all of a sudden, I’m ghetto. They don’t call me it, but it is the looks I get.

Anaja seems to have a strong sense of identity. She appears to be very confident in herself. Even in POWER, she often works alone. When she does work with another student, it is almost always with Myles, and often, it is in the auditorium room of the program, rather than with the large group of students in the computer lab part of the program. She did seek help from the program leaders when needed, but this occurred infrequently. She seems less concerned with issues of isolation than the rest of the students in the program, but, even in her confidence, there appears to be a sense of isolation. In the second to last sentence of her response about isolation, Anaja said, “Even if I act myself or make a joke, or if, god forbid, I’m loud, all of a sudden, I’m ghetto.” To me, this suggests that in order for Anaja to “fit in” in her classes, she has to be someone other than her own, culturally-imbued self. Much like what Ricardo and Maritza seemed to be expressing in their comments, Anaja appears to be suggesting that in order to belong, she has to act in a way that is inauthentic. I wonder how one does this all day long and what a toll it exacts.

I asked Dre about what it was like for her to be in her honors classes. She told me, 

In the honors classes I am in (biology, algebra, and English) most of the students are White and the teachers are all White. I think it is just because I’m in honors classes and most of the Black kids are in the regular classes. Last year, I was the only Black person in my honors reading class. It makes me feel isolated, but then I just get used to it. When you go to honors classes you find just a few Black kids. It makes you feel weird. There’s nobody here! It’s like you go to the class and you don’t find anybody but you. Its not a
good system because if you are in honors classes it’s a whole bunch of other people you don’t know, that don’t talk to you, that can’t relate to you.

Dre reiterates the point of isolation that comes up time and time again when I speak to the students at POWER. I think of isolation as the opposite of belonging. According to Grossman et al. (2002) and Vygotsky (1986), belonging includes feeling part of a group. For many of the students in POWER, particularly those who are in advanced courses, there seems to be no group for them to be a part of. And, if they don’t feel like they belong, the research suggests they will be less engaged (Gibson et al., 2004; Osterman, 2000). Though this was not the case in all of my observations, it was clearly the case with Chanice. I wonder also about what Dre said about not finding anyone but herself. I could interpret this as her saying, “well, the White kids don’t see me, so I don’t see them.”

Andre was another student I observed in class. And much like Chanice, he too was disengaged in the lesson. In his honors English class, he too laid his head down for most of the class, but in his case, he appeared to fall asleep. When I asked Andre what it feels like to be in honors-level courses he responded,

When in those classes, I . . . well, I don’t know. I feel by myself. I don’t know why I feel that way. I think some of the other students, you know, that are White, they like look at me differently sometimes, I don’t know. But I know I don’t feel that at POWER. Here I feel more valued as a Black male than I do in class. It is when I am in predominantly White classes that I feel isolated. Like my third hour class. Its my English class, the one you watched me fall asleep in? My cousin’s in there, so usually when we sit next to each other it is all good. But she moved us so now I’m at a table with kids I don’t know and they are like . . . White. I feel like all attention is on me. There is a group of White kids and I’m right there. It just don’t feel right.

This notion of isolation due to race, particularly in upper-level courses, is one that troubles me, and makes me wonder. More students of color are being “pushed” (at least at Pradera High School) to be a part of honors-level and Advanced Placement courses, and part of that push is because the researchers have told educators, time and time again, to set high-
expectations, to believe in students, and to push them. There is also a large call for equity and social justice in schools. Anderson (2004) points out that one reason for the achievement gap is lack of access to high quality curriculum, and suggests that Advanced Placement courses are a gateway point for students of color to get into college. Yet, it seems, at least in the experiences of these students, these spaces are not kind, inclusive, caring, and respectful places for them. How are we to expect these students to thrive as scholars in a place where they seem to feel oppressed, or minimally, unwelcomed and like they do not belong? Osterman (2000), in her review of studies done on belonging, points to a broad body of research has demonstrated that students function more effectively when they feel respected and valued and function more poorly when they feel disrespected or marginalized. POWER, at least according to the students, appears to be a place where the students feel this respect and value, but I wonder if it is enough. I wonder how we can bring this respect and value into the classroom where it seems to be missing for these students so that they too, can function more effectively. So that they too can have access to the knowledge and capital found in these advanced classes.

**Conclusion**

At POWER, I’ve witnessed countless times when students have asked for help. I have watched as students have struggled with difficult material, sometimes giving up, other times persisting. I have watched as they have worked, talked, argued, teased, laughed, learned, tutored and encouraged each other, played, danced, cooked, received help on matters of school and life, been guided, and been cared for. They have done this as students of color as a group, and have done these things as individuals. At POWER, the sense of isolation did not appear to exist. Even when the students sat by themselves and worked, I never got the sense that someone was feeling
alienated. Of course there were times when students didn’t all get along, but I never saw this last for any length of time. At POWER, there was a sense of community that I didn’t find in the classes at Pradera High School. Perhaps this was due to the lack of time teachers have to build this sense of community. Perhaps it was due to the perception on both students and teachers parts that some students belong in honors classes more than others. This study was not intended to figure that out. But as the research from Osterman (2000) points out, students are more engaged when they feel like they belong. The students intoned this in our conversations as well. This confluence of factors suggests to me that belonging matters, and POWER is a place where these students feel they belong.

This sense of belonging, and its impact, is what I have chosen to term an engagement gap. In these students’ classrooms, in spaces where they do not feel like they belong, the students do not have the opportunity to engage with the curriculum, pedagogy, and relations at the same level as their peers. Some, like Maritza, may, but for others, such as Chanice, opportunity is truncated because of her isolation. The stories and words of the students in this chapter suggest that it is at the confluence of opportunity and engagement that student achievement can be made more available to all students.
Chapter 6

Opportunities in the Form of Teaching and Learning

Throughout the spring of 2012, as I observed students in POWER, I had countless chances to observe teaching and learning opportunities. In this chapter I will discuss several of these opportunities. I will describe two actual lessons, and several examples of teaching within the natural context of POWER.

Teaching and Learning Opportunities

Within the program, I watched as Miss Cori, a White female in her junior year at the local university, retaught complex concepts from geometry and tutored students in all other subjects. Miss Cori was the only leader in the program with a background in education. She was studying to be a high school math teacher and was taking teaching methods courses throughout the time I observed. I observed Miss Naomi, an Asian female in her senior year at the local university, as she helped students with their Math, Spanish, History, and English assignments. I watched as countless numbers of tutors from the local university helped students in a variety of subjects as well—keeping them focused, answering questions, helping with completion of essays and job applications, and quizzing students for tests. I observed several community members teach enrichment activities ranging from Hip-Hop Dancing to cooking. I also travelled with the students to the local university where I watched professors and teachers-in-training teach the students to calculate codes, manipulate robotic cars, and create bath gel in a chemistry laboratory. There were also many times when I observed students helping one another, in essence, teaching. Finally, I observed fourteen, 43-47 minute lessons within the classroom setting of Pradera High School.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Total Number Students</th>
<th>Percent Black and Latino Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number Students</strong></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geometry (1)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geometry (2)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore English (1)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore English (2)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman English (1)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman English (2)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman English (3)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 19.** Racial breakdown of observed in-school honors-level classes.

In both of these figures, where numbers are in parenthesis, this indicates that I observed in more than one class of that type. For example, I observed in two geometry classes. I have delineated these by calling them class 1 and 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Total Number Students</th>
<th>Percent Black and Latino Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry (1)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry (2)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman English (1)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman English (2)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algebra (1)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algebra (2)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geometry</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 20.** Racial breakdown of observed in-school academic-level\(^{25}\) classes.

---

\(^{25}\) In Pradera, “Academic-Level” refers to classes that are not honors or Advanced Placement level classes.
From the data in Figures 19 and 20, a few points should be noted. Both the academic-level chemistry and geometry classes were comprised of students from a variety of grades. These classes are primarily for sophomores, but freshmen who have had algebra during eighth grade can take geometry in their freshman year. Also, students who have failed these classes in the past can take them at any time. In general, the trend that is showing up in these charts, with few exceptions (honors-level geometry and freshman honors-level English [2]), is that honors-level courses have a greater number of students enrolled in them than do the academic-level courses. Also, in all but two cases, (honors-level geometry [1] and honors-level English [1]), the number of Black and Latino students is significantly below that which is expected given their prevalence in the school in general. The opposite trend is true in most of the academic-level courses, where Black and Latino(a) students are significantly overrepresented given their prevalence in the school.

In the following sections, I will describe some of the various learning opportunities that were provided to the students who participate in POWER. In my observations, there were many, too many to describe in this chapter. I have chosen examples that exemplify the different types of opportunities the students had to learn.

**POWER Teaching Example: Creating an Opportunity for Student-centered, Engaged Learning From a Geometry Tutorial**

May 2, 2012—It is a beautiful spring day. The sun is shining and it is about 84 degrees out. I wonder as I enter into the dark, stiflingly hot, imposing building, why the students come to POWER when they could be outside. Miss Cori is working with Maritza on geometry when I come over to see what they are doing. They are at work at the whiteboard in the front of the computer room. Miss Cori sits on the front table facing the board, as Maritza sits in a blue rolling
chair in front of the table with her papers behind her on the table Miss Cori is sitting upon. She faces the worn whiteboard. Around the room 15 students work, talk, and play on the computer, check their grades, joke, and study. The room is loud with talking. In the room there are also two tutors here today from the local university as well as Miss Naomi. The tutors and Miss Naomi sit with students as they work, answering questions, and keeping them focused, as needed.

Miss Cori: Do you see a pattern here?

Maritza: A pattern of what?

Miss Cori: Of all the angles. Write down all of the angles you found. (Miss Cori picks-up the small “book” used in Maritza’s geometry class. The book is a set of papers that have been folded in half and stapled. The print in this book is extremely small. She reads aloud.) “He notices that the measure of the exterior angle is related to two of the angles of the triangle.” You need to write out the exterior angle measurements of this triangle right here (she points to a triangle in the book she is holding). What do you notice about this one (it reads, “one angle, 48 the other 100 degrees, the exterior equaling 148”)? Let’s try another one. Does it work the same way?

Maritza: Yes, I do see a pattern. She writes in her book, “Some of the angles add up to the exterior angles.”

Miss Cori: Here, A and B are called remote interior angles because they don’t touch the exterior angles. Write a conjecture about the remote interior and exterior angle of the triangle. It is basically what you wrote here, but now you have the language.

Maritza: Can I say, the remote interior angles add up to the exterior angle?

Miss Cori: Yep. That’s perfect. (Maritza writes this down on her lined paper.)

Maritza: Wait, is that a conjecture? I thought a conjecture was the angle, angle, side thing.

Miss Cori: Yep, there are lots of conjectures. It wants you to prove it for any angles, not to use numbers. (Miss Cori draws a triangle on the board with variables A, B, C and X as the exterior.) How would you figure out what C (opposite exterior) is?
Maritza: Since it is equal to 180, you do 180-(A + B) = C. 180 - C will equal X.

That’s what I write for C?

Miss Cori: Yep. That’s the proof! This isn’t done though, so let’s solve for C in this one. How would you get C by itself? You know when you solve for X in algebra? It’s like that. Think back to solving for X and instead of an X, use a C instead. You want C by itself. (She covers up X on the board with her hand.) How do you get C by itself? (She pauses for a good thirty seconds.) When you are adding a number to a variable, how do you get rid of it?

Maritza: You subtract it. What do you do to one side you have to do to the other, right? (Miss Cori nods.)

Maritza: (She writes while speaking) So this would be 180 – C = X. (She subtracts 180 from both sides getting -1 C = X - 180.)

Miss Cori: Good. So now you have –C, so how do we make that C usable?

Maritza: You divide by -1 on both sides. So C = -X + 180.

Miss Cori: Do you remember how to do substitutions? (Maritza shrugs her shoulders) So, all of this is (she points to the C = -X + 180) and all of this, is C. If you have 2 + 2 = 4, and 3 + 1 = 4, you would know that 2+2 = 3+1, right? So we do 180 - (A+B)= x +180 (She writes this on the board). Then try to get X by itself.

Maritza: So you subtract 180 from both sides (Miss Cori follows her instructions) giving negative A minus . . . . (Miss Cori stops and looks at what she is writing.)

Miss Cori: I forgot to make the X negative (she fixes it). So the correct solution to 180 – C = X should be C = -1X + 180. Miss Cori writes, “180 –(A+B) = -X + 180.”

Maritza: Subtract 180. (Miss Cori does this and writes, “-A -B = -1X.”) Now, divide each side by negative one (she does, and this leaves her with X = A+B.)

Miss Cori: That is exactly what we said at the start. Nice work!

Maritza: So that is all that I have to write down?

Miss Cori: Yep. Do you want to talk it through first?

Maritza: No. I get it. (She writes on her paper the following:}
180 – A + B = C
180 – C = X
-180 = -180
-1C = X - 180
-1 = -1
180 - (A+B) = -X + 180
-180 = -180
-A - B = -1X
-1 = -1
X = A + B

Miss Cori: That is excellent, Maritza. You are so good at this and you learn so fast!

Maritza: Well, we went over this in class today, he just went too fast so I didn’t really get it. I think I get it now.

The lesson continued with a more complex pentagon for the next 20 minutes. Culminating with Maritza saying, “I got it! That was a cool problem. Hey, where did everyone go?” (The room was now empty, the students left, loudly, to go to the Home Economics room where they were learning to make chocolate chip cookies.)

Miss Cori: I think everyone went to cooking.

Maritza: Aren’t you supposed to be cooking with them? I feel bad that you are here.

Miss Cori: You know math is my favorite thing in the world, well, next to teaching math to smart people like you.

Lessons like this one, usually taught by the resident math pre-service teacher, Miss Cori, occurred almost daily. This one lesson, in particular, was longer than was typical, with most lessons lasting between 20 and 30 minutes. Maritza, Dre, Fatima, and Houstin would get math help on a regular basis from Miss Cori. Others would get help on assignments and the like, but on a regular basis, these four students would be retaught material. Oftentimes, these students would come in, saying something like this that Fatima said one day, “Miss Cori, where have you been? You weren’t here when I needed you. I have a test in geometry tomorrow and I have no clue what the teacher was talkin’ about this week. Can you teach it to me again?”
On this day, in this example, we see Miss Cori teaching a complex lesson to a student, one Maritza had been taught previously but didn’t understand. Miss Cori knows this subject well enough to explain it in a way her student, Maritza understands. She uses specific praise, and exercises patience. Maritza too, demonstrates patience with this extended, complicated task. In this example, Miss Cori also recognizes a mistake that she made and corrects it. I also noticed that Miss Cori had Maritza do most of the writing, both on the board and in her notebook. She also asked Maritza questions to check that she understood what she was being taught. This is a luxury that comes with working one-on-one that does not exist in today’s classrooms.

As I watched this lesson, I wondered why Maritza had not understood this concept while in class. She is the student that I observed in English and Math class that paid attention despite a lot of commotion in the room. She is the student that told me she tries her best to pay attention in every class. But, Maritza is also one of several students who told me in her interview that she did not like asking questions in class, particularly when she didn’t have a good relationship with her teacher. I wondered if she had asked questions in class on this day, so after the lesson, I asked her if she had. “No.” She replied. “I didn’t. The teacher was going so fast, and he gets mad when I ask questions, so I don’t. I know I can come here and get Miss Cori to teach me stuff, so I wasn’t too worried about it.” It concerns me that students are afraid to ask questions. I did not witness any teachers getting frustrated with students for asking questions, but repeatedly, this is what the students told me. Is it just their perception? Have they had previous experiences that tell them that they shouldn’t ask questions? When I spoke with Tela, a shy Black girl who often worked independently while participating in the program, she told me, “In high school you want everyone to look at you as if you are somebody. You want to fit in.” Could it be that these students don’t really feel they fit in in school? A special education teacher (Black Female) was
visiting the program one day and I heard her say to the site-coordinator, “What you have here are the misfits.” Mr. Donnovan looked at her quizzically. “What I mean is that these are the smart Black and Latino kids. They don’t fit in with their friends who look like them, and they don’t fit in with their classmates. They come here, and fit right in.” It bothered me to hear this, but maybe in a way she was right. At least in their honors-level classes, most of these students don’t feel like they belong, or at least, are welcome.

**POWER Teaching Example: Opportunities for Engaging in Hands-on Learning Through a Robotics Activity**

Once per week, eight students from POWER travel 45 minutes on the public bus to the local university where they receive tutoring for a half-hour, then have an hour lesson in the Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) fields by a professor and students. Today Dr. P. is in the room when the students arrive to the classroom in the Foreign Language Building. The room is cold and has but one small window in the corner. The light in the room comes from the florescent lights hanging from the high ceiling. The students file in and drag their desks towards one another, scraping the gray cement floor as they do. Professor Adam and three of his students are here to give a lesson in robotics. He is Miss Cori’s math methods instructor, and the three students are in her class as well. Dr. P. is a Black man, in his early thirties. He is a professor in the Chemistry Department and has done this type of STEM work with students at the local Boys and Girls Club in the past. Professor Adam is a White man, in his early forties.

Dr. P.: (loudly) EM!

Students: (not so loudly) POWER.

Dr. P.: I’d like to introduce you to my good friend, Professor Adam.
Professor Adam: You can call me Mr. P. I once taught math at your school. You guys are from Pradera High, right?

Students: Yes.

Mr. P.: Today we are going to work with some robots and calculators to accomplish some tasks. (While he talks, most of the students listen, looking at Professor Adam as he speaks. Myles fidgets with something in his backpack. Miss Cori moves so that she is sitting next to him. He stops and looks on.) The goal of today will be to program your robot to accomplish the tasks that I am going to give you. (He pulls out a 2-wheeled car about six-inches long by three inches wide.) You are going to use a calculator to drive this car. The goal is to learn how to tell the calculator how to drive the car and then to accomplish however many tasks you can with the robots. You have to know how to tell the calculator what to do. (He has his university students hand out a sheet with instructions on it. The students look at the sheet as Professor Adam talks.) Every command has three digits. It is called a command language. On the sheet you just got, there are three arrows with three numbers. If you are going to tell a robot what to do you are going to have to type in a number. First command equals 112. Look at your sheet and tell me what the numbers stand for.

Dre: (Reading from her sheet) One, move for a certain amount of time. Two, move for a certain time unless the front bumper hits something first.

Professor Adam: For the second box, the second number tells the left wheel what to do. If you type in zero, the left wheel will rotate backwards. If you type in a one, there will be no motion. If you type in a two, the left wheel will rotate forward. The third number tells the right wheel what to do. Zero will rotate backwards. One will have no motion, and two will rotate forwards, just like with the second number but for the right wheel. You have to know how to talk to the calculator to tell it what to do. (He gives them examples and quizzes them for what the robot will do. Ricardo is the only one answering.)

Professor Adam: Good answers young man. What’s your name?

Ricardo: Ricardo.

Professor Adam: Do you guys agree with Ricardo? (The students nod.) Someone besides Ricardo, 100, what command are we giving the robot?

Chanice: It would move for a certain amount of time and go backwards?
Professor Adam: How much time would it move for?

Myles: A certain amount.

Professor Adam: A calculator speaks in centi-seconds. Can someone conjecture how long that is?

Chanice: A hundred seconds?

Professor Adam: Ohhhh, so close. You are on the right track. Where have you heard centi before?

Houston: Centipede.

Professor Adam: If there are a hundred-feet on a centipede, how many centi-seconds would be in a second, do you think?

Chanice: 100?

Professor Adam: (Jumping) Yes! So, if I want to tell my robot to move for three seconds, how many centi-seconds do I program in?

Houston: 300.

Professor Adam: Right! So, first step, turn it on. The on switch is on the bottom. Think about this. If my command is 120, and my time is 450, when I tell this robot to move, what will it do?

Dre: Stay in place.

Professor Adam: Everyone agree?

Ricardo: It is going to go in a circle.

Houston: It is going to turn around.

Professor Adam: How do you know?

Houston: Because of the numbers. I read what the 120 did.

Professor Adam: Why didn’t it do anything if is was doing the opposite?

Houston: Because the wheels were moving (he smiles).

Professor Adam: How long did it go for?
Houston: Four and a half.

Professor Adam: How do you know?

Houston: 450 is four and a half seconds. Four hundred is four seconds and fifty is a half of a second, so four and a half seconds.

Professor Adam: I think we have a math wizard here! (The college students walk around the room, handing a robot and calculator to each student.)

Professor Adam: Turn it on. You’ll see a red light. Grab your worksheet and we’re all together on the top right here. I need to show you where to go to enter your command language. What does the sheet tell you to do?

Dre: Press the “apps” key.

Professor Adam: Yes, push that.

Dakota (White Female): TI robot.

Professor Adam: Choose the one that says TI robot and choose new program.

Let’s try this. What if we put in the command of 121 with the time of 600? After you enter your command, press enter. Make a conjecture about what this is going to do.

Dakota: I think it is going to slightly turn.

Professor Adam: Which way?

Dakota: Right. No left. Or the right. One of them, but not all the way.

Professor Adam: How long is it going to turn for?

Dre: Six seconds.

Professor Adam: Hit mode to save. It is at the top. If you press mode, it saves it and brings you back to the screen. Put it on the floor and see if Dakota’s prediction is right. (The students put their robots on the floor after programming them and watch what they do.)

Dakota: It went into a big circle!

Chanice: Only the left one was moving and the right one was still.
Professor Adam: You just learned the basics of programming a robot. On the back of your sheet are your missions. On the back, they get more challenging as you go through. For example, make your robot go forward for four seconds then go back to where it started. Once you get it, have one of us watch you make it happen. Show it to us. If it works, we’ll sign your sheet. You can work alone or you can work together. You can collaborate. Your only competition is with yourself. Let’s see what each of you robot programmers can do!

Dakota: Are the numbers you gave us the only numbers you can use?

Professor Adam: Well, there are other numbers, but these are the only ones I will give you. You get to explore beyond this.

The students pair up with the college-age students, leaders, and volunteers in the room. Today there are eight adults in the room, so there are enough for each POWER student to work with an adult. Dre eagerly gets started with the first task. Within seconds, she has accomplished the mission. “I think that was a world record,” says Professor Adam. I just said go 10 seconds ago!” The room is abuzz with activity. Each of the students stay engaged with the activity for the next 20 minutes, some having more luck than others. Myles works with Dr. P. and gets frustrated that he cannot do the tasks perfectly, but is encouraged by Dr. P. to keep going.

Dre is flying through the missions, and has a big smile on her face while she works through each task. She works with one of the math methods college students.

College Student (White male): How much more time do you think we might need to add to get to 36?

Dre: Maybe a half of a second?

College Student: Try it.

She makes the change and it is one-quarter of an inch off.

Dre: You know, I wonder if the problem is the floor. It is cement so it is rough in places.

College Student: That’s right. So you are noticing that there may be something else going on and that thing you are noticing is friction. You are getting a
little bit of physics in there too. (Shouting to the class) I think we have a superstar over here, y’all.

The tutor leaves to find a place Dre can do the next activity that requires more room and precision. I follow him to the room next door where he has put two long tables next to one another, creating a smooth transition between the two tables using stiff paper. Dre brings her robot into the room where she works to make the car go eight feet, turn one-quarter turn, go six inches, return eight feet, turn another quarter-turn, go six inches, and end up in the same space. Four adults (including myself, Mr. Donnovan, the site-coordinator, her tutor, and Professor Adam) eagerly look on. When the car does exactly what it is programmed to do, all of the people in the room give her high fives and applaud. There is a huge smile upon her normally hardened face until she is told it is time to go.

In my hours of observations with POWER, this was the most engaged I saw the students in a lesson. In general, the trips to the local university provided the students with hands-on learning opportunities. The first week, the students learned the scientific method and created an experiment with gum to practice using it. The second week, the students learned how to figure out their future driver’s license numbers using the code used by the Department of Motor Vehicles. This robotics example came from the students’ third visit to the campus. The students continued on with robotics for the next 2 weeks. On the sixth visit, the students did an engineering activity where they used materials such as tongue-depressors, tape, and pipe-cleaners to make a boat that would hold the greatest amount of pennies without sinking. The last week on campus, the students were taken to a university chemistry laboratory and there they donned lab coats and safety goggles in order to make shower gel. Dr. P. taught each of these lessons with the exception of the robotics lessons discussed here. During each of these lessons on campus, the students were engaged, but in this particular lesson, there was an excitement that
was missing in the others. The aptitude showed by each of the students in this case, with the exception of Myles (which I discuss later in this chapter in the section on tenacity), was impressive to me. One student in particular, surprised me—Dakota. Dakota was one of two White students who regularly participated in POWER. In my observations of the program, I rarely saw her engage with much other than a computer, and in particular, her Facebook page. She was friendly to most of the students in the program, but rarely sat with anyone besides the one other White student in the program, Joe. I saw her work on homework no more than three times in all of my observations. In my casual conversations with Dakota, I once asked her how she did in her classes and she responded, “I’m not here for school. I don’t worry about that stuff. I’m here to hang out with my friends. I don’t like school. I’m not good at it. So, why should I try?” But in this instance, Dakota was not only engaged, she was successful, and she seemed happy about it. The next day when the students who did not go to campus the day before asked her what they did, she eagerly responded, “It was so cool! We did robotics and made cars do what we told them to using a calculator. I was really good at it!” I was excited to see if this “success” for Dakota would translate into changed behavior at POWER, perhaps into her doing some of her school work. It did not.

Dre was also a surprise to me. Although there have been many times that I have observed her actively engaged with her studies and fellow POWER students, until this time, I had not witnessed her pursue an activity with such vigor. Her usually hard shell faded away and seemed to have been replaced by excitement.

In this situation, relations did not seem to matter. Both the teacher, Professor Adam, and the university students, were unknown to the students, and the students to them. But in this circumstance, where the activity was engaging and fun, albeit challenging, this did not seem to
matter. In this case, as well, both the professor and his students were White. Here, race seemed not to matter. It made me wonder. How is it that the students can be so engaged in a learning activity that involves mathematics, in this setting, but less so in the classroom? I speculate that it had something to do with the following factors. One, the students knew each other. They were friends who spent approximately three hours a day together, three to four times per week, for some 12 weeks. Two, the lesson Professor Adam presented was engaging. The students were asked questions, they had their hands-on the robots. In this way, perhaps Professor Adam was being responsive to the needs of the students. He could have lectured on what the students needed to do, or lectured about robotics, but instead, he engaged them with an interesting activity. Three, this lesson was not competitive, it was cooperative and it seemed to be empowering. Professor Adam gave the students a choice to work alone or with another student if they chose to collaborate. The only competition present was with oneself. Four, this is a different setting from school. For one, these students are in a college classroom. To get into this classroom, they have to walk across the campus lawns, often strewn with college students reading, playing, or sleeping, and they walk down a brick-lined hallway filled with college students talking and studying. They are taught by a college professor, and aided by college students. In an interview with Andre, I asked him about what opportunities he felt POWER gave him and he said,

    Going on campus has made a difference. I see myself . . . I want to . . . it like motivates me to want to go to college from what I see when I’m on campus. When I am there, I feel smart. It makes me want to try hard when I’m there.

Finally, with the exception of Dakota, these students were all students of color, and as the students told me repeatedly, when they are with people who look like them, they feel they can be themselves.
Opportunities for Recognition and Engagement of Racial Identity

Below are a few examples of what students had to say that related to this notion of POWER being primarily a program for students of color and how this made the students feel. In Chanice’s interview when I asked her what the students in POWER were like she replied,

The students in POWER try to help me and in that sense they care about me. It shows me that the students care and they want to see you do well too. If you fail at something, they will try to help you and encourage you. They cheer when you do good or get a good grade. I think now that we have this (program), it gives us a chance to be with other kids who look and act like us. Before the program, we all blew it off, like, whatever. The idea of people like me getting together has helped people do better. Before POWER I used to do bad on every test. When I have class with another POWER student, we usually try to help each other. If we think we may fail, we try to do better, even if we know we may fail. It is nice to be with kids who are like us who care.

While in an interview with Ricardo, I asked if he feels his culture is valued differently in different places and he responded in part,

(At POWER) you have a voice and can express how you feel. You have an opinion and it gets heard. In POWER, people listen to my ideas and I feel safe being myself and expressing my ideas, even if they are out there. I even told the students about breaking up with my boyfriend and they didn’t freak out. For our peer-pressure video, I was making the whole script for the play myself. I was leading people and they were listening to me and it felt so good. I was part of what I said so I feel I really put myself out there and was respected.

At the end of the semester I sat down with the site-coordinator, Mr. Donnovan, and talked to him about the program. One question I asked him was, “What is it about the culture of the program that is salient?” Mr. Donnovan responded,

I think that the kids can come to POWER and feel safe, regardless of their race. They don’t get bashed for being loud which they get all day. The program has helped to identify individuals as individuals because there is a trust. That trust built the safety and sense of family as well. We (the adults in the program) recognized that these kids were different and we didn’t call them out on it. We celebrated their uniqueness. At levels, everyone has some type of connection with one another. Whether academically, sense of family, interests, in the same classes. . . They all felt connected. Everyone fit in in some way. We didn’t have any outliers, like some rich snotty kid who didn’t want to be a part of the program. We had one affluent student but she was Latina and she wanted to be there. It wasn’t, “Oh, my god, those people are so loud.” She wanted to be there to be a
part of the program. At POWER, the kids felt safe being themselves, even if that meant they didn’t know stuff. I don’t think they felt that way during the day in school. I’m glad we were able to provide a space where kids could be themselves and feel comfortable. I’m not sure they feel that way in some of their classes. I’m also not sure how safe they feel being the kid who wants to study or who wants to be smart. I walked into some classes that were predominantly loud, and kids couldn’t learn. I wonder how safe they feel there being smart, wanting to learn. It is a Catch-22. Here, they can be themselves and they can be smart and want to learn and no one will make fun of them or look down on them.

**POWER Teaching Example: Providing Opportunities for Learning Skills that Support Student Engagement in Academics**

Throughout the spring of 2012, I watched as students were taught tacit skills that support academic learning. These would happen in the natural context of whatever was going on, and would often last only minutes. For example, one day Jessica was frustrated because she could not find an assignment she needed to work on. Within a matter of just a few minutes, Dre helped her to organize her binder and helped her come up with a strategy for keeping track of assignments that were to be done, and those that needed to be turned in. Skills such as problem-solving, conflict resolution, and persistence were commonplace at POWER. What follows are a few examples of skills students were taught within the natural context of the program.

**Teaching life skills that support student engagement in learning from a conflict.**

There were many opportunities for me to watch a range of learning opportunities while observing POWER. Oftentimes, I witnessed lessons like the ones described above that relate directly to academic skills, and others, like watching students tutoring one another, and college-aged tutors helping students study for tests or complete homework. But, there were many times when I witnessed another kind of teaching taking place. These were unplanned lessons that occurred naturally as a response to a situation. Though not purely “academic” in nature, these
lessons taught the students skills that are important for students to learn, particularly if they are to have access to more traditional learning opportunities, such as those found in the classroom.

Researchers of socio-emotional learning have argued that there is a link between students’ academic success and their ability to act in pro-social ways within the educational setting (Ben-Avie et al., 2003; Malecki & Elliot, 2002; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). The example below is just one of many in my observations in which students were guided through a conflict and taught how to act in pro-social ways.

May 15, 2012—On a hot afternoon in May, the POWER tutoring room was filled, as usual, with loud talking and laughter, interspersed with students completing homework and others receiving instruction from tutors. “Let’s talk.” Miss Cori said as she walked up to Houston and Dre who stood just two feet from one another, fingers raised at each other in anger.

Dre says sharply, “I don’t want to talk. I’m angry. I’m as angry!” The once buzzing and bustling room became silent and all eyes turned, riveted to the middle of the room where the two students seemed poised for a fight.

Houston: I don’t want to talk to her.

Dre: You’re an idiot!

Several students looked around anxiously at one another. Their eyes once again fixed on the scene, their mouths agape in mild shock.

“Now, calm down.” Miss Cori said calmly and quietly, her hands looking as if they were gently conducting a Brahms lullaby. “You are friends. You may not feel like friends right now, but you are. You both need to take a deep breath. Breathe with me.” Miss Cori takes a deep breath, looking into one, then the other’s eyes. The students do not breathe with her.
Now, tell each other what happened. You’ll each get a chance to tell your story without being interrupted. You need to listen to each other. It is hard to do when you are angry, I know, but if you learn to do this, it will make your life a lot easier.

Silence. The two continue to glare at one another, their anger apparent in every muscle, saying more than words can say.

Miss Cori waits a few seconds then says,

It’s like a family, right? You’ve got to fix this small tear or it will become an unfixable one. This is small, and your friendship is bigger than this. Now, who is going to use the EmPOWER Way and say *something* to fix this? Where is my leader in this conflict?

Silence again, but just for about five seconds.

Dre breaks the silence, “Fine. Fine! . . . Houston, you talk too much and it makes me crazy when you don’t stop when I ask you to.”

Houston pleads, “But . . .”

Dre interrupts him, “Shut up. I’m talking. This is exactly what I am talking about. You act like a freakin’ child! You talk too much and you start too much stuff, and I’m sick of it!” (She spits out the words like they taste of bile, her hands slapping into the space in between the two as she talks.)

“What did I do?” Huston’s eyebrows are arched, his shoulders lift and his palms turn toward the ceiling seeming to show genuine puzzlement.

With frustration in her voice Dre says, “I just told you. You talk too much, and you start too much stuff. Why don’t you just stay out of stuff that is not yours to get into?”

A few onlookers nod in agreement. Dakota says aloud, “You go, Dre.” Ricardo gives Dakota a high-five in agreement. Several on-lookers offer up a seemingly nervous laugh. Miss Naomi, who had been working with a small group in the back of the room, stands and walks
calmly towards the maelstrom and stops about five feet behind Miss Cori, who is looking on without much expression on her face.

Houston says pleadingly, “I was just trying to help you and Fatima, that’s all. It looked like you guys were going to fight, and you are friends.” There is a look of genuine concern in his face as he says this. He seems to be seeking the eye contact from Dre who is rolling her eyes and clicking her teeth.

“We didn’t need your help, Houston. Don’t you get it? You act just like a spoiled child sometimes and it is annoying.” Dre’s hard, loud voice softens a bit as she says these last words. Her eyes land on Houston’s for only a moment before she lets them fall to the floor.

“I was just trying to help. I didn’t want to see you two fight. You are my friends,” Houston explains. His hands reach out into the nomad land of space in between them, they look as if they are trying to grasp something ethereal, like a notion.

“We aren’t going to be your friends anymore if you keep this up.” She throws a glance at Fatima who is looking on with great interest. Fatima nods in agreement. For just a moment, just in time to see this nod, Houston looks at Fatima. His eyes and arms drop. “Just grow up. This is Fatima and my problem, and what business is it of yours? It’s not, that’s what, so just butt out.” She emphasizes the last three words in such a way that the room seemingly grows colder.

Houston hangs his head low. His shoulders noticeably slump. “I’m sorry. It is just who I am.”

Dre says in a softer tone, “Well, you are going to have to change if you want to be our friend. Do you hear me?” Silence. No eye contact. “Do you?”

Houston nods. He walks back to the front of the room where he had been working on studying for a biology test with Maritza. He wheels his chair around the long table so that his
back is facing the rest of the students. He plops down into his chair and lays down his head. Maritza, now sitting next to her study partner puts her hand on the center of Houston’s back and rubs it a few times, leans in, and whispers something to him that I cannot hear.

Noticing that she still has the attention of her classmates, Dre takes a small bow. A few students hoot, and she walks dramatically into the auditorium room adjacent to the lab where the conversation took place. Miss Cori follows Dre out of the lab and touches Dre lightly on her right arm. Dre stops and their eyes meet. Miss Cori says,

I’m proud of you Dre, for being the first to talk and acting like a leader here. I do think you hurt Houston’s feelings though, and name-calling is not the POWER way. Sometimes you say very hurtful things, and I think this was one of those times. You need to learn to control your anger or you are going to find yourself in a lot of trouble one day.

Dre responds, “Oh please don’t start with the ‘[em]POWER Way’ thing again” (she uses her fingers to add the quotes). “I’m so sick of that crap.” She starts to walk away from Miss Cori but then turns back. “I don’t care about him,” Dre states, as if it is a matter of fact.

Miss Cori finalizes the episode, “I don’t think you are being honest with yourself, but, I guess that’s fair, but when you do, make it right, okay?”

Dre says quietly, “Whatever. I mean, (inaudible).”

Scenarios such as this one were commonplace throughout my observations of the program. Students were guided through actual conflicts, rather than through role-playing activities—a luxury of a program like this: Time to do such work. I wondered, upon watching such scenarios, what the value of these skills might be to a student. Is the ability to solve conflict an important one for negotiating school experiences? The students I spent time with in this program throughout the spring semester were often isolated in their advanced level courses, often being one of five or six students of color in a sea of 20-25 White students. Their voices, according to several I interviewed, were muted while in class, and conflicts with students and
teachers alike, were many. There were two different students, Fatima and Dre, who said to me on different occasions (both preceded by conflicts like the one noted above, but that occurred in school) that they “needed” conflict and anger management skills. The skill of resolving conflicts is not measureable in terms of academic learning, but I wonder if this could be a skill that could benefit a student academically. According to SCLT theorists such as Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg (2007), teaching students such skills will help them to have more success in schools and allow students to engage more positively. I can’t help but also notice that in this “lesson,” Miss Cori is trying to teach Dre something about caring. She let Dre know that she said some hurtful things to Houston and that that was not okay. Not because it was not the “[em]POWER way” as much as because it was not the way people treat each other.

Additional skills that support access to learning opportunities. In addition to learning skills such as problem solving and conflict resolution, the students learned many other skills that researchers say are linked to academic achievement. For example, I watched as Mr. Donnovan walked Ricardo through how to stay organized and different ways of studying for tests. There were also numerous times when I watched the students help each other organize their binders, create homework charts, and creatively study for tests. There are researchers who have studied the link between test taking and or learning strategies and academic achievement (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Minskoff & Allsopp, 2003; Sternberg, 1998; Willis, 2007), but learning opportunities such as these are not planned, at least not in POWER.\textsuperscript{26} They are not something the program director or site-coordinators put into a curriculum. In POWER, such opportunities for learning skills that support academic achievement happen in a natural context. In this situation, where Mr. Donnovan taught Ricardo about test taking and organization skills, Mr. Donnovan

\textsuperscript{26} Skills such as organization, note taking, and test taking strategies are systematically taught to students who are a part of the AVID program. In POWER, Houston and Jessica were a part of the AVID program during the school day.
was responding to a need he saw in Ricardo. He was noticing him as an individual. He recognized Ricardo’s frustration and taught him a way to manage his situation. Such occasions seemed to raise their heads often with the group of students from POWER. Sometimes, it was the adults who noticed and responded. Others, it was the students. And still others, these needs went unmet.

Throughout my observations, I also observed several times when the students were taught leadership and given opportunities to practice leadership skills. One such situation occurred when the students were practicing for a video they were making about peer-pressure. In this case, Houston, with the guidance of Miss Naomi, took the lead and helped the students put Ricardo’s script into action. Turning once again to SCLT, there are researchers who suggest that being able to lead, particularly while working in a group learning environment, is an important skill that leads to improved academic outcomes (Elias & Arnold, 2006). This may be of particular use to the students in POWER who often spoke of not liking working within groups while in class.

**Creating opportunities by providing safe spaces for students to ask questions.** Given that several students spoke to me about being unable and or unwilling to ask for help from their teachers, one particular incident I observed was potentially significant. In mid-March, I observed the following scene:

March 21, 2012—“Andre, why aren’t you working on your chemistry assignment? You know it is due tomorrow.” Miss Naomi asks as she walks slowly up to Andre while he looks at his Facebook page on the computer.

Without any expression, Andre replies, “I don’t understand the assignment. I tried . . . I quit.”
“Well, you know Andre, that here in POWER, we don’t quit. Let’s go see your teacher. I’m going to show you how easy it is to get help.” He stays glued to his chair. “Come on. It can’t hurt to ask. It means a lot to teachers when you ask for help. It shows them you care.” Miss Naomi’s eyes plead with him. She gently grabs his left arm. He reluctantly gets up and follows her, dragging his size 11, Nike-clad feet.

“But what if I don’t?” Andre says flatly.


They walk across the hallway to Mr. Singleton’s chemistry room. Andre sheepishly walks a few steps into the room behind Miss Naomi.

“Mr. Singleton, I am sorry for interrupting you but Andre is worried about this assignment you gave him for his chemistry class. He doesn’t seem to understand what to do and is worried about asking you about it.” Miss Naomi says this as she walks to the desk where the teacher sits doing something on his computer. Mr. Singleton looks up from his computer screen when he hears her voice, his fingers still perched as if waiting to continue working. There is a slight look of frustration on his face.

“Now Andre, you know you were not paying attention in class today.” The teacher’s voice is curt.

“But I was paying attention. I knew that is what you would say.” He turns to Miss Naomi and says with a bit of anger and definite frustration in his voice, “This is bogus. Let’s go. This dude doesn’t want to help me.”

“Now Andre, try to not get upset and just try to listen. Sometimes when you need help, it is hard to ask, but if you don’t ask, you’ll never get it.” Miss Naomi says encouragingly as she
turns and looks him in the eyes. Andre lowers his head. It is not clear as to whether he does this in protest or in shame.

Mr. Singleton says in a less sharp tone, “Andre, it is vital that you pay attention in class. I don’t want you coming in and laying down your head and sleeping in class. How can you learn?”

Andre responds quickly, “I’m tired, man. It is first thing in the morning, and I’m tired. Why you just ridin’ me? Everyone sleeps. Maybe you’re just boring. I hate this class.”

Miss Naomi steps towards Andre, puts her hand on his shoulder and says calmly, “Andre, I see you are feeling attacked, but remember what we came in here for.” She motions with her hand for him to stand next to her. He walks towards the desks where she is standing, moving as if in a slow-motion film. Mr. Singleton looks at Miss Naomi as if to comment upon her use of the word “attacked.”

Mr. Singleton says, “Andre, I am here to help you. I am always here to help you. All I am saying is that you have to help yourself too. In this situation, you can help yourself by getting a good night’s sleep and coming to class ready to learn some really hard stuff. Don’t be like the others in class.” He waves his hand in the air as if to suggest these “others” are everywhere. Andre clearly takes offense at this and turns his back as if to go. “Now, take out your assignment and I’ll show you both what you need to know to do this assignment for tomorrow, ok?” Mr. Singleton’s voice is calm and assuring. Andre does not turn around. He is facing me and there is anger in his eyes as he looks at me. I smile at him and tip my head in such a way that suggests he should turn around. “I want to help you. I see you are smart. I just don’t want you to waste your god given talents by sleeping in class.”
Andre turns slowly. He slaps the assignment down, slumps down with a thump at a cluster of four desks. Miss Naomi takes a seat across from him, and Mr. Singleton besides. He proceeds to explain the assignment to Andre, who in turn, appears to listen.

As a teacher of many years, I can look at this interaction in many ways. I can see the frustration on both sides—both wanting respect and not feeling it. I can see the fault in comments on both sides. But what I want to point out is that the opportunity for learning that was not passed by. So many times, I longed for my students to come see me for help. I would beg them to come in when they were confused. When a student would come ask for my help, I would be ecstatic. But I often found that these same students who would not seek help, when pushed, would be embarrassed, or they just plain did not know how to ask. What occurred here was particularly important. Andre was not just told to go see his teacher. He was taken there. Not only that, but having a mediator there may have helped a potentially explosive situation turn into one that was somewhat positive. This, one cannot measure, but it is important for academic success (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997).

**Creating learning opportunities through an exercise in tenacity.** Earlier in this chapter, I described a lesson done on the university campus on Robotics. During this lesson, one student, Myles, struggled. In his struggle, he was guided and encouraged by Dr. P.

May 1, 2012—The students have received instruction on how to make the robot cars move by programming the calculators sitting atop the robots. They are given a paper with tasks such as making the car move ahead two-feet, stop, then back-up to its original position.

The room is abuzz with activity. I hear Dakota yelp and then clap her hands with excitement. She got one of the tasks correct. I hear Dr. P. suggest to Myles that he write down the commands to see what they look like. “If you write down what works, for instance, how
many centi-seconds it takes to move a certain distance, you won’t have to keep recalculating it.”

Myles reluctantly picks up his pencil and writes the information down. He has completed two of the 10 tasks. Dr. P. has pulled a worn-down metal desk close to him.

“We’ve got five 180s; how much is this one?” Dr. P. says as he spins a marker on the palm of his left hand to mimic the car spinning 180 degrees. Myles is on the task of getting the car to go forward 36 inches, then turn around five times. He is getting frustrated. He is saying things like, “I give up.” “This is too hard.” “This is stupid.” “I can’t do this.” All while pouting out his lower lip and throwing up his hands in what looks like frustration. Dr. Johnson pulls his desk closer, laying his left hand on the back of Myles’ desk chair.

Dr. P. looks Myles in his eyes and says, “It’s okay to pout, but then bring it back again.” Andre tries again, lip still protruding.

“Almost.” Dr. P. says to Myles.

Myles tries and fails again and says, “I’m sick of this.”

“Actually, I think what you are is frustrated because it is hard and you can’t get it easy. Am I right?” responds Dr. P.


I’ve been there, man. But that’s life. Things that are worth doing are sometimes hard. It is easy to give up when things don’t come easy. You think it has been easy for me to get here? I’m a doctor man. I’m a professor. How many Black professors you know?

Myles makes a face suggesting he has no idea. “Tough people . . . strong people stick it out. Who are you?” Myles says nothing but plugs in his new numbers. He gets closer on this try but the attempts are interrupted by cheers over Dre’s success on a difficult task.

Myles scowls at the cheers. Dr. P. sees this reaction and pats him on his shoulder. He says in a quiet, reassuring voice, “You’ll get it. Just don’t give up.”
Tenacity is a key component of academic success (Mansfield, Pinto, Parente, & Wortman, 2004; Strand, Peacock, Education, & Schools, 2002). At this point, I had observed the students participating in POWER for over two months. In that time, I observed Myles give up on difficult tasks on several occasions, including learning to type with both hands, and studying for a test on Ancient India. This was the first time I saw him work through a difficult task without giving up before it was finished, and given what I observed of him in the past, he wouldn’t have stuck to this activity without the direct encouragement of Dr. P.

In addition to talking to Myles about not giving up when things get hard, Dr. P. demonstrated responsiveness to Myles. He saw Myles’ frustration. I infer from his story about being a Black doctor that perhaps he saw himself in Myles’ frustration. Instead of letting Myles’ be frustrated and give up, Dr. P. responded to this frustration with calm, caring, and encouragement. I think here too, there is an element of race as well as gender that is salient. I watched as a White male tutor tried, even pleaded with Myles to change the way he was typing with his left hand. Myles would not budge, even though there was no way he was going to be able to pass his keyboarding class with just one hand typing. I watched as Miss Naomi, an Asian female, encouraged Myles to retake his test on Ancient India that he had gotten a C on. For him, a C was good enough. In this situation, Dr. P. told a story to Myles that he could connect to. He told Myles about his own difficulties as a Black man. It makes me wonder, had I been in this situation, what story would I have been able to tell Myles that would have urged him on. I am convinced that whatever story it would have been, it wouldn’t have been as compelling, connected, and meaningful as the one Dr. P. was able to tell about his own life.
Conclusion

My study focuses on opportunity. What opportunities are available to students in POWER, how they perceive these opportunities and interact with them. This chapter delineates many of the opportunities for learning the students experienced while with the program. In their classrooms, students have opportunities to learn. In POWER, students have opportunities to learn. But, as the data has shown, these opportunities vary greatly, and there are barriers to learning in all of these situations. In the classroom, one barrier appears to be race. Students feel isolated, particularly in their upper-level courses. Many fear asking questions. In the classroom, there are a variety of approaches taken, some of which appear to engage students more effectively than others, such as a lesson I witnessed in honors geometry where students chose their own groups (POWER students sat together with two other Black students) and calculated the amount of paint they would need to paint an apartment. At POWER, there are barriers as well, such as students’ difficulty solving personal problems, staying focused, and keeping with difficult tasks.

The goal of this chapter was to show that learning opportunities are ubiquitous, and do not occur solely in the confines of a classroom. It was also to show that teachers take a variety of forms—they can be tutors, leaders, professors, even the youth themselves. Opportunities, in this case, come in many forms. In POWER, opportunities to, “open the students’ world” as Miss Jones put it, don’t just come in the form of enrichment activities like going to the local university for STEM classes, taking fieldtrips, or learning to do photography. They come in the form of a leader reteaching an important concept students missed in class. They come in the form of leaders and students alike, helping participants through difficult conflicts. They come in the form of students being guided on how to ask a teacher for help. They come in the form of a college
professor admitting that life is hard for people of color, and that you have to push through. All of
the examples from this chapter are situations that I witnessed where students had opportunities to
engage, learn, and maybe even have their window to the world opened-up, even if just a little bit.
Chapter 7
Discussion of Findings

In this chapter, I discuss some of the data findings from the previous three chapters in greater detail. I do this by examining POWER in light of socio-cultural learning theory. First, I detail the opportunities provided to participants in POWER. Next, I look at the culture and social nature of POWER. In the following section, I examine how race and student culture are centered in the program, and examine the historical context of POWER. Next, I look specifically at the nature of the relations within the POWER. I do this in order to help further an understanding of the program, but also the context in which students in this program are engaged with the opportunities it provides. Finally, I propose a way of looking at relations that is responsive to the individual in their present context, and gives the reader a way of thinking about responsive relations within a learning setting that promote student access to learning opportunities.

Opportunities Provided by POWER

In my observations at POWER, I found many examples of opportunities, or access to possibility, as Irvine (1990) puts it. Students were given one-on-one tutoring by trained tutors when they wanted or needed it. I witnessed students working with tutors on Spanish, French, algebra, geometry, history, typing, and English essays. The tutors would sit aside, or sometimes across from the student, helping them through problems, seeking answers in textbooks, looking up information on the Internet, quizzing the students, and helping them to construct writing assignments. They were also retaught concepts they missed in class or had missing in their repertoire of knowledge. This was exemplified in the geometry excerpt found in Chapter 6. When Maritza was unclear of how to do a proof, Miss Cori walked her through the process for
over an hour, until she had mastered the concept. Lessons like this one, where Miss Cori would reteach key math concepts, was not uncommon, often occurring two to three times per week. The participants in POWER were taken on a weekly-basis to the local university where they received instruction in the STEM fields by university professors and undergraduate students. They were taken on fieldtrips to cultural centers to see a world-renowned poet talk about race, and to see a Black modern dance company perform. Additionally, the students were asked what enrichment activities were of interest to them, and community members were brought in to teach these activities, which included art, dance, cooking, drumming, and photography.

The opportunities for learning in POWER were not all that unique. The school where this program is situated, Pradera High School, offers tutoring through the AVID program during class. Two of the students that I interviewed, Houston and Tela, were in AVID. Students could also get help and reteaching from teachers before and after school, and in many cases, as was the case with Mr. Singleton, during lunch as well. The school provides numerous opportunities for enrichment through a variety of after school extra-curricular activities. And, on occasion, the students are given opportunities to engage in field trips. From what the students told me, most were not in POWER for the enrichment activities that Miss Jones thought were needed to draw students to the program, and to “open their world.” What my data suggests to me is that it was not the opportunities themselves, or even access to them that was essential, but rather, it was the chance to engage with these opportunities that was of greatest importance, and POWER gave the students a chance to truly engage. The question is, what about POWER made it a place where students could engage with the opportunities provided? I believe the answer lies in the culture of the program. What follows is a discussion of the culture of POWER and what my data suggests is salient about that culture to helping students to engage in the opportunities provided by this
one after school program. I will use socio-cultural learning theory (SCLT) to help frame this discussion.

**The Culture of POWER**

POWER is an after school program, right now, but if Miss Jones has it her way, one day, it will be a movement. What will make it a movement, according to Miss Jones, is its philosophy. At its core, in my own understanding of this philosophy that I saw in action, is the understanding and belief that all people deserve to be treated with respect and care; to be challenged and encouraged; to be looked upon as being resource-full, regardless of cultural practice and background; and to be known and appreciated as an individual within their own personal context that acknowledges their race, ethnicity, and social class.

There are many people who use SCLT to help them explain how learning is taking place. I will use this theory to help make sense of my experience with this program over the course of this past year while doing this study. Vygotsky (1986) argued that learning must be understood in terms of the social, cultural, and historical processes of people’s activities. He also theorizes that learning occurs through social interactions. Wertsch (1998) and Rogoff and Chavajay (1995) suggest that the everyday experiences of students matter. And Honig and McDonald (2005a) found that social interactions vary in ways that matter. I will use these theorists understanding of learning and, in this case, engagement with opportunity, to help discuss the climate, or culture of POWER.
Social Nature of POWER

As the data showed, POWER is a very social space. What it may not have shown so well, is that it is also a very loud space. Students interacted with one another and with the adults in the program in an on-going manner, often quite loudly. An outsider may conclude by walking into the program space, on any given day, that it is too loud and chaotic to be conducive to learning. The students would often sit in groups of three to four. Sometimes these would just be groups of students, and other times there would be an adult (either a tutor or leader) present. In these groups the students would talk, joke, tease, and play. They would also complete homework, teach each other, study, and learn. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the environment was often cacophonous and at the same time, melodious, like an unfinished symphony. In this environment, students could be themselves. I witnessed what I considered to be a sense of comfort while observing POWER. The students also spoke to this level of comfort in many of their interviews. In my interview with Mr. Donnovan, discussed in Chapter 6, he said about the volume of the program, “I think that the kids can come to POWER and feel safe, regardless of their race. They don’t get bashed for being loud which they get all day.” At POWER, as long as the students can get their work done, loudness is just a part of the climate of the program, and it is one that is purposeful. According to Mr. Donnovan, he recognizes that the students are silenced throughout the day, and respects their voice enough to let them be themselves, even if that does mean it seems loud and chaotic to outsiders.

Another way to describe the social nature of POWER is by describing it as being family-like. In this vignette, elements of this family-type climate is evidenced:

Houston is working on a Spanish assignment while sitting next to Dre. “Hey, show me your sheet . . . Help a brother out.”
Dre says, “I can’t tell you the answers, you need to learn this for yourself,” then adds in a sarcastic tone, “I am supposed to encourage you to be your best.”

Houston responds, “I’m tired of you and your nerdiness trying to help me.”

Mr. Donnovan says from across the room, “Houston, that’s not the POWER way.”

To which Houston replies, “What? I was complimenting her.”

This vignette exemplifies the way the students often bantered with one another, and also the way in which they would encourage each other, even if through sarcasm. There were also times when I watched as the adults and students also joked with each other:

Myles is kicking Mr. Donnovan’s shoes as he sat sideways in the desk. “What, you got Bozo’s feet now?” He says, mockingly.

“No man, I got on your shoes.” The room erupts in laughter.

Another way in which the nature of the program was family-like was in the way the students treated one another. Much like within a family, the students not only joked with one another, but they got into arguments, disagreed, and got mad at each other. In addition, there were also times when they encouraged and helped each other.

Race, Culture, and POWER. Culture is central to this program. In my observations, I found that there was an awareness and respect of each participant’s race and culture. I saw this in the way the adults interacted with the students on a regular basis. It is exemplified in the excerpt in Chapter 6 when Dr. P. is working with Andre, who is frustrated with the robotics activity. Dr. P. recognizes Andre’s seemingly negative attitude as frustration. He does not just give up on Andre because he is saying things like, “This is stupid.” Instead, Dr. P. talks to Andre with respect for his feelings but also very directly. He says to Andre, “It’s okay to pout, but bring it back again.”
I also saw evidence that there was recognition of the racial micro-aggressions students face every day. I saw it in the above-mentioned allowance for the students to be loud if they so chose, and I heard it in the interviews, for example in Chapter 5 when Ricardo spoke about how wonderful it was to go see Nikki Giovanni talk about racism. Even in her speech to the students in the opening story about the day Miss Martin died, Miss Jones tells the students that Miss Martin knew what they went through each day and wanted to help them.

According to Miss Jones, in the training she does for all program staff, she emphasizes the importance of teaching students to recognize that culture shapes the way people see and experience the world, and to help them to know and understand their own way of seeing and knowing the world. It is also teaching them that at times, their own culture, though perfectly valid, may cause others to perceive them in a different light than how they see themselves, and that at times, this may cause them problems, particularly in predominantly White settings such as schools. I saw this echoed in the premise of the phrase I heard repeatedly when the students were being disrespectful to one another, “That’s not the [em]POWER Way.” When I asked the students about this phrase, several said something similar to what Tela said, which was, “Don’t act loud and ghetto (sic) . . . at least, not around people who will take it the wrong way if you do.”

POWER aims to show students that there are people who look, act, and share similar cultural values to them that are successful by our society’s standards. To do this, POWER hires people who look like the participants (and in this case it means that a majority of those running the program are either Black or Latino). In doing this, the students can see people in leadership and have teachers who are predominantly people of color. I also noted in my research that each
of the community members who worked with the students on enrichment activities, including Miss Martin, were people of color.

One goal of POWER, according to Miss Jones, is to teach students in POWER that individuals have different cultures, life experiences, and histories that create a situation where people may see and experience the world differently from one another, and that this may even lead two people to act very differently when in the same situation. It is teaching the students that it is okay to be who they are, even if it is not valued by others, but that there may be times that they may need to adapt to the culture they are within (for example, when in school) if they want to experience success within that setting. Miss Jones, in other words, thinks it is important to teach the students that their own culture and way of being in the world is valuable, but there are times when they will have to “code-switch” in order to fit in. It was this very thing I think Ricardo was talking about when he discussed feeling invisible in class. Ricardo was good at code-switching, which may be one reason he felt he got along so well and was liked by most of his teachers. But, it seems that he didn’t want to have to code-switch in order to be accepted, and when he did this, and was accepted by his White peers, he felt invisible. This brings up an interesting dilemma. POWER, through its employment of people of color, and through its lessons about the [em]POWER way, teaches the students that their culture is valued, but at the same time, teaches them that where it is not valued, they may have to act in a way that may not be congruous to their culture, and this could lead to a problem for some students, like Ricardo, for whom acceptance in this form, comes at a cost to his identity.

Though Miss Jones does not suggest that everyone of a specific race or ethnicity has the same behaviors or attitudes, or even ways of being and experiencing the world, she does recognize that there are potentially shared traits of a group that may lead this group to experience
instances of discrimination in predominantly White institutions such as schools. In order for this awareness has to translate into action, Miss Jones embeds cultural and racial understanding into the training for everyone who works with program participants. She teaches staff and volunteers about the cultures and potential behaviors and reactions of the participants. She discusses with them ways in which they can and are expected to respect the students’ race and culture. She teaches them to respond to the individual, knowing their racial, social, and cultural context. This training was evidenced in the way that Mr. Eddie engaged with both Brenda and Marianna in Chapter 4. Mr. Eddie treated both students with respect, but he was responsive to each of the students’ specific contexts.

**Historical nature of POWER.** POWER is a relatively new program, started in 2010. In this sense, there is no real historical nature of this program, specifically, but there is a historical nature to after school programs. In the past, as was discussed at length in Chapter 2, after school programs were seen as structured programs where students could go and be safe, and even, stay out of trouble (Little, 2009). The vestiges of this past purpose of after school program complicates the historical nature of POWER. This program is voluntary, it also exists within a history that suggests it is not important, or at least, not as important as school. I suggest, for this reason, the program is not taken as seriously as it could be by the participants. For some of the students, in particular, the 15 who attended on a regular basis, this was not the case. But, there were many other students signed-up for the program (about 50) who would come and go on a daily basis, sometimes not showing up for weeks at a time. The vestiges of this program being more of a holding tank for students rather than being a place of significant learning, is also apparent in the students’ responses any time rules were attempted to be put into place. For instance, towards the beginning of my observations, it became apparent to Mr. Donnovan that
students were so busy listening to music through their headphones, that they were not getting their work done, so, he told the students they could no longer listen to music. Their reaction was immediate and long lasting. Shouts of, “I thought this was supposed to be different than school.” And, “I don’t want to be here if I can’t listen to music,” were plentiful. Echoes of this concern lasted throughout the semester. The students seemed to feel torn. Torn between wanting a space where they could go and be themselves, and a space where learning could take place.

Another important historical context is that of the way adults in this country tend to treat children. Schools are places where adults exact authority. In order to control the environment, there is this sense that the students must also be controlled. Students are told what to do, and if they don’t want to get into trouble, they do it. Those that do not, get labeled as troublemakers or disciplinary problems. Yet, in POWER, there is an underlying sense of respect and dignity, and this seems to run counter to the history in which this program takes place. Finding the balance between respect and dignity, letting the students feel safe being themselves, and love, and needing a controlled enough environment to promote learning is a difficult task for most adults. In a way, it is like finding a way to weave steel and silk. When the site-coordinators would want to crack down on behaviors that were not conducive to the learning environment, such as not listening to music, they had to find a way to do this that was not authoritarian and that was framed with love, care, dignity, and respect. And they had to figure out how to do this in an environment that suggests that adults are here to protect students by creating boundaries. Yet, doing this in a way that was in line with the philosophy of POWER was a skill that alluded all but one of the site-coordinators, Mr. Eddie. In the excerpt from Pradera Middle School, Mr. Eddie was able to break out of the vestiges of the historical context of the adult-child paradigm. He was able to be firm and set boundaries, to tell the students what he wanted them to or not to
do, in a way that was not seen as confrontational by the students. This takes a special kind of understanding of oneself, the program philosophy, and of the students with which one is working.

This program also exists within a broader historical context of the Pradera School District, which, as was delineated in Chapter 1, has a long, complicated history of racial segregation and discrimination. This history of segregation and discrimination is an important context for POWER, for its students are still feeling its effects in their mostly segregated classrooms throughout the day. These classrooms, as the data throughout this work shows, are often places where the students feel, if not directly experience, racial discrimination. They are spaces where they do not feel they belong, and even, where they feel unwanted.

Though I have not focused on it in this work, it was not just the students in the honors courses who felt discriminated against. Those in the academic classes did as well, though this discrimination came in a very different form. These students did not have a chance to engage in learning in their classrooms due to the large amount of behavioral disturbances that occurred throughout their day. Each of the students I interviewed have integrated classes that are not at the honors level. And each of the students, at one time or another in my time observing or interviewing, told me that in these classes, the students keep the teachers from teaching, and that many times, according to the students in POWER, the many of the students acting up in class, and being disrespectful, are students of color. There could be many reasons for this, and it is worthy of great thought and study. I wonder if it could be the curriculum the students are exposed to in these classrooms where passing the state mandated test has become the primary focus of teaching. I wonder if it could be that the students in the classroom who are acting up are resisting learning, or actively choosing to not learn (Kohl, 1994). I wonder if it could be that
students are not interested in what the teacher is teaching, or if they don’t see a connection between what is being taught and their own lives. All of these are just supposition. But, the fact remains that the students feel that in their more fully-integrated classes, they too have limited access to the opportunity for learning.

Segregation and discrimination must take a toll on students. As I just described in the previous section on the culture of POWER, in the predominantly White spaces of their honors classes, the students have to make a choice that most White students do not have to make, because the culture and way of knowing the world in these classrooms privilege people who are White. The choice these students have to make is complicated. The students in POWER seem to have told me that they have to decide whether they are going to fit in or not. If they decide they want to try to fit in, they will have to adapt their behavior, in essence, leave their culture at the door. If they do this, they may or may not be welcomed as a part of the class, and feel as if they belong. If they decide to be themselves, they will have to deal with people’s stereotypes, and as many of the students suggested, this led them to disengage in the learning opportunity of the classroom. From what I could tell from my time with these students, they were intelligent, capable people. They had fun, but were, for the most part, engaging, fun, and extremely hardworking. It doesn’t seem like anyone should have to make such a choice, but due to the long-standing issues of racism that face our nation, and in particular, the Pradera schools, it is one the students feel they have to make.

The Nature of Interactions and Relations in POWER. As was described through examples in Chapters 4 through 6, caring relations in POWER were ubiquitous. In my observations of POWER, I found that students were cared for. They were known. They were
treated with respect. They were acknowledged and recognized. In Bosworth’s (1995) study, Black students defined caring teachers as those with the following characteristics:

1. Saw students as individuals,
2. Helped with schoolwork,
3. Showed respect,
4. Were tolerant,
5. Explained work,
6. Made certain students understood,
7. Encouraged students,
8. Planned enjoyable activities,
9. Were polite,
10. Helped students,
11. Involved themselves with students,
12. Offered guidance, and
13. Went out of their way to improve student life.

In my observation of the program, and in the data throughout this study, the “teachers,” or in this case, the site-coordinator, program leaders, and volunteer tutors, exemplified each of these characteristics. Given this, it makes sense that the students in POWER each spoke of being “cared for” by the people in POWER. Students discussed each of these characteristics found in Bosworth’s (1995) study when I talked to them about how they know they are cared for in POWER.

Noddings (1988, 2005a, 2005b) reminds us that there is no formula for care. I do not propose that we create a checklist of care, per se, but, I do think it is important to think hard
about these things. I think it is important to understand how students perceive care—how students know they are cared for. In knowing this, I think it is more possible for adults who work with youth, and those who plan programming or schooling for youth, to take students’ perceptions and needs into account in order to more effectively teach the whole child, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income level.

Knowing that students work harder in environments where they feel cared for, it makes sense that there be work done to understand how students perceive care. The example in Chapter 4, where the biology teacher tells the students that the teacher they are complaining about cares for them, and they should know this because they are learning and getting good grades, speaks clearly to the disconnect that exists between teachers and students on the issue of caring relations. Teachers face tremendous pressure from the system of schooling itself, the policies that inform what is taught, and from the school administration. This is becoming more and more clear with the pressures from accountability legislation. Teachers are under great pressure to have their students perform well on these high-stakes tests. This pressure is felt more upon teachers who work in communities like Pradera, that have high percentages of low-income, and minority students, than in other districts that have lower percentages of low-income students (Carnoy, 2003; Townsend, 2002), even though it is these exact students that school reform efforts such as the No Child Left Behind legislation purport to help (Townsend, 2002). With this pressure to increase academic achievement, and high student population loads, it is no wonder that teachers do not have time nor the ability to relate to, let alone care for their students, particularly those students who do not share their own way of knowing and being in the world. To teachers in circumstances such as these, they may show their care of students in ways that don’t feel like care to the students. In the examples from this study, they show their care by teaching the
students. They show their care by answering their questions. They show their care by letting them retake tests. They show their care by pushing them hard to do well. To the students in Boswell’s study, as well as in my study, these characteristics were not what the students were talking about when they spoke of care. The students in POWER spoke of teachers knowing them as individuals, responding to them as individuals, helping them understand complex material, understanding when they were having a bad day, recognizing them, and their race, and the impact race has on every part of their lives. I have chosen to term this lack of parallel definition of the term care, syncopated caring.

**Responsive relations and intersectionality.** Throughout this study, students talked about the importance of having positive relations with their teachers. Several, as was demonstrated in Chapter 4, talked about working harder for teachers with whom they had good relations, and conversely, a few talked about “acting out” or, resisting learning, when they did not. But how are positive relations defined? Eccles and Gootman (2002) describe the qualities of supportive relationships as having:

- Warmth
- Closeness
- Connectedness
- Good communication
- Caring
- Support
- Guidance
- Secure attachment
- Responsiveness
In the episodes of teaching and learning in the previous chapters, many of these characteristics were demonstrated. For example, in Chapter 4, when Myles was frustrated with his poor grades, several teachers demonstrated caring relations with Myles. Mr. Donnovan, Miss Audrey, and Miss Cori gave him support and guidance, but he was given much more than what this framework provides. In essence, in addition to these characteristics of relations, he was treated with the characteristics of care that Bosworth (1995) found Black students value, including: seeing Myles as an individual, helping him with schoolwork, showing him respect, being tolerant, explaining his work, making sure he understood, encouraging him, being polite, helping him, being involved with him, offering guidance, and going out of their way to improve his life (situation). The only characteristic in this instance that I did not see was “planning enjoyable activities,” and to the contrary, what was planned (lots of make-up work) probably didn’t feel at all “enjoyable” to Myles. With this example, and others from my observations in mind, I have come to look at relations in a way that intertwines these two frameworks, and also recognizes the impacts of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and immigration status on how a person experiences relations.

Within the social sciences, particularly within feminist discourses, the notion of intersectionality is central. Intersectionality recognizes the relationship between different social categories such as the ones I have listed above. The concept of intersectionality recognizes that we are not just one self, for instance, I am not just a woman. The way I interact with the world, see the world, and know the world, and the way others interact with me is impacted by the fact that I am a woman, but also a person of color, to some, but to others, not. I am of Indian and German descent, but am also from a middle-class, suburban upbringing. The way I know, see, and experience the world is influenced by the intersection of all that I am, but also, these parts of
me, though integral, are of relative importance, given the context I am in. For instance, as a
teacher, my race and my gender were central to how people saw me and interacted with me. As a
student, my age and race is more salient than my gender. At any given point in time, how I
understand respect, and know respect, for example, may be different than at a different time or in
a different context. In order for there to be positive relations, in this case, the person wanting to
be in relations with another person, needs to understand that person as an individual within a
specific, ever-changing historical and social context, and must respond to that person with this
knowledge. They must act in a way that is responsive to their present context that takes into
account that person and the intersectionality of all they are within this context. This
understanding of what I am calling responsive relations is depicted here in the following diagram
(Figure 21).

In the center of this diagram is the intersectionality of the person with whom there is an
attempt to relate. Surrounding this “person” is a partial set of characteristics Eccles and Gootman
(2002) found to be qualities of relations. I added respect, trust, and recognition to this set of
characteristics, as these three qualities of relations came up frequently in my observations of
relations in POWER, and I also moved responsiveness to the outside perimeter of the circle that
represents the qualities of relations. The center of the circle is pushing out on each of the
characteristics, showing that how one perceives themselves as a whole-self, taking into account
her or his own intersectionality, determines how they understand each of the characteristics. For
instance, one can understand and experience any one given characteristic differently than another
person, as understanding is based on experience and learning. How one knows, for instance,
respect, may be a reflection of one’s history, culture, and experience with respect. These arrows,
stemming from the ever-changing self, reflect this understanding of each of the characteristic of
relations. On the perimeter of the list of characteristics of relations, I have placed the words history and culture, using arrows to signify the way in which they inform each other, and I have drawn an arrow from both history and culture to context, in order to show that history and culture impact the context in which relations happen. I have removed responsiveness from the list of qualities of relations, as I gathered from my data that, in any situation, in demonstrating any one or a combination of qualities of relations, one must be responsive. I theorize that in
demonstrating responsive relations, one must not see responsiveness as a quality in and of itself, but rather, as something one uses when being caring, close, connected, supportive, etc. In order to have responsive relations, one is always acting in ways that are responsive to the other person, recognizing who they are as a person, the context for relations, and what may be going on that will change how one acts, for instance, with closeness.

This figure can be further explained using an episode that was documented and discussed at length in Chapter 5. In this episode, Chanice was disengaged from her English teacher and the lesson. In my conversations with her following a reading of my observation, she told me that she hated that class and was resisting learning from her English teacher, Mr. Engle. Using the “responsive relations” figure, one can think about Chanice. In this setting where she was one of only a few Black students in an honors-level English class, her race is salient. Given that she is a female, and her teacher, male, suggests that her gender may also be important in this context. According to Chanice, she felt disconnected and isolated in this classroom environment due to her race. Because of this, she was shut out from relating to her teacher. She wanted no part of it and she demonstrated this with her body language and lack of eye contact. When she did give the teacher eye contact, her face was hardened. Had Mr. Engle known how she was feeling, that she felt unwelcomed by both he and the White students in the class, that she did not feel like she could be herself, he may have been able to demonstrate caring, closeness, warmth, or even respect, by acting in a responsive way to her current state of being. Had he been aware of her history with feeling this way in predominantly White spaces, he may have been able to act in a way that got through to her and showed her that he cared, which I have no doubt that he did, in his own way. Had he known her well enough to understand how she was feeling, he may have been able to form a sense of relations with her that would have enabled her to feel a greater sense
of belonging, even within this predominantly White space, and perhaps, he would have then
granted her greater access to the learning opportunities he was providing. In using responsive
relations, Mr. Engle may have been able to diminish the engagement gap being experienced by Chanice in this situation.

Another way of understanding what I am theorizing here is to think about oneself in
different contexts. The way one shows relations, even to the same person, may be different in
different contexts. One may say hello, and even shake the hand of a peer while in the academic
setting, but when he or she comes to your home for dinner, you may embrace that same peer.
There may also be times when you are feeling like your gender is salient, such as in your home,
and therefore, hugging your peer may not be the most respectful, or comfortable way of showing responsive relations. In this way, context and one’s intersectionality impact what any given characteristic of relations looks like, and one’s responsiveness in relating, is of great importance.

As an example of this, there is Miss Cori. Miss Cori could get students to do nearly
anything for her. She could coax almost every student in POWER to learn difficult topics, stick
to lessons when they were feeling frustrated, and get the students to pay attention when others had difficulty doing so. She did all this as a White, suburban, four-foot-ten, 22 year old woman. I suggest that how she did this was by being responsive to the individuals she was working with.

With Maritza and Chanice, she would use touch, and encouragement. She would sit closely to them, but not every day or in every situation. There were times when she kept her distance, and would not use touch, particularly with Chanice, when she saw she was feeling particularly angry about something. But the opposite would be true on other days. When she seemed to sense that Chanice was having an emotional day, she would use touch much more often, as a way to encourage her. With Houston, she would use humor, as in the example in Chapter 4 when she
tells him she thinks he stands out in a crowd in response to him saying, “I think if I didn’t act out in his class he wouldn’t even know my name.” Other times, she would be firm, and tell him to, “sit down and stop acting like a baby.” She knew when she could be firm, and when she had to use humor with Houston. To some students, on certain days, Miss Cori would show respect by giving them space, and on others, she would show them respect by pushing them. She acted in this responsive way to Houston regularly. On most days, she could get him to stick with her algebra lesson, but there were a few times that I witnessed her let him give-up. On the days she let him leave her lesson he was particularly agitated. She seemed to notice his state of being, perhaps because of his body language or his disposition, and she would respond in a way that was showing him respect and caring, by recognizing and acknowledging him, his state of being, and his present context. I theorize that her flexible response to individual students, in differing contexts, shows the students that she knows them and acknowledges them, and in this way, regardless of her interaction, demonstrates responsive relations. I suggest it is these responsive relations that show students that she cares about them, and it is for this reason that they follow her directions. Responsive relations allow Miss Cori to control the situation while not making the students feel control. I believe this skill is one that goes back to the philosophy of the program, Miss Cori has somehow figured out how to weave steel and silk into a beautiful tapestry of understanding and engagement.

In order for there to be responsive relations, there must be a knowledge on the part of the person wanting to engage in a relationship, of the person they are wanting to engage in relations with. I think this is why having responsive relations is difficult in the school context. Knowing each student is a complicated and challenging task. It takes time, trust, and a true willingness to engage the individual in their own present context. It takes knowledge of one’s own power in the
situation, and one’s own context and intersectionality and how these factors are impacting the
relation and the broader context of the classroom. In the present context of high-stakes testing
and accountability, there is an ever-diminishing amount of time for this important work. But, it is
this work that I propose, is vital to getting our students of color to engage in the learning
environment and therefore, be able to take full-advantage of the learning opportunities provided
in schools.
Conclusion

I have attempted to understand the intricacies of Project [em]POWER. I have endeavored to understand and explain the context of this after school program, and the opportunities it provided to those 15 students who chose to participate in it on a regular basis. At times, I have witnessed what I consider, through my experience, to be expected student and teacher behavior. This work has left me with more questions than I had before I began. I have called the notion of opportunity into question, and am left to wonder, even more than before I began this study, what we can do to stem the tide of inequity that is tearing at the very fabric of our society’s ostensible desire for equity in our nation’s schools.

In this concluding chapter, I synthesize the answer to my main research question about opportunities provided by POWER, and summarize the major findings that emerged from my research. I discuss how this research is significant and how it can be used, and propose how this work can inform and suggest future research. I also discuss its limitations.

Opportunities and [em]POWER

In this research I have sought the answer to the following question: what are the qualities of experiences, interactions, and learning opportunities provided by Project [em]POWER and how do the students take advantage of them? Answering this question was a much more complex task than I originally thought. I was thinking, much like that of Miss Jones, the program director, that opportunities were chances for students to get ahead and to see the world as being bigger than they had thought. In my research, I found POWER provided many opportunities in this vein. The students went on several fieldtrips. They went to the local university’s cultural center to hear renowned author, Nikki Giovanni. They went to another university to see a Black dance
troupe. The students also had an opportunity to be taught by college professors on campus. They were given opportunities to learn about topics that were of interest to them such as photography, cooking, hip-hop dance, and airbrushing. They were provided tutoring and reteaching. All of these are opportunities. Yet, in my research, I found these things to be peripheral to the real opportunities provided by POWER.

My data suggest that the “real opportunities” came, not in the activities themselves, as much as they came from the full-access the students had to the activities while in POWER, and from the ways and in what contexts the activities were provided. POWER provided the students opportunity in many ways. It provided the activities listed above. But, it provided so much more. Below is an expiation of the context in which opportunities were provided as POWER allowed students to engage and therefore, take advantage of them.

Providing Participants a Meaningful Identity: Scholars

The students in POWER are not called students, they are called “scholars.” This is intentional. Miss Jones wanted the students in this program to be seen as being “resource-full,” rather than from a deficit perspective. She had experienced this deficit perspective in her own life, and had seen the impact of it on her own three children. From the outset, POWER scholars were seen as capable of great learning and great lives, regardless of their backgrounds and home environments. Ford, Harris III, Tyson, and Trotman (2001) discussed this notion of deficit thinking. They suggested that deficit thinking about students of color hinders students’ access to advanced-level classes and that changing this thinking to a perspective that recognizes the strengths of students of color is a way to increase access. In essence, this is what POWER did by starting with the idea that, given the opportunity, all students will be scholars. Not only did this
impact the way the adults in the program interact with the students, it also impacted how the students viewed themselves. Sanfra made direct reference to this when she talked with her friends about how she has known herself to be smart, but had never thought of herself as a scholar.

**Recognition of Race**

POWER was a program for low- and middle-income students. As the program was designed and was run by people of color, it created a space that embraced students’ race and racialized experiences. All staff members, both paid and volunteer, were trained in culturally competent practices including: recognizing one’s own race and relative position of privilege and power, recognizing the impact of race and racism on the scholars in the program, and relational practices that help know and acknowledge each student as an individual. The staff regularly role-played scenarios that they had experienced in order to evoke a collective understanding of ways of being with students that is respectful of them as individuals within a world that is complicated by race.

While doing this study, I found numerous times when race came up as an issue. As was detailed in Chapter 5, students had a lot to say about their experiences with racism in school. I was actually quite surprised that the students were able to articulate their experiences and the impact of these experiences, in such clear ways. These students expressed a sense of isolation in classes due to their race. They expressed feelings that the teachers did not treat all students the same way, based on their race. One example of this that I did not put in my data chapters came from Chanice. When I asked her in an interview if she felt all students were treated fairly in school she replied,
You would be surprised at how bad it is. So, if I’m sitting in English class and a student pulls out their phone and is listening to music, and the teacher walks right by them, but when a Black student does the same thing, they get in trouble for it.

I spent time with Chanice as I was completing this dissertation. I had her read what I had written about her, and the quotes I used of hers, and her response was, “That’s really interesting. I’d like to read that book!” I asked her if the fact that her father was a history teacher impacted how she understood race and she told me that it had not. She told me she understood the racism she felt and saw—because “I’m smart and observant.” This observation of her experiences helps to explain some of her insight. Even in the quote above, I noticed how Chanice said, “when a student.” She did not say, “when a White student.” I perceive this as her saying that “students” in these spaces, such as her honors English class, are presumed to be White. They are the norm. They are the expected. Black students are not only disciplined differently, they are “different” from the normal student in this space.

This makes me wonder how “micro-aggressions” such as this cannot but impact student learning. Socio-cultural learning theory suggests that the social nature of one’s learning environment is pivotal to a student’s learning experience, that how one interacts within the learning environment impacts what and how a student learns. Given this, the students many comments about racism in their school explains a great deal about why students of color are not achieving at the level they could be. It also makes me wonder how much the day-to-day living of these students, in school, and also in life, impact them. If at such a young age (most around the age of 15) these students notice the difference in their treatment, and the treatment of those around them, how does this shape the way they see and experience the world? But, this is one aspect of POWER that I found to be different than in the school. In POWER, students of color were embraced. Their comments and questions were not silenced. They were not invisible. In
POWER, students were given the “space” to be themselves, even if in doing so, outsiders would perceive them as being “loud” or as Anaja put it, “ghetto (sic).” In this program, the individual was centered, but was centered in such a way as to show respect to the impact of racism on the students in the program. Though it was not solely so, the program that I witnessed was a program for students of color. As in school, many of the teachers in this program (leaders and tutors) were White, but here, this did not matter. This makes me wonder what it was that did matter. I believe that one thing that made a difference was that most of the students in this program were students of color. From what the students told me in our interviews and conversations, having a program that supported student learning, where students could be themselves without worry of being judged as different, as they are in many of their classes, made them want to engage more with the opportunities provided by POWER.

**Learning Opportunities in POWER**

The learning opportunities provided to the participants in POWER were many. As was detailed throughout Chapters 4 through 6, students were retaught concepts they did not understand in class, tutored in all subject areas, and given specific help with writing essays for their English classes. In my conversations with students, these opportunities were said to be invaluable. Several spoke of needing the help they received through tutoring at POWER. Myles was able to bring up his grades in band, chemistry, and geometry. He directly attributed this to the help he received by the tutors and leaders in POWER. But, the lesson he learned about receiving help was even more important to him. For Myles, one small action of Miss Naomi

---

27 I hesitate to even write this word. It calls into question so much of what I perceive as wrong in our society today. Even it’s history, initiated within Jewish inner-city dwellings, calls in to question the issue of slavery, and the relative roles of subordination people were put into, and the stamp this leaves on our society today. It points to the issue of “acting White” and how our educational system has made being educated and being a person of color, dichotomous entities. This topic is one worth tomes, not footnotes. But, as I am centering the words of the students, I feel it is important to quote from their own words.
taking him to see Mr. Singleton, made a lasting impression. I asked Myles to tell me why this mattered and he said,

I was afraid of him. Well, I still kinda am. But, when I finally sat down with him and he explained the assignment to me . . . well, I kinda got a different impression of him. He seemed to treat me different after that. Maybe I treated him different too.

This example tells some of what the students learned in POWER that was not planned. I would suggest that these were the some of the real opportunities POWER afforded the students.

Chanice also spoke about the learning opportunities provided her in POWER. She spoke of the tutoring and reteaching she received, and of the help she got studying for tests. She told me, “POWER gives me success. It made me feel like I could graduate. When I came in (to POWER) my grades were falling. I didn’t know if I could graduate. But now, I will. There is no doubt that I will.” Even though this quote is quite powerful, and speaks to the experiences provided by the program, she also spoke of being inspired by other students in POWER to speak up and take risks in class. She saw her fellow POWER peers doing so, and this made her want to try and take risks too. Though I did not witness her doing so, her saying this to me provided me hope that she would.

POWER provided many chances for its participants to learn skills that will help them in school and in life. They were taught to solve problems, resolve conflicts, calm down when they were angry before responding, or, “popping off” as the students would say. They were taught how to get and stay organized, how to study for tests, and how to plan and manage their work time. As important as all of these skills are, they were only accessible to the students because of the context in which they were presented. I have termed it a context of responsive relations.
Access to Opportunities

It appears to some that American schools are moving towards equity in education. But this is not the case. If anything, they are moving farther away. According to Orfield (2001), schools across the nation are becoming more segregated than at any other time in recent history. Students of color are not matriculating to college at the same rate as their White peers (Darling-Hammond, 2000). They are dropping out of high school at higher rates than their White peers (Orfield, 2004). And they are graduating from college at a much lower rate than their White peers (T. Cross & Slater, 2001). American schools are in a state of crisis, and the seemingly unstoppable march towards standardization and increasing accountability is not going to improve the situation.

The data that I have collected for this study speaks to this crisis. Those students in my study, “lucky enough” to be considered “worthy” of being in honors-level courses, do not experience the same access to the education in those courses as their White peers. This is clear from their comments. They feel isolated. They feel they do not belong. But why? Why are students of color in honors-level courses considered to be outliers? Why would Chanice feel as though students and teachers alike look at her and wonder, “What are you doing here?” Is this a systemic problem that has trickled down into the day-to-day workings of schools? Why is having students of color in advanced classes seen as being so aberrant? Throughout the nation, gifted and talented programs, and other such tracking programs, have been used to differentiate which students have access to the highest level of curriculum and instruction, and which do not (Oakes, 2005). Researchers have also shown that tracking practices and gifted and talented programs have been used to combat desegregation efforts. In creating classes such as those at Pradera, for “honors-level” students, schools have created segregated schools-within-schools, where there are
White students in the school, but they are not integrated into the classrooms (Foster, 1992; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). This history of segregation and its legacy, of our not-so-long ago past, could be repeating itself.

It has been well documented that enrollment in Advanced Placement courses increases a student’s opportunity to get into a “selective” college (Geiser & Santelices, 2006; Santoli, 2002). There is no credible evidence that students of color are not capable of complex thinking and learning. Due to the isolation the students feel, they are less likely to engage in what the teacher is trying to teach. In this way, there is an engagement gap. The data suggest that many are afraid to ask questions. Some fear the questions will anger their teachers. This feeling may not be founded in any real reason to fear, but the fact is that the students in POWER spoke of this feeling. They were afraid to admit there is material they do understand. But why do they not know what their peers know? Could it be that this disengagement has gone on for so long that they have missed key information all along? Could it be that these students have been placed into honors-level courses because someone saw in them capacity to be there? It could be. Of the eight students I interviewed, six were in at least one honors-level course at the high school. Of these six, only two, Chanice and Dre spoke of being in honors-level courses at the middle school level. If the balance of these students were not in honors-level courses prior to high school, and the majority of students in these honors-level courses are populated by students who were,28 I would assume there would be an understanding that those new to honors-level material would have gaps in their understanding that need extra instruction and support. But instead of extra instruction and support, these students are not fully accessing the materials presented in class.

28 At Pradera High School, decisions about what level courses the students will take in their freshman year are determined by eighth grade teachers. Students who are in honors-level courses in middle school are automatically placed in honors-level courses at the high school. Additionally, students or parents who choose for their students to be enrolled in honors-level courses can do so with the consent of a school counselor.
Why are they not accessing this information? One reason the students spoke of repeatedly was this sense of isolation. The sense of isolation made them avoid engaging in group work, and avoid asking questions.

My experiences with the students in POWER offered another reason for this engagement gap, and therefore access to learning opportunities in their classes, it was the lack of personal relations they have with their teachers. Of the students I spoke with, every one of them told me that when they had teachers they knew cared about them as individuals, they worked harder. In contrast, Houston and Ricardo both said that when their teachers did not care, they “acted out” in class. In both situations, students seemed to be articulating what Kohl (1994) said about resistance: In spaces, particularly classrooms where students do not feel respected and cared for, or where they are being asked to learn material that they feel is unimportant or irrelevant, they will resist learning. They will choose not to learn.

The students spoke of race and its impact on their learning opportunities. Particularly in the predominantly White spaces of honors-level courses, the students in my study said they could not be themselves. In order to survive these classes, the students did one of two things—they sat silently, not asking questions, not participating, not engaging, in order to blend in, or they participated and engaged, but not in a way that was authentic to their culture, to themselves. Though the students did not use the term, “acting White,” they seemed to have implied it. When Ricardo spoke of feeling that he fit in because the students did not see his race, I could not help but think he was saying his race no longer mattered. But to Ricardo, his race and ethnicity did matter. They were a part of who him, and when this part of him was not recognized it made him feel, like Ralph Ellison (1952), invisible.
Systemically, race matters. It is part of the fabric of how schools are now and have always been constructed. Historically, who was schooled, what was taught to whom, and what the purpose of school was, varied significantly depending on both race and gender. The fact that these “honors-level” courses exist at all, and that some students have access to them, and others do not, and that some who do have access do not really have the same opportunities for learning, and for success within them, is a critical issue in and of itself. Irvine (1990) spoke of tracking as a discriminatory practice, which conflicts with the notion of equality of educational opportunities. This thought is echoed by the work of Oakes (1990, 1995) and Oakes and Guiton (1995).

But POWER was not such a space. In POWER, there was a sense of community and, therefore, a sense of belonging. This program created an environment where learning was accessed. Here, the opportunity was in the environment that inspired engagement. POWER was a program set up by people of color, but all were invited to attend. Those who attended in the semester of my observations, with the exception of three, were Black and Latino(a). Here, the “whole-person” was taught and nurtured. At POWER, students could come and feel safe being themselves, knowing that they would not be judged—as they felt they were in their classrooms. Here, they could be smart, ask questions, act “goofy,” be loud, and be authentic. Here, they did not need to “code-switch,” or, “act White.” As Chanice put it, “I can be both Black and smart.”

At POWER, I did not witness the disengagement and resistance to learning that I witnessed in my observations in the school day classrooms. I think this is one of the most salient findings of this study. POWER created learning opportunities that engaged students of color. POWER not only provided opportunities for learning, but also provided an environment where students engaged the opportunities.
Figure 22. Confluence of opportunity and engagement gaps as a way of increasing opportunities for equal outcomes.

POWER created an environment where students could engage with the opportunities provided within the program by creating an empowering place for youth of color. It nurtured the whole-person. It celebrated the individual.

**Responsive Relations**

As has been discussed throughout this dissertation, the experiences, interactions, and learning opportunities provided by POWER, were accessible to the students in this program because of the context in which they were provided. In Chapter 7, I proposed a model for understanding this context for relations and have chosen to call it the *responsive relations model*. In this model, responsive refers to the ever-changing way in which one person relates to another. Responsive relations place the person (in this case, the student) and who they are as complex human beings, with a full array of personal needs that vary based on social, historical, and cultural context, in the center of the model, interacting in flexible ways with the qualities that
make up positive relations (such as caring, respect, acknowledgement, etc.). It recognizes the impact of individual culture, experiences, and history on how a person perceives and receives these qualities, and responds in a nurturing, even supplicating manner. In this model, the student is centered. Responsive relations call for an understanding and knowledge of the student and all that she is, an understanding of her cultural and historical context, and it calls for responsiveness to a set of characteristics that are within this context. Human relations are complicated things. Caring is a complicated act. This model is a way of thinking of these complicated, and vital actions and behaviors. Relations are ever changing. They need to be responsive in order to create an environment where a student feels cared-for.

My research question asked what opportunities were provided by POWER and how the students took advantage of them, and I found, that more importantly than knowing what the experiences were and how the students took advantage of them, was to understand why. In answering the original question, I presented many examples from POWER. I showed how the students interacted with one another, and how they interacted with the adults in the program on numerous occasions. I also gave examples of the learning opportunities provided and how the students interacted with them, for example, how Maritza interacted with Miss Cori and her geometry lesson. But, in the course of this study, the why became more important to me than the how.

Why students interact with the learning opportunities and the interactions was because of the context itself. Salient in this context is a respect for and understanding of race and racism and the impacts they had on the lives of the participants. I discussed this in the previous section of this chapter. Also salient was the relational context of this program. Students in POWER had a relationship with one another, and a relationship with the adults in this program, and I believe,
these relations were effective because they were responsive, as defined above. In POWER, the students were seen as “resource-full.” They were addressed and seen as scholars. They were acknowledged to be smart. In POWER, the students were seen as “whole human beings,” not just students. Their brains were nourished with new ideas, and helped to keep old ones. They were given academic support, but they were also given so much more. As technical help, the students were shown how to fill out job applications, recognizing the financial straits so many of the students and their families were in. They were given food, knowing how hungry they were by the end of the day. They were taught how to care for their hair and skin. They were taught how to cook healthy (mostly) snacks for themselves. They were taught art that they could relate to and that represented their culture. And they were taught to dance. These and other learning opportunities were important.

What I noticed was that at POWER, regardless of what the students were learning, they were engaged. Some may look at this program and see “yet another program for poor Black kids,” as Miss Martin fears. Some may look and see chaos. On some days, there was more engagement than others. But, each day, I saw the participants in this program engage with their studies, the computer, the enrichment activity, and each other. They did so seemingly feeling safe to be “themselves.”

What about POWER induced this engagement? I suggest that part of the context of great importance was the student-teacher relations that existed within it. In POWER, the adults fostered responsive relations. They knew the students. They knew them well enough to interact with them in a way that was responsive to this knowledge and to the students’ present context. Partly because of this, the students were able to listen when someone was teaching them, to persist through a difficult task, learn something new, take risks, engage, meet new people, and
follow instructions. In Chapter 7, I detail how Miss Cori used responsive relations with students in order to masterfully engage them. I believe it was the relational context of POWER that generated this engagement.

**What Can Be Learned From POWER**

POWER is no panacea for our society’s ills. For one thing, it was a new program and it is still developing. For another, in my observations, I did not see all there was to see. There were days I was not present, conflicts I did not witness, and imperfections that I undoubtedly missed. It was an after school program. It was an informal learning environment. But, there was something there that can help move us closer, as a society, towards providing more equitable educational opportunities. Context. The context of schools today is toxic for many students of color. In many schools, as was discussed in Chapter 1, students are segregated, taught by under-qualified teachers, exposed to “skill and drill curriculum,” and treated differently because of their race. They are not only experiencing a gap in the educational opportunities they have access to, but because of the environment in which opportunities are provided, they are also experiencing a gap in their levels of engagement with the learning opportunities. They, in a way, are being sold a bill of goods, being told that education is their way out of poverty, when graduation rates and matriculation rates to college, and therefore, a “better life” tell a different story. What if schools could be places where students were not pre-judged by their race, where they could be understood, acknowledged and known and treated with caring, responsive relations? The data from this study suggest that these places could potentially become schools where students are engaged at a level more similar to their White peers and therefore, have greater access to the information and experiences they need to have opportunity in life.
POWER provided learning opportunities, similar in some ways, to those provided in school, and different in others. What was important about those opportunities was the context in which they were provided. In POWER the students were engaged and were treated with responsive relations. They were known as individuals within their own contexts, and they were treated as such. The students were acknowledged. In POWER, there was a sense of community, a sense of belonging. In POWER, students were not vilified or ostracized for being Black or Latino(a). Rather, this fact about them was acknowledged and even, celebrated. I do not see any reason, beyond will and lack of desire to challenge the status quo that American schools perpetuate, that this philosophical and pedagogical shift could not be made in American schools today.

From this study, there are two primary applications that can be generalized to the school setting. First, schools need to be environments where all students belong and are cared for as capable human beings. There needs to be action on the part of policy makers, administrators, and teachers that creates an environment of equal access to educational opportunities that includes access to high-quality curriculum, pedagogy, and resources for all students, regardless of race or socio-economic status. This action must include recognition of the need for engagement of students in the opportunities provided, for the provision of high-quality curriculum, pedagogy, and resources alone are not enough. All students deserve this access, but these opportunities must be provided in a context, or environment that is responsive to the individual, caring-centered, and recognizes the complications of racism in schools and society. Without this change in environment in our schools, there will remain an engagement gap, as this data shows students who do not feel they are responded to as individuals, cared for, and feel they are in an environment that does not understand, let alone acknowledge their race and the racism they
experience, will not engage the learning opportunities in the same way and at the same level as their White peers.

Second, the way that POWER created an environment where students actively engaged in the opportunities provided in the program was by using responsive relations. POWER trained their staff and volunteers to work with students of color in a way that recognized the individual. The training, done through use of student stories and role playing, often involving students from the program, taught the racially-mixed group of trainees the complexities that go along with being a student of color in a predominantly White environment. Those trained were forced to confront her or his own relative position of power and privilege in a society that still confronts racism, despite popular rhetoric to the contrary. Because of this, the issue of race and racism was not foreign, nor shunned within the environment of the program. Students could be themselves and not worry about the stereotypes they unwittingly wore upon their sleeves within the regular school day.

There needs to be a dialogue within our schools about race and racism. The color-blind ideology that is permeating our culture at present, does not serve our students of color. Even though race is a mere social construct, it is a present reality that impacts our students of color. Regardless of how much our culture may want to suggest that we are now in a “post-racial” society, race still has a large impact on how people are perceived, received, and treated. Ignoring this fact leads to situations much like those faced by the students in this study. In spaces, such as classrooms, where students are impacted by their race, feeling isolated and like they do not belong, where they do not feel cared for or known, they fail to engage at the same level as their White peers. In these classroom spaces, teachers feel unsafe engaging in critical questions around racism. Whether this is because of the color-blind philosophy that binds our nation, or
because of other factors such as lack of knowledge, is unclear from this study, but this fact was less apparent at POWER. Even though the two leaders of the POWER program at Pradera High School were not Black nor Latina, they treated the students in the program with responsive relations. Neither Miss Cori, nor Miss Naomi understood, in any personal way, the racism the students in their program faced each day in class, yet, they knew each student as an individual, and understood that the students’ race was one facet of their being that impacted their daily experiences. Instead of seeing this group of students as being loud, disrespectful, lazy, or rude, as they were often felt perceived to be in class, they were treated in a way that recognized their individual selves, within a historical and cultural context. They were treated as individuals within this broad context, but also within a situational context, that of the present moment.

In order to create an environment of belonging, pre-service and inservice teachers need to be taught how to use responsive relations. This will not be an easy task as it starts with the notion that all people, regardless of station in life, deserve an equal opportunity to be successful in life. It starts from an understanding that all people, regardless of their race, culture, or experiences in life are resource-full and have something to offer to the community of learners, even if this means they do so in a way that is different from the perceived norm. It starts with an understanding that racism permeates the policies and practices of our nation, and has been historically and is presently being used to maintain the privileges of people who happen to have been born White, even though our nation is becoming increasingly a nation populated with people who are Black and Latina/o. In order to create this environment where all students have both access to and engagement with high-quality opportunities, there has to be desire for equity on the part of our policy makers, administrators, and teachers alike.
Imagining a School Like POWER

I cannot help but wonder why POWER could not be a school. What if there were schools that carefully trained their teachers. To be aware of their own race and power; to be conscious of their own way of knowing and being in the world; to know how to get to know and understand each student for who they are, in the context where they are; to act with care and responsive relations. What if these teachers were given long periods of time with students to engage in meaningful work? What if these schools were places where one’s race and culture were shared and understood, where there were on-going conversations about what is going on in our world and in our media? What if the teachers in this school were given permission to take advantage of teachable moments, without fear of testing? What if students were asked what they wanted to learn about and then given an opportunity and the encouragement to take risks, be curious, ask questions, and explore these topics? What if the teachers in these schools, and the community members who were brought in to share their expertise with the students, were a reflection of the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of the student population?

I can imagine these schools as being places where students would thrive and would be excited to attend every day. I can imagine that in these schools, there would be a lot of noise. It would look chaotic to an outsider. I can imagine all the things the students would learn about the world they live in—its history, its present, its future, and about how to survive and thrive within it. I can imagine that the curriculum being a reflection of the lives and histories of the students within it. I can imagine these schools as being places where students learn about history and how it relates to the present, and geometry and how it relates to carpentry, and chemistry and how it relates to cooking. I can imagine these schools being places where students are nurtured holistically, where their minds are nourished, not just filled with facts and formulas. I can
imagine these schools as being palaces, not prisons with security guards and metal detectors, where students would not resist learning, because there the context was supportive, caring, relational, and nurturing.

Of course, in today’s environment, these schools cannot exist. They are but a dream because there would be little way to evaluate such a school, at least by accountability measures. Would colleges accept students who went to such schools? Could schools like these that support, honor, and nurture students of color to be scholars, get credentialed? Who would pay for such schools that would allow students of color, who have been traditionally marginalized from education, gain greater access to these life opportunities?

But I remain hopeful. There are many good ideas people are thinking about in this regard. And, I believe that POWER could offer some insight into the contexts of schools, in their present realities, so as to provide to students of color the contexts that increase engagement with learning. The lessons from POWER could inform practices that create contexts where students of all races, ethnicities, and social classes could take advantage of the learning opportunities provided within them, and in that way, increase all students’ access to opportunities in life.

**Research Implications**

The findings of this study suggest that the learning context matters. This is nothing new. It is the basic tenant of socio-cultural learning theory among others, including many practitioners. But what these findings point out, is that there are specific conditions within the learning context that are salient for students of color. One: Race and racism are not just a figment of imagination. They are a reality that impacts everyday experiences. Therefore, further research is needed, more stories need to be told, and this present reality needs to be made known so that it
can be clearly articulated and understood by the people who design, determine policy for, administer, and work within our schools. Two: Responsive relations are central to engagement and building a sense of belonging. Therefore, further research is needed on the nature of these relations in education. The implications of the syncopated nature of care, and how people in different positions of power perceive care needs to be further explored. Furthermore, the responsive relations model needs to be applied in pre-service and in-service teaching settings in order to determine whether such a philosophical shift in the thinking of those who engage students can have a positive impact on academic engagement of students of color in integrated classrooms. Three: Many students of color will feel isolated and may be ill prepared to succeed in the advanced level courses, yet many should be there. More research needs to be done on the experiences of students of color in advanced-level high school courses, and what needs to be done to support them, so that they can experience success in these classes.

**Limitations of This Study**

In this study, I sought to understand Project [em]POWER and the opportunities it provided to its participants. In the course of this inquiry, I came to understand better this program and the opportunities it provided to its youth of color, but I also came to know the youth themselves. Because of my interactions with them, I came to form relationships with them. And because of this, their stories touched something deep within me. The findings in this study are limited. They are limited because they are based on my understanding of one program, set in a specific context, over a limited period of time. They are limited because in doing this work, I became involved with the students and therefore carried their stories close to my mind and heart I wrote them. They are limited because in doing qualitative work, it is impossible to say one
knows *anything* for certain. But, despite this cardinal rule, I do feel certain saying that something *must* be done to change the state of education for children of color in this country. One direction to look for major solutions is towards programs like POWER that confront the engagement gap by centering the child, recognizing the implications of race and racism on the child, and that go about teaching them in a way that is responsive to the child as an individual.
References

All references to Pradera Community School District, Pradera, and [em]POWER have been modified to respect the privacy of the actual school district, city, and project.


*Notes from the consent decree hearing September 14, 2009, 9* (2009) (Notes taken by Rakha at hearing on termination of Pradera's consent decree).


S. Jones, et al., v. Board of Education of Pradera Community Unit School District, 2nd revised consent decree (Pradera District Court 2006).


Appendix A

Assent Form

ASSENT LETTER

December 12, 2011

You are invited to participate in a research project about the [redacted]. This project will be conducted by Shameem Rakha from the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Yoon Pak, of this department, will also be overseeing this project.

In this project, Rakha will observe, videotape, and take notes during observations of program activities including afterschool programming and weekend enrichment activities. Each observation session will last for the duration of the meeting time. The videotape will help Rakha to make sure she has accurately represented what she observed and the video will not be shown to anyone. All notes will be kept on a password secured University server or in a locked file cabinet and the name of the program as well as yourself and any others mentioned will be changed. Rakha will also have access, through [redacted], to your school grades. She will use this information to help see if the program has made an impact on your academic success. Your name will be taken off all grade sheets and will be replaced with a number that identifies you to the researcher alone. Finally, at the end of the year, you will be asked to complete a brief survey that will help Rakha understand the impact this program has had on you.

The risks involved in participation in this study is a risk of reputation to [redacted], not to you. If the research were to uncover that the program was somehow seriously flawed, this could impact the reputation of the program. This could also lead to funding problems for [redacted]. To minimize the possibility of any damage caused by this research, all names, including the name of all persons involved, and district name will be made changed for purpose of publication. The results of this study will be used for a dissertation, and may also be used as a scholarly report, a journal article, a book, or a conference presentation.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. Your choice to participate or not will not impact your status as a student or participant in [redacted]. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may view a copy of the research results after this project is completed.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Shameem Rakha by telephone at [redacted] or by e-mail at rakha@illinois.edu. You can also reach Dr. Yoon Pak via email at yoonpak@illinois.edu.

Sincerely,
Shameem Rakha

I have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in the research project described above. I have been given a copy of this assent form.

____ yes  _____ no I agree to be observed by Rakha while participating in ***activities.

____ yes  _____ no I agree to be videotaped if I happen to be present at times of observations. I understand these videotapes are for transcription purposes only.

________________________________________
Signature                                          Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, 217-333-3023, or ber-irb@ed.uiuc.edu or the Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu
Appendix B

Consent Form

CONSENT LETTER

December 12, 2011

Your child has been invited to participate in a research project about the [redacted]. This project will be conducted by Shameem Rakha from the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Yoon Pak, of this department, will also be overseeing this project.

In this project, Rakha will observe, videotape, and take notes during observations of program activities including afterschool programming and weekend enrichment activities. Each observation session will last for the duration of the meeting time. Videotapes will only be used to help with fully understanding what was observed and for transcription. All notes will be kept on a password secured University server or in a locked file cabinet and the name of the program as well as yourself and any others mentioned will be made into pseudonyms.

In addition to observations, Rakha will have access to the grade data collected by [redacted]. The purpose of this collection will be to help better understand the academic impacts of this program on your child. This data will be coded, so any information that identifies your child will be removed. Finally, at the end of the year, Rakha will ask your child to complete a survey about their experience with [redacted]. This too will be coded and your child will in no way be identified.

The risks involved in participation in this study is a risk of reputation to [redacted], not to the individual student. If the research were to uncover that the program was somehow seriously flawed, this could impact the reputation of the program. This could also lead to funding problems for [redacted]. To minimize the possibility of any damage caused by this research, all names, including the name of all persons involved, the program name, and district name will be made into pseudonyms for purpose of publication. The results of this study will be used for a dissertation, and may also be used as a scholarly report, a journal article, a book, or a conference presentation.

Your child’s participation in this project is completely voluntary, and they are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. Their choice to participate or not will not impact your child’s
status as a student or participant in *********. Your child is also free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may view a copy of the research results after this project is completed.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Shameem Rakha by telephone at ********* or by e-mail at rakha@illinois.edu. You can also reach Dr. Yoon Pak via email at yoonpak@illinois.edu.

Sincerely,

Shameem Rakha

I have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to have my child participate in the research project described above. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

____yes _____no I agree to have my child observed for purposes of this research.

____yes _____no I agree to have my child complete the end of year survey if he or she chooses willingly to do so.

____yes _____no I agree to have my child be videotaped if he or she happens to be present at times of observations. I understand these videotapes are for transcription purposes only.

Signature                                      Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, 217-333-3023, or ber-irb@ed.uiuc.edu or the Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu
Appendix C

Interview Questions

Project [em]POWER Interview Questions

Goals of Interview: to understand from the perspectives of young people themselves their experience in POWER and how it relates to other parts of their lives. Also, to understand how the students perceive schooling and the opportunities provided by the program.

Before proceeding I want to make sure you understand (1) that you don’t have to answer questions you would rather skip (you can just say, “I’d rather pass on this one” or something like that); and (2) the responses you give will remain confidential.

Is it okay if I record this interview?

1. When did you join Project [em]POWER?
2. What was it about POWER that made you decide to join?
3. Were there other programs or activities you could choose from? What were they? Why did you choose this program over the others?
4. Were there particular things you wanted to get out of the program?
5. What do you hope to get out of the program this year?
6. What kinds of enrichment activities have you been participating in this year? Tell me about them.
7. Are any of the activities you’ve done or will do in the future ones that you recommended to the leaders?
8. What made you decide whether you would participate in the enrichment activities or not?
9. What have you learned by participating in the enrichment activities?
10. Are there things that you learn by participating in POWER that help you in school?
11. Are there times when you are participating in a POWER activity that you learn something you did not expect to learn? Tell me about it.
12. Do you feel like you have grown as a student because of your participation in POWER? Tell me about it.

13. Have you learned any study skills by participating in POWER?

14. Have you faced any challenges while participating in POWER?

15. What are the adults in POWER like? How do they show you that they care about you as an individual?

16. Could you describe one experience with an adult in the program that stands out for you?

17. Based on your past experiences, what makes for a good program leader?

18. How well do you think the leaders fit that?

19. Are the adults in this program people you feel you can rely on to help you when you need it? Please tell me more about that.

20. Are there times when you have been motivated or encouraged by the adults in the program? Tell me about that. How does that make you feel?

21. Tell me about the youth in POWER. How do they show you that they care about you?

22. How well do the youth in the program get along with one another?

23. Are there times when you have been motivated or encouraged by other youth in the program? Tell me about that. How does that make you feel?

24. Are there things that you learn from other students in POWER? Tell me about them.

25. I often hear the phrase, “Empower Way.” Can you tell me what that means to you? Are there times outside of the program that you find yourself thinking about the Empower Way? Has there ever been a time that it has made you change your behavior? Tell me about it.

26. How do you see yourself as a student? Has that perspective changed since you have joined POWER?

27. Tell me about your classes.

28. How do you feel when you are in your classes?

29. Are there any stories you can tell me about your experience as a student?

30. When you are in class, do you feel your teachers care about you? How do they show you that they care about you?

31. What does being a successful student mean to you?

Is there anything that you want to add?

Do you have any questions for me?