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## *What Can We Learn from Big Mama?*

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### **Abstract**

*Taking a multi-generational view, this study draws on oral-life histories and a qualitative, critical race analysis to explore thematic patterns over time and across the educational ideals and pedagogical practices of two African American educators from different generations of the same family—Olivia Smith (Big Mama) and her granddaughter Christie Hayes. We examine how the personal and professional experiences of these two teachers influence their respective understandings of their work and provide the basis of successful teaching for African American learners. By examining the lessons Big Mama taught and Christie learned and subsequently brought into her own classroom, it becomes possible to better understand how to more effectively prepare future teachers to draw on cultural and historical knowledge and thus successfully teach all students.*



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## The Abysmal State of Black Education in the United States

As Joyce King (2005) has noted, “The abysmal state of Black education in the United States and globally is an inhumane situation that calls into question the values and pronouncements of Western civilization” (p. 3). For many low-income, urban African American children the promise of an equal and quality education remains a fleeting fantasy not grounded in the reality of contemporary society. Race-based inequities in access to quality education still exist fifty-three years after the passage of the Supreme Court ruling of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that declared the “separate but equal” dictum was unconstitutional and had no place in public education. Despite the *Brown* decision and the most recent Supreme Court verdict regarding racially segregated schools in Seattle, Washington and Louisville, Kentucky, overwhelming evidence reveals enduring and pervasive disparities in the academic achievement of African American children in U.S. public schools (Blanchett, 2006; Johnson, Boyden, & Pittz, 2001; Noguera, 2003).

Yet, there have always been teachers who have been able to successfully teach the so-called “hard to reach” where others have failed (Foster, 1997; Hilliard, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Siddle Walker, 2001). There is a rich and emergent body of scholarship on Black teachers and their culturally based approaches to teaching (Lynn & Jennings, 2009). What is needed, however, is documentation of how the knowledge and experiences of successful teachers of African American learners is inter-generationally transmitted and infused into the pedagogy of classroom teaching. This paper provides evidence that African American educators of the past and present have produced and continue to produce a valuable cultural paradigm that can be used to inform educational research regarding how to effectively educate Black students in contemporary society.

Taking a multi-generational view, this study draws on oral-life histories and a qualitative, critical race analysis to explore thematic patterns over time and across the educational ideals and pedagogical practices of two African American educators from different generations of the same family---Olivia Smith (Big Mama) and her granddaughter Christie Hayes. We examine how the personal and professional experiences of these two teachers influence [d] their respective understandings of their work and provide [d] the basis of successful teaching for African American learners. By examining the lessons Big Mama taught and Christie learned and subsequently brought into her own classroom, it becomes possible to better understand how to more effectively prepare future teachers to draw on cultural and historical knowledge and thus successfully teach all students. After all, as Maya Angelou (1993) put it, “When I am speaking of the Black experience, I am speaking to the human condition.”

### How to Read This Essay

In Bulman’s (2002) article *Teachers in the ‘Hood: Hollywood’s Middle Class Fantasy*, he illustrates how Hollywood presents images suggesting that the only people who are capable of transforming the lives of inner city youth are White middle class women. In movies such as *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*, for example, White middle class women with White middle class values solve the problems of urban public schools’ youth with progressive pedagogy that includes common sense, good behavior, and better choices as defined by White ways of knowing, being, and acting. The lessons conveyed by dominant White society, then, posit that the

faster children of color learn to act, talk, and think like White people, the sooner their challenges with poverty, under-achievement in schools, and other social ills will be eliminated.

This study, by contrast, provides an alternative to Hollywood's narrative of successful teaching storytelling by drawing on the narratives of two African American educators whose respective teaching practices explicitly work[ed] against the historical, systemic privileging of characteristics, interests, values, experiences, and histories associated with White people.

For the purposes of this paper, we follow Thompson (2003) by putting Whiteness at the center of our examination of Big Mama's and Christie's professional experiences as educators for social justice. We define Whiteness, in turn, as an identity that is neither problematized nor particularized within discourses on race because it assumes a status of normalcy (Chaisson, 2004; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Tate, 2003). Pointedly, the intent of this paper is not to attack, blame, or indict White people [or anyone else] or their choices and actions, but to analyze and learn from the ways Whiteness functions as a hidden referent in schools and teacher education and thus becomes a force that structures the experiences and practices of educators working toward social justice (Cross, 2003; Hayes & Juarez, 2009; Juarez & Hayes, 2010, Marx, 2006; Thompson, 2003).

As Lipsitz (2006) and others (Gillborn, 2005; Olson, 2004) have argued, Whiteness is not about individuals, but rather, a mind-set, a specific set of understandings that is collectively held and applied by individuals to make sense of race-based matters in the world around them in ways that simultaneously uphold the historical investments and advantages of Whites as a group and deny or limit the full participation of racial minorities in U.S. society and its institutions---"see no race, speak no race, hear no race" (Leonardo, 2005, p. 131). Individually and collectively Whites can and consistently do, as the historical record shows (Baldwin, 1985); draw on these assumptions and knowledge of Whiteness to "secure supremacy in almost all facets of social life" (Leonardo, 2005, p. 78). "[A]lthough there is certainly a preponderance of white people who interpret social life through [a lens of] white racial knowledge" (Leonardo, 2005, p. 109), however, even people of color may and sometimes do embody and draw these assumptions of Whiteness to perpetuate White supremacy. One's racial identity and social position influence but do not determine the racial understandings individuals draw on to navigate and act on the world around them (Schick, 2000; Sullivan, 2006; Wright, 2003).

Through stories of their professional experiences, Big Mama and Christie Hayes describe how they construct pedagogy to address these unspoken privileges of Whiteness that both directly and indirectly affect their teaching and the lived experiences and learning of their students. Significantly, one need not be African American to learn how to construct a teaching pedagogy that addresses the unspoken privileges of Whiteness; what is needed, as we illustrate in the paragraphs below----is an understanding of how Whiteness functions to privilege its own interests and how individuals and groups help to perpetuate the system of Whiteness. .

Olivia Smith (Big Mama), the first participant in this study, is now in her early 90's. She began her teaching career at the age of 18 in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Mississippi and has over sixty years of experience as a full time teacher. The contemporary educator is Christie Hayes, Big Mama's granddaughter. Christie's narrative describes how she has taken lessons from her grandmother and other mentors, who attended and taught in segregated schools in the South, to develop a transformative pedagogy and approach to teaching and learning in de facto segregated schools.

What we will see as a theme in the stories of both Big Mama and Christie are their struggles with trying to combat the historically embedded notion of Black inferiority (O' Connor,

2006)---a set of beliefs widely held among Whites suggesting that, for example, African Americans tend to be unmotivated, less intelligent and more aggressive and violent than Whites, prefer welfare over working for a living, and have poor parenting skills and an over-all less sophisticated and well developed culture than Whites (Feagin, Vera, & Batur, 2001; Pica & Feagin, 2007). By default, assumptions of Black inferiority imply assumptions of White superiority.

We hope readers will see how Big Mama and Christie take it as a moral obligation to use their personal experiences as a way to help their students eliminate social inequalities and institutional oppression and their pursuit for a more robust democracy. With many pressing issues in education, we likewise hope that readers will learn from the experiences and thus the lessons of Big Mama as a call to action and become agents of change and school culture shifters (Quijada Cercer, et.al, 2010; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Freire, 1973; Lynn, 2006; Yosso, 2005). Our hope in presenting the narratives in this article is to use the experiences and wisdoms of Big Mama and Christie as a starting point for school change endeavors which are aimed at realizing the promise of *Brown*--that Black children will finally get that which is rightfully theirs: a better and equal education (O' Connor, 2006).

Yet—and this is very important—we must caution against reading the narratives of Big Mama and Christie as a recipe cookbook, how-to-guide, or other kind of source for magic bullet-type formulas on how to successfully teach Black and other racial minority students and thus “fix” our schools. There will be no recipes provided herein. As we define it, teaching and learning is cultural work, a way of thinking and thus approaching life and its many domains, not a technocratic, rational, objective, and mechanistic process or procedure. We already have a plethora of narrow curriculum, scripted pedagogies and standardized assessments that are proven failures despite the good intentions that may have produced them (Quijada Cercer, Alvarez, & Rios, 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Like Knaus (2009), we apply Critical Race Theory for the purpose of developing the voices and narratives that challenge racism and the structures of oppression. Tate (1997) asks the question, “Pivotal in understanding CRT as a methodology, what role should experiential knowledge of race, class and gender play in educational discourse?” (p. 235). Ladson-Billings (1998) states that CRT focuses on the role of “voice in bringing additional power and experiential knowledge that people of color speak regarding the fact that our society is deeply structured by racism” (p. 13).

Solórzano and Yosso (2001) define CRT as “an attempt to understand the oppressive aspects of society in order to generate societal and individual transformation and are important for educators to understand that CRT is different from any other theoretical framework because it centers race” (p. 471-472).

CRT scholars have developed the following tenets to guide CRT research; all of these tenets are utilized within the design and analysis of this study (Kohli, 2009):

(1) *Centrality of race and racism*. All CRT research within education must centralize race and racism, as well as acknowledge the intersection of race with other forms of subordination (Kohli, 2009; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2002). This study is centered on a family of Black educators and will give a detailed account of how they dealt, and continue to deal, with this endemic part of American society.

(2) *Valuing experiential knowledge.* Solorzano and Yosso (2001) argue that CRT in educational research recognizes that the experiential knowledge of students of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education. Life stories tend to be accurate according to the perceived realities of subjects' lives. They are used to elicit structured stories and detailed lives of the individuals involved (Delgado, 1989; McCray, Sindelar, Kilgore, & Neal, 2002).

At the heart of CRT is an appreciation for storytelling. Following hooks (1992), Big Mama's story is important because it counters the institutionalized ignorance of Black history, culture and Blacks' very existence. As hooks (1992) put it, "We don't even know ourselves." The field of education needs successful counterstories and testimonies of the past Black educational experiences to help us to understand how we in the present might successfully prepare African-American students in today's racially charged society. It is the stories of oppression and resistance of the past that we can use as a framework for the present (Lynn, 2004).

The application of CRT allows us to focus on the expression of the voices and narratives of teachers like Big Mama and Christie to learn more about how to think about and use teaching as a form of cultural work to successfully teach African American students. By successfully teaching African American students, Big Mama and Christie both used their work as educators to challenge the dominance of White superiority. The use of CRT makes it possible for us to tap into the knowledge and understandings that Big Mama used to effectively teach African American students and Christie used to learn how to successfully teach the next generation of African American students.

(3) *Challenging the dominant perspective.* CRT research works to challenge dominant narratives, often referred to as majoritarian stories. CRT scholar Harris (1995) describes the "valorization of Whiteness as treasured property in a society structured on racial caste" (p. 277). Harris (1995) also argues that Whiteness conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits, and it was jealously guarded as a valued possession. This thematic strand of Whiteness as property in the United States is not confined to the nation's early history (Frankenberg, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

(4) *Commitment to social justice.* Social justice must always be a motivation behind CRT research. Part of this social justice commitment must include a critique of liberalism, claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness and meritocracy as a camouflage for the self-interest of powerful entities of society (Tate, 1997). Only aggressive, color conscious efforts to change the way things are done will do much to ameliorate misery (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Tate, 1997).

(5) *Being interdisciplinary.* According to Tate (1997), CRT crosses epistemological boundaries. It borrows from several traditions, including liberalism, feminism, and Marxism to include a more complete analysis of "raced" people.

Ladson-Billings (1998) has already put forth the argument that CRT has a place within education. She argues that CRT in education allows for the use of parables, chronicles, stories, and counterstories to illustrate the false necessity and irony of much of current civil rights doctrine: we really have not gone as far as we think we have. Adopting CRT as a framework for educational equity means that we will have to expose racism in education and propose radical solutions for addressing the ever-present issue (Ladson-Billing, 1998).

In this paper, we apply a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens to help us present the narratives of Big Mama and Christie. The richness, utility, and the power of this framework is that the

knowledge and experiences of the participants in this study are deemed valid and both worth listening to and learning from. We use CRT to recognize the experiential knowledge of these two Black women educators and apply this knowledge as a means to unpack racial oppression in the de jure and now the de facto segregated South (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

### **Methods**

Studying the work of African American teachers has been a continuing challenge for educational research. The challenge is largely due to the institutionalized silencing and sterilization of the Black experience in the United States. Similarly to Lynn & Jennings (2009) and Ware (2006), this study asks, ‘What is unique about the pedagogy of African American teachers, especially as related to African American students?’ [H]ooks (1992) answers the question saying in telling our [Black] history and sharing our experiences enables political self-recovery.

To fully explore this question, we used a methodology based on narrative analysis of data collected from three formal semi-structured interviews respectively with Christie Hayes and Big Mama. Our intent in collecting and analyzing this study’s data was to facilitate a discussion and understanding of the daily lives of two African American teachers and their views on teaching. In meeting with these teachers and pursuing an understanding of their pedagogy, we encouraged our participants to tell their own stories as we continually reminded ourselves of our places as co-authors of the narratives relayed to us by Big Mama and Christie (Lynn & Jennings, 2009).

We use Critical Race counterstorytelling/counternarratives/testimonies as a method of recounting the experiences and perspectives of racially and socially marginalized people. Yosso (2006) argues that counterstories do not just respond to majoritarian stories. She further expands her argument that counterstories do not focus on trying to convince people that racism exists. She also states that counterstories seek to document the persistence of racism from the perspectives of those injured and victimized by its legacy. It is within this framework that we have undertaken in order to examine the lives and work of Big Mama and Christie as a way to see how their narratives reveal a critical pedagogy of resistance that seeks to challenge hegemonic structures in the Black educational experience (Delgado, 1989; Knight, Norton, Bentley & Dixon, 2005; Lynn & Jennings, 2009; Ware, 2006; Yosso, 2006).

### **Two Themes in Big Mama’s Teaching Practices**

Prior to *Brown*, African Americans tended to view formal education as the key to improving one’s life and life chances. African-American children were schooled in hopes of not only improving themselves but also their families by acquiring an education. Despite the poor educational conditions, there was a strong sense of commitment, a desire for freedom from oppressive conditions, and an expectation for high professional standards (White, 2002). When examining Big Mama’s life and work, two themes emerged that exemplify her life and work. These include education as a way out of oppression and the importance of developing pride in oneself and one’s racial group.

African-American teachers of the Jim Crow era, like Big Mama, tried to instill in their students an understanding that they do not always have to be subservient to White Americans and that Black people are not genetically inferior to Whites. Despite the deplorable schooling conditions and the terror of White racial harassment, Big Mama wanted her students, particularly those students who were forced into the sharecrop labor, to understand that they should not give up on going to school. She wanted her students to understand that the way to help end the racial

oppression of Jim Crow was through education. She states, “I told my students, as well as my own children, you have to be sure you get your lesson. It is the only way you will not have to work on some White man’s property.”

Big Mama clearly understood that having an education was important to move Blacks out of the cotton fields and factories and into classrooms. Cotton fields and factory jobs during the Jim Crow era, for many Blacks, meant long hours, little pay, no respect, and always living in fear that the job could end if workers showed any signs of organizing or resisting the racial caste social order in the South. Big Mama describes how she tried to convey this message to her students. She recalls,

[The lessons] I tried to stress to [my students] were that... other people in our community had made it, which meant they could make it. The lessons that I [taught] were to show and help my students to understand that “There is the way out of poverty [and] their circumstances and *education* was the way.” As Black teachers, most of us were really demanding. We didn’t just specifically say it per se. But back then, you knew that they [all Black teachers] knew this is the way out of here [oppressive conditions]. And we would go to that extra length to try and instill into [our students] that this is your way out of this mess. I could really remember we had the desire to instill in [our students] the need to get out of that cotton field, and education was the way out.

Education was so important for Big Mama’s sharecropper students to have that she reiterated “It was not okay for my students to come into my class without their lesson. I understood that they may have picked cotton all evening the night before, but they still had to get it, and if they did not, there was some sort of punishment.”

When thinking of nightmares, we often connect them to events that happen while someone is asleep and mostly at night. For many Black students in the South, Jim Crow was an all day, all night, and all year nightmares that occurred regardless of whether one was sleeping or awake. A participant in Hayes (2006) reiterates Big Mama’s connection between the necessity of an education as a way out of the oppression caused by Jim Crow as he reflected on his experiences: “There was very little emphasis on actually educating Blacks; we were told we’d probably be picking cotton for the rest of our lives and so there was no need for us to get a quality education” (p. 75).

Importantly, these same nightmares have come full circle for many students in urban areas in the United States as manifested by the growing connection between prisons and schools serving high racial minority populations (Noguera, 2003, 2008; Wacquant, 2001). What we see with Big Mama’s pedagogy is what many CRT scholars call critical race as praxis, a process of simultaneously working within the classroom and community to help students to both survive and transform the conditions and consequences of White racism. Based on her daily experiences and thus experiential knowledge of how to effectively navigate contexts of White racism, Jim Crow specifically, the praxis dimension of Big Mama’s pedagogy informs her social justice-oriented actions and practices and is a key component of learning in her classroom. Big Mama knew exactly what the conditions of Jim Crow were exacting from her students and she was using her work as a teacher exactly to counter and transform those conditions.

Following a long tradition of Black teachers and social activism among women in the African American community (Jordan & Irvine, 1999; Quijada Cerecer et. al, 2010; Stovall,

2004), Big Mama was single-minded about addressing social inequities to ensure the survival and future of her students and children and all Black children. Accordingly, part of Big Mama's praxis was convincing Black students that they were just as capable as Whites so that they would be less likely to believe what the dominant society maintained as truth---that Black people had not and would not accomplish anything of value, apart from menial services to Whites (Beaufboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; 2002). Smith and other Black teachers like her socialized their students into particular ways of seeing themselves, others, and the society, and these racial socialization practices became key Black resistant tactics to White domination.

What Big Mama also understood and teachers today need to understand, is that the idea of merit, for example, is problematic in the United States. It is not enough to say that anyone who works hard can achieve success. Big Mama knew that despite their hard work, students of color continue to be systematically excluded from education and educational opportunities. Merit operates under the burden of racism; racism thus limits the applicability of merit to people of color (Bergerson, 2003). The hard work of some pays off much more than the hard work of Racial Others because of the systemic privileging of characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences, histories, and interests of White people.

Big Mama's narrative serves as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse on Black education as deficient and Black students as being disadvantaged and "at risk." Big Mama's teaching philosophy and practices likewise challenge mainstream narratives that equate school desegregation with educational equality (Horsford, 2009). Similar to a teacher in Foster's study *Black Teachers on Teaching* (1994), Big Mama did not want her students to just be in the future; she wanted them to change the future. Foster (1997) states, "When people can think critically, they can change things. They are less likely to be taken advantage of and more likely to be able to avoid the traps that others set for us; an uneducated person can be taken advantage of because of their ignorance or naiveté" (p. 16).

Disparities in educational performance today suggest that Big Mama's social justice-oriented praxis is as necessary and relevant as it was for earlier generations of students. Whereas in times past Black bodies filled the labor requirement for sharecropping, today Black and Brown bodies in like manner fill the labor requirement for wars being waged and a [renewed] quest for global dominance (Camarota & Romero, 2006). McCullough-Garrett (1993) argues that Black teachers in Black schools provided a unique presence, pedagogy, and care, and we would add determination. Unfortunately, when schools were integrated, some of this uniqueness disappeared.

Moreover, now that schools have re-segregated, we argue that for Black students to thrive in public schools today there is a strong need for this unique presence, pedagogy and care to resurface. This is not to say that contemporary teachers do not care and teachers of the past did care. Yet the type of care Black students received in segregated Black students from Black teachers was different. For Big Mama, teaching was a form of care that always included a strong critique and challenge to White racism and was not based on assumptions of Black inferiority and White superiority.

Many teachers today however, are using labels such as at-risk, high-risk, limited English proficient and poverty-impacted, all that point to and justify race-based oppression, to describe their students of color. These deficiency-based terms facilitate and justify systemic acts of oppression against students of color most often in the form of lowered expectations and victim blaming. Many teachers are quick to blame their students of color for low school performance, a symptom of race-based oppression (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997).



Horsford (2009) argues that the current state of Black education represents a historical reversal that pales in comparison to the long tradition of educational and cultural excellence that generations of African-descent people established and maintained within the context of White racism. Importantly, however, Christie Hayes's narrative illustrates how one contemporary teacher is attempting to build from and apply those rich traditions of educational and cultural excellence to impact another generation of Black students who likewise find themselves in segregated schools albeit in a different era of time. In Christie's narrative, Big Mama now becomes a metaphor representing the many mentors from of the past that have influenced and helped in the development of her liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1973). Christie learns and draws from not only the experiences of Big Mama, but also from those of her parents, both educators, and those of two of her own teachers, all of whom both attended and taught in Jim Crow schools and were active members of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.

### *Christie Hayes*

Christie's narrative answers the question, what can we learn from the past to shape the future? Christie did not experience Jim Crow schools and had some choice in the type of education she received. The stories she has internalized of Jim Crow and segregated Mississippi serve as a foundation. The stories of the past frame how she approaches school, serving as a source of motivation, determination, and inspiration. The stories of denial, the stories of oppression, and the stories of getting a quality education are now used as motivation and direction as she develops classroom pedagogy. Christie describes how she has used the lessons from the past to frame her present and future. She explains,

The lessons I learned from the Jim Crow generation are very important for me and for Black people in general. Those lessons tell of empowerment through education. I know for me, personally, it is probably the same empowerment that Black people of long ago knew that they needed. So, with education comes that empowerment. And the more education I receive, the more empowered I feel, and without education I wouldn't have that empowerment. Education has propelled, or given Black people through the decades and the generations the empowerment they needed to succeed.

The amount of empowerment was limited for many Blacks prior to the Civil Rights Movement, especially those Black Mississippians who made a living sharecropping. In 2010, this is not very different for many Black youth. These students live in segregated neighborhoods, and many of their parents work minimal jobs for minimal wages. The want for empowerment framed many Black teachers' classroom pedagogies. Out of this desire for empowerment, Black teachers had a demanding and rigorous academic program cradled in a supportive environment as Siddle Walker (2001), Foster (1997), and Hayes (2006, in press) describe. Christie describes how two teachers, Mr. JSR and Mr. Hayes, both from the pre-desegregation era, provided her the needed support:

Most of my teachers who were Black attended, especially the older teachers, segregated schools. I think it had a tremendous effect on the way they dealt with the Black students as opposed to their White colleagues. Both Mr. Hayes and Mr. JSR had high expectations for all their students whether they were White or Black, whereas, maybe some of their White colleagues, they had high expectations, but it was there to obtain if the students wanted it. They didn't necessarily push, so that the others who probably needed a push, and who need that extra push could have

done a lot better if some of their White colleagues had given it to them. Whereas Mr. Hayes and Mr. JSR were there to give us the push or the swift kick or whatever we needed to propel us and give us the extra drive we needed.

They knew that all students, especially Black students, needed an education if they were to become successful and not a part of the permanent underclass that exists today. This knowledge and understanding was used to manage their classrooms, which is where they strive to ensure Black students did not become complacent with the false notion of everything is equal for everyone, and that mediocrity in life, and especially in school, was not an option for Black people.

They were not afraid to tell a student that they needed to “Get it Together” or there would be severe consequences to deal with if they did not improve. They both did whatever was necessary to help propel their students to the next level, regardless of any external factors that some teachers might use to justify a student’s poor performance or lack of drive and determination.

Because of the experiential knowledge that has been passed down through storytelling, Christie sees the benefit of segregated schools described by her mentors. She also makes mention that even though legal school segregation has ended, the racial makeup in schools is similar to that of 1965. The difference in 2010 as opposed to 1965 is that segregation was mandated by the law *de jure* segregation and in 2010; people are segregated along class lines where poor Blacks live in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, in *de facto* segregation. She feels that being temporarily impoverished is not an excuse for failure. Situations are temporary and can be used as sources of motivation. She states, “My parents had a hard life, but that did not stop them from achieving their goals because it was expected.” She explains her position:

Even though I did not attend segregated schools, from what I have heard about them from Mom, Dad and my teachers who attended them and taught in them.... the simple fact is that the message to students in *de jure* segregated school is not the same... There are not enough teachers who really push them because they are poor. Whereas, in the segregated schools of the Civil Rights era, the children who were no more impoverished than the children today; probably some more so, were required by their teachers to excel. Poverty was not an excuse then, and should not be used as an excuse today. Now, if they are from the wrong side of the tracks .... they are automatically placed in *de facto* segregated schools which gives them[students] to have low expectations of themselves which usually means accepting the easy way out because they’re poor.

In most instances, I would say that segregated schools, if they were run like they were run when Big Mama was a teacher, they would be a benefit to Black children. However, they are not being run like they were then. As a result, it [segregation] is not helping public school students.

Christie is not advocating for meritocracy and “pull yourself” up by your bootstraps but advocating for transformation. [H]ooks (1995) explains that it is imperative that we make the distinction between meritocracy, that is to say, the act of pulling oneself up by his or her bootstraps and the notion of self-determination that these two educators are advocating. The notion of pulling oneself up by his or her bootstraps liberates White folks of the responsibility and the role that White folks play in “perpetuating and maintaining White supremacy”. She goes on to

say that when people of color strive for self-determination, not only does it force White folks to be held accountable for White supremacy, but it also allows people of color to go through a “process of decolonization and radical politicization” (hooks 1995), which unlike the individualistic notion of pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps, has real transformative power.

### **New School Meets Old School: Crossing Epistemological Boundaries**

Christie has taken it upon herself to educate a generation of students who do not know the hardship that a generation faced under Jim Crow, and how out of these hardships, the necessity for an education became important for Black Mississippians. Her narrative also describes how she crosses the epistemological boundaries where she merges “old school”<sup>1</sup> with “new school.” Christie describes how Big Mama’s experiences framed her teaching philosophy:

Most of the experiences that framed my philosophy of education came from the experiences that I’ve gone through as a student, both before college and during college. Having two educators as parents and educators as grandparents as well, helped me to shape my beliefs about and my philosophy of education. Therefore, the lifelong legacies from the things that I’ve heard or heard them talk about generally are what have influenced my philosophy of education.

Christie is using the experiential knowledge of Big Mama that CRT describes as recognizing the lived experiences. She is aware that racism is still part of the American fabric, and it comes in many different forms: liberalism, equality, and meritocracy are examples. She explains how living in a house of educators where on numerous occasions the alleged system of equality was critiqued as being far from equal. She explains how rejecting claims of neutrality helped frame her teaching philosophy:

I think every teacher education program has its pre-service teachers develop their personal philosophy of education. While I was a pre-service teacher, I too had to compose my educational philosophy. I remember this one specific detail of my chosen philosophy because it was brought into question by one of my professors. I basically said that I believe that educators who come from a strong line of educators, who have a strong sense of education, and who instill education in their children seem, generally, to be very involved and better teachers. It was suggested that I remove the statement because it was such a strong opinion, in the opinion of my professor. I felt so strongly about this because having so many educators in my family and growing up around them did have an impact on me personally and influenced my overall take on teaching and education. I wouldn’t take it out. It is still included in my philosophy today.

Out of this philosophy framed in the experiential knowledge of teachers from Big Mama’s generation, the tenet of CRT that frames her pedagogy is a critique of

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<sup>1</sup> An old school teacher, according to this family of teachers, is one with very high expectations, who believes that students should be pushed to their academic limits. Old school is a very common term used in the south. Being an old school teacher is race neutral; any teacher can be old school. Being old school is an attitude, it’s an expectation, and it’s a demeanor. Being labeled an old school teacher is a badge of honor for many.

liberalism. Hearing the stories from the past, Christie can, through a critical lens, recognize inequalities in the education of Black students. She explains why she is much harder on the Black kids:

I try to get my children, and you could say I'm probably harder on them, the children in my class of color. A lot of times I see them behaving in ways that are just really not appropriate, even at that age, and I try, you know, to stop them and often just to provide a model for them on how to act and how to behave because they need to learn. They need to know that once they get older and go out they'll find that the way they act and the way they behave is going to determine a lot of what they can and cannot do. I have high expectations for all of my students. Many of those expectations come from my lived experiences, of having parents and grandparents from the Jim Crow Era, who are also teachers and having teachers like Mr. Hayes and Mr. JSR, and experiencing certain inequalities firsthand.

Therefore, I try to give those who need a push or a swift kick the support they need to achieve without showing pity. That is not to say I do not empathize with their situation. I just know that pity will not change their circumstances. So, I am hard on them all. I do this to show them that with a good education, determination, self-respect, integrity and dignity, they can accomplish anything, even if things are a little difficult. I always tell them, "I don't make the rules, I just play by them".

Christie's pedagogy and classroom practices can be described as "old school" in the sense of what she expects from her students and this is what we argue as where we need to return as a way to hopefully raise achievement in Black students in urban districts. Gordon (2000) calls "old school" teachers those who are traditional, conservative, and demanding. Ware (2006) and Bonner (2009) would consider Christie a warm demander. They define a teacher who is a warm demander as someone who engages students through high expectations, firm and authoritative classroom management and culturally familiar communication patterns and for the purpose of this study it is helpful to identify Christie as a warm demander, because this is something she learned from Big Mama.

As part of her warm demanding pedagogy, Christie tries to counter racism by insisting they are prepared academically. It is not okay to come in to her class not prepared to learn. She attempts through her instruction and pedagogy to counter the notions of meritocracy and neutrality. She states, "We are not all equal! The more education you have the better off you will be. There are only a few athletes and movie stars and in this competitive global world; being mediocre in addition to being Black is not going to be enough."

What is important to the theme of this paper is that Black educators, for generations have challenged the dominant discourse in terms of how African American youth should be educated, and what we see with Christie's narrative is a continuation of that tradition. The education Christie is talking about is not mastering a standardized test and if they are not mastering these test that are not true measures of what students know these students are deemed as failures. Teachers like Big Mama and Christie would argue that this dictated pedagogy focused around assessment is actually exacerbating the problem. We argue that one way of overcoming these problems is through pedagogy that ensures that young Black minds reach their full intellectual destiny (Bonner, 2009; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

## **What Can We Learn From Big Mama?**

For the purposes of this paper, we draw upon the works of Paulo Freire (1973), Gloria Ladson Billings (1994), Lisa Delpit (1996), Audre Lorde (1984) and others to develop our working definition of transformative pedagogy. Transformative pedagogy refers to an approach or philosophy of teaching accompanied by practices that enable students to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to navigate within, provide socio-political critique of, and foster democratic change within conditions of historical White supremacy. We follow Leonardo (2005) in defining White supremacy as “a racialized social system that upholds, reifies, and reinforces the superiority of Whites” (p. 127).

As we define it, transformative pedagogy has three major components. First, there is equity. Equity is equal access to the most challenging and nourishing educational experience. For us, equity is more than equal representation or physical presence within an educational program for example. Educational equity refers to full participation as a recognized member of a community. A closer examination of Big Mama’s teaching career suggests that her students did not have equal access to educational opportunities. Yet, inequities of access did not stop Big Mama from providing a rigorous educational experience, one that was not necessarily banking in nature, to her students (Delgado Bernal & Solorzano, 2001; Hayes, 2006).

Second, there is activism. Activism is a part of transformative pedagogy because it entails preparing students to actively reinsert themselves into public spaces and dialogues to help them gain access to the valued resources and opportunities they have been either excluded from or denied. This activism demands that students have an understanding of the inequities in society and the “how to,” in terms of beginning to fix those inequities if necessary.

Lastly, transformative pedagogy as we define it is about social literacy. Social literacy is preparing students to acquire the discourse or language necessary to resist the fattening effects of materialism, consumerism and the power of the abiding evils of White supremacy—nourishing an awareness of one’s identity (Ayers, Quinn & Stovall, 2009; hooks, 1995; Quijada Cercer, et. al, 2010).

If we are to bridge the Black-White performance disparities in education that plague our public schools, we must find a different way, a new path, an alternative journey (Ross, Bondy, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2008). Theorizing Big Mama’s lessons and the experiences she draws from allows us to begin imagining and creating a different path and approach to education not grounded in assumptions of Black inferiority and White superiority. Big Mama’s lessons thus provide the understandings that policymakers need to make sense of why traditionally dominant ways of teaching African American learners continue to fail and teachers continue to enter the classroom unprepared to teach all students (Knaus, 2009; Ware, 2006).

There is no magical potion or recipe that pre-service teachers can take or use that will tell them how to change failing schools. We use the term “warm demanders” to describe Big Mama and Christie. What we see with the pedagogy of Big Mama and Christie is a no-nonsense approach to education for those who are expected to fail in school. Big Mama and Christie are explicit about the importance of being educated.

Both Big Mama and Christie draw from and affirm the richness of the students’ own cultural background and histories. The difference between many teachers and teachers like Big Mama and Christie is that teachers who are successful with African American learners know how to apply a dual focus in their teacher—they simultaneously keep the realities of White racism in

view as they work against it and they affirm and draw from the richness of the students' own cultural and historical backgrounds. Big Mama and Christie, through their narratives, show us how this dual focus in education is translated into practice and enacted as an approach to teaching as a form of cultural work. We posit that anyone and everyone regardless of background can [and must] learn how to adopt this dual focus to effectively teach all students; in the paragraphs below, we describe briefly how this dual focus might be acquired and applied. Although the examples are a minor tradition within U.S. society and its history, there have always been Whites who have learned to draw on the racial knowledge and understandings collectively generated by people of color; knowledge that does not perpetuate or depend on Whiteness (Aptheker, 1993; Frankenberg, 1997; Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996).

Unfortunately, high expectations, no-nonsensical approaches and culturally familiar communication patterns to education have largely been replaced with "at-risk," "low performing," and "poverty" and other deficit-oriented adjectives used to describe African American learners. Teacher education programs likewise turn to scripted programs, for example, Ruby Payne framed in the apparently multicultural discourse of "if we could all just get along approach" presented as solutions to the tenacious gap in achievement and school performance evidenced between White students and students of color (Bonner, 2009).

If there is one take-away from this section, according to Ware (2006), culturally and politically responsive teachers teach with authority, a form of teaching that includes teaching to the whole child as a member of a particular social group situated within a particular context and history. However, being a warm demander is more than coming into the classroom and demanding a checklist of certain behaviors from students. Effective teaching of African American students is not about implementing a particular step-by-step remedy plan. Black and Latino kids, for example, see White teachers arrive in their communities, stand up before them attempting to teach them a curriculum that is already pre-determined and defined in terms of what they need to know. Consequently, the students can in turn answer questions on a standardized test that are likely to have little to no bearing on their actual lived experiences and realities. The teachers, in turn, do not have any connection to their students and neither does the curriculum they are attempting to teach.

Teachers cannot be warm demanders by doing drive-by teaching. Teachers must be invested in, deeply familiar with, and able to find and draw on the richness and beauty of the communities they teach in. Teachers must not go into communities with the mentality to save the students from themselves, their parents, their culture, or their history and thus miss the resiliency, richness, and beauty of the ways groups and individuals have learned to cope and thrive within a historical context of near constant race-based hostility and forms of micro-aggressions, sabotage, and assault perpetrated by dominant society.

The paradox of teacher preparation, however, is that most teachers, teacher educators, and future teachers are White. Teacher education in the U.S. is a White world (Juarez, Smith, & Hayes, 2009). Most White people have developed very little familiarity or investments in African American or any other racial minority community in the U.S.

What can a predominantly White field of educators learn from Big Mama? Big Mama and Christie are both African American women. Logically, then, both Big Mama and Christie have and are more likely to have the familiarity with and investments in the African American community required for effective teaching of African American learners.

Do teachers thus have to be Black to learn from Big Mama's lessons? Since White people and others from outside of the African American community tend not to have these same

connections and familiarity, are they necessarily excluded from the pool of potentially effective teachers of African American learners? We posit that the answer is a resounding “No!”

First, race is a social construction. People must therefore learn their racial identities. While the realities of race and racism are very real and historically embedded, they are not biologically determined. Accordingly, there is no inherent biological or other natural barrier to keep White and other non-Black people from learning from Big Mama or anyone else.

Second, and accordingly, Big Mama’s lessons constitute an approach to teaching and learning, not a step-by-step formula or recipe. Both Big Mama and Christie view their work as teachers from a particular perspective that includes an awareness of and an activism against White racism. They explicitly are aware of, know about, and work against assumptions of Black inferiority and White superiority. Hence, Big Mama’s lessons are perspectives and ways of thinking about and making sense of the world that can be learned and adopted by anyone regardless of background.

Moreover, because Big Mama’s lessons are not technical step-by-step formulas, they cannot be mechanically implemented as a type of technocratic, objective, rational process. To learn from Big Mama’s recipes requires us to understand and interpret them within the context they were derived and developed from. In particular, Big Mama’s lessons require us to develop an awareness of the historical and group context, not the individual as an entity outside of group membership and history (Baldwin, 1985).

The focus of Big Mama’s lessons is not simply on the cognitive, psychological well-being of students, but incorporates an awareness of and challenge to the ways White racism negatively influences the individual’s psychological, social and other forms of well being. Big Mama’s lessons were not only grounded in a knowledge and critique of White racism, they also acknowledged and validated what DuBois (1924) called the gifts of Black folks, that is to say, the contributions of African Americans to the making of the United States. In other words, Big Mama affirmed the contributions and validity of Black culture, experiences, and history. She did not view her Black students or the surrounding community as a deficient and corrupt version of European American culture.

Without an awareness of history and context infused into teaching approaches and practices, Big Mama’s lessons are likely to become just another set of prescriptive recipes that fall by the wayside in schools. To learn from Big Mama’s lessons, like Christie, all of us must learn to identify, deconstruct, and challenge assumptions of Black inferiority and White superiority. We must learn to identify and work against the consequences of White racism that influence students of color and privilege students who benefit from the systemic privileging of Whiteness presently and historically within U.S. society. We too must familiarize ourselves with the gifts of Black folks and develop a vested interest in communities of colors, an investment not based on the patronizing and ultimately harmful effects of presuming Whiteness as the normative standard.

## **Conclusion**

Black educators have been successfully educating Black students and leaders for generations now! In today’s educational parlance, we are always talking about these “hard to teach” kids as if it is so very impossible. The education community needs to look to the source of information—those who have accomplished this apparently impossible feat, for wisdom and knowledge about how we too might do this thing that previously seemed an impossible task.

We hope that this research will assist educators, policy makers, and vested others in comprehending the social justice-oriented teaching approaches that African American teachers have historically employed to foster the academic success of Black students and to offer a vision of a more socially just society. Until we like Christie learn to follow Big Mama in viewing the world through a lens that is grounded in anti-racist struggle and does not affirm assumptions of Black inferiority and White superiority, our recipe-like practices and what to do approaches will continue to fail in our public schools and the dream of an equal education for all students will remain yet elusive.

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