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Empowering African American women to use their voices

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Empowering African American Women to Use Their Voices

By

**Debra Bolger
California State University Monterey Bay
Fall 2002**

**Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of
Arts in Education**

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Empowering African American Women to Use their Voices

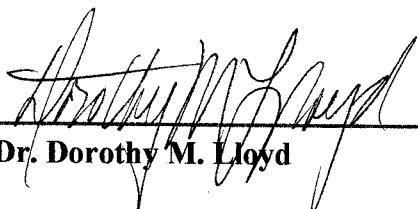
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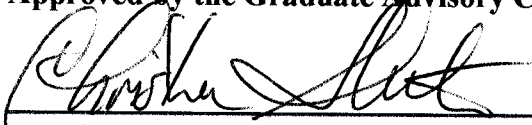
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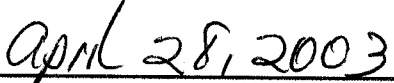
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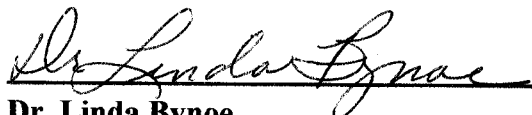

Dr. Dorothy M. Lloyd

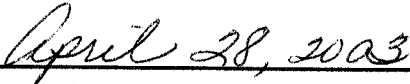

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ABSTRACT

African American women face multiple oppressions and injustices. Since the beginning of slavery, they have formed an inner courage and a cultural heritage to fight oppressions by empowering themselves and others to speak out against discrimination.

The purpose of the research is to learn methods to teach African American students and women how to use their voices to empower themselves. Women were asked to share how they developed self-confidence and how they used their voices to overcome different types of oppression.

The participants were five African American women: one African American student, one African American professor, one community leader, one counselor and one school teacher. I chose women in education because my topic objective is to learn strategies for educating African American women, youth and children with exceptionalities. I chose a variety of different careers, generations and perspectives hoping to obtain their view about self-empowerment, the many oppressive acts they have had to endure and their use of voice to overcome their shyness and or fear. These five women are all considered successful because they have all achieved or attempted to achieve degrees in higher education and are acknowledged by their community and other African American women as leaders. They also teach in various disciplines around education and they have developed their voices to help students and other people of color to build self-confidence and become empowered. They transcend the normal teaching standards and strive to help women of color, particularly African American ancestry women.

This study suggests that African American women continue to be empowered, develop their voices through varying methods and share their knowledge in order to improve the lives of others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I enrolled at CSUMB in 1995 I never realized what an incredible journey I would take. I was unaware of all the outstanding people that would guide me along the way. Six years later I would graduate with a Bachelors Degree and two more years with a Masters of Arts in Education. So many people have helped along the way that I would like to thank.

Christine Sleeter was my guide for this incredible journey and I could not have asked for a better navigator. Thank you for your patience, guidance, support as an instructor and also a friend and a mentor. Linda Bynoe was an outstanding thesis advisor. Her constant push, support and encouragement has inspired me to continue throughout my journey. I want to give a special thanks to the Master of Arts in Education Program's faculty who have been involved with my project.

In addition to faculty, my classmates supported me throughout my academic journey and they deserve a special thank you as well. I would personally like to thank my family (who were my inspiration for obtaining a higher education). My sons, Bobby and Marquis, I know it has been rough because I have been so busy and I have devoted a lot of my time to this thesis. Thank you for being patient, understanding and loving.

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CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE, RATIONALE AND OVERVIEW

My Voice Too Shall Be Heard

The overarching theme for my action thesis was to investigate how culture and self-confidence provide African American women the resilience to express their concerns and to empower others.

It is my personal belief that in order to become empowered, a person must have self-confidence. I wanted to explore how cultural heritage influenced self-confidence and how positive role models contributed to the empowerment of African American women. From this study, I hoped to learn teaching strategies that would help me and other educators to teach, African American women, students of color and exceptional students to openly and publicly express their thoughts and ideas in ways that promoted self-confidence. I selected this project in hopes of helping shy African American students and or women to learn that their skin color does not impede their ability to speak in a society that professes to be inclusive of all people. I wanted African American students to be affirmed as valuable members of society. I hoped to obtain knowledge and teaching strategies that would give students a worldview that included a historical and contemporary cultural understanding about the relationship between voice, self-confidence and empowerment.

From personal experiences, I know that this has been a problem for me and other African American women. After entering college, I became aware of my own insecurities and my inability to speak out in class and public society. My fear was that I could not

speak as well as my white colleagues or I did not know the proper way to speak. Other African American women have shared the same concern. For example: an African American friend who attends California State University Monterey Bay said, "I am already dyslexic and when I try to speak in class the other students look at me like I am crazy or I am asked to repeat what I said several times" (Evans, 2002). This experience made her feel inferior to White classmates and therefore caused her to lose confidence in her abilities to speak.

The history of African American women dispels the notion that African American women have weak and disempowering voices. African American women are known for their ability to organize, speak out as activists, and express their thoughts in many genres. When African American women's voices are respected and nurtured their abilities to speak and the content of their messages are meaningful and profound as demonstrated by such voices of Sojourner Truth, Maya Angelou and Angela Davis.

One of the cultural elements that I draw on and causes me to doubt myself as a speaker was my parent's teaching about respect. My parents always said that a child should be seen and not heard and this belief caused me to be shy and uncertain about when to speak and how much to say. While attending elementary, junior high and high school, my cultural values and educational experiences were embedded in my competence to speak out. Negative educational experiences continued in college, other students (and professors) would cut me off in the middle of a sentence, discounting my ideas, making me feel inferior and shutting down my voice. When I did speak, I would feel insulted and my words devalued. When African American women experience these disapproving attitudes, I would like for them to be able to overcome their fears,

frustrations and disappointments with any situation and be able to still speak and feel valued.

Because of my experiences at home and in school, I feel that teachers assumed that I was less intelligent which caused me to feel less capable. While the aftermath of this cultural upbringing seemed wrong, my parents were attempting to teach me in a way that would protect me from the oppressive acts that they had experienced by the racist attitudes endemic to the culture of the USA. The ability to use ones voice, in all situations, is an important skill for African American women's self-confidence. It enables them to seek a higher education and to enhance their economic and social status. My cultural and educational experiences as an African American women influenced my commitment to this project. It is my hope that other African American students and or women are empowered by information derived from this study, to overcome the past oppressions and be able to use their powerful voices to speak with confidence when and where appropriate.

Generations of Experience

For my study, I chose five African American women, between the ages of 44-78. The participants included one African American student, one African American professor, one community leader, one counselor and one high school teacher. I chose women in education who are considered successful in their communities. They were willing to share those experiences, speaking skills and inspirations necessary to become successful in their field and overcome educational and personal obstacles. They are considered successful because they have achieved or attempted to achieve degrees in higher education and they teach various topics that require the use of voice. Their community

and other African American women acknowledge these women as leaders. They transcend the normal teaching standards and strive to help women of color, particularly African American ancestry women.

Breaking the Silence

The major theory that informs my study is the Womanist Theory. The Womanist Theory defines black feminist and feminist of color. Women like Toni Bambara, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Angela Davis and Toni Morrison are just a few women who broke their “silence” in the 1970’s by writing and speaking about the experiences and lives of African American women. As role models, they helped African American women in the 1980’s and 90’s develop opportunities to speak out and voice their concerns. Alice Walker and her views about the womanist theory set the stage for its importance.

Alice Walker

“Alice Walker is a well-known African American writer who has written over 30 books for and about African American women. Ms. Walker is a critically regarded writer of the last two decades and her work reflects black vernacular, oppression and poverty. These social constructions are threaded into her writings” (Walker 1983, 9). Alice Walker’s book, In Search of Our Mothers Garden, introduced the term womanist. She believes that womanist describes the black feminist and feminist of color. “Walker believes womanist theory is rooted in black women’s concrete history in racial and gender oppression. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. One is womanist when one is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Shakhovtseva 1999, 5, XII).

Womanist is a term derived from the absence of community among women. During the 70s it became apparent that the feminist movement benefited white middle class, educated women. From the beginning, women of color recognized that white women would primarily affect the social standing of white women in the middle and upper class groups while affecting only in a small way the social status of working class, and poor women. The womanist fights for the suppression of sexism, racism, classism and all forms of patriarchal power for all women. The womanist theory is very important both in its power to liberate women from the terrible bonds of sexist oppression and in its potential to radicalize and renew other liberation struggles.

Understanding of Terms

Below is an explanation of the terms described in this paper. **Abolitionist** is someone who advocates for a specific purpose: anti-slavery, gun control, anti-smoking, child abuse, etc. a cause or purpose (Wick, et al., 2002, 1). **Classism** is the “systematic oppression” of poor people and people who work for wages from those who have access to control of the necessary resources by which other people make their living (Bynoe, 2002).

Culture is the human experiences, traditions, languages and worldviews that are influenced and governed by family and or society (Defrantz, 1994). **Empowerment** is the power to save the self in the self, the ability to acquire the knowledge needed to become empowered (Wick, et al. 2002, 1). A **Feminist** is a person who wants social equality with men of their class; women who want equal pay for equal work; other women wanted an alternative lifestyle.

Oppression is an unjust situation that has perpetuated itself over a period of time whereas groups are denied by another group access to the resources of society. (Bynoe 2002).

Racism usually refers to an unfavorable attitude, and perhaps an unfavorable action, toward people who are members of particular racial or ethnic groups; it may or may not specify the type of relationship that exists between unfavorable attitudes and actions; and the idea of group ranking may be more or less salient (Bynoe 2002). **Sexism** is based on sex discrimination against women.

Self-confidence is believing in oneself, concentrating on your strengths and weaknesses, knowing your limitations and preparing for the best (Swindell 2002, 1).

Womanist theory addresses women of color and for African woman it promotes black women's self-definition. Womanist is, "being committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker 1983, 5, XI).

For and About African American women

This action thesis is intended to serve African American women, teachers, educators and specifically students. This action thesis excludes the cultural effects of voice for White, Mexican, Asian, etc. women. It is intended for the education of African American women, children of color and exceptional children. This action thesis might help teachers who are teaching predominately African American students with disabilities and African American women who are afraid to speak up in class and or general society. It may also be useful for African American women who need guidance in the quest for empowerment and the development of voice.

A Look into the Future

Chapter Two is the Literature Review. In this chapter, I addressed some of the struggles of African American women during slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. I determined how women during these most troubling times were empowered to fight against injustice.

Chapter three discusses the methods used for this study. In this chapter, I discussed the research design, the research participants and the methods I used to collect and analyze the data.

Chapter Four presents the results of the study. In this chapter, I shared the results of the data analyzed and what I found out through analyzing the data.

Chapter Five discussed if the goal I set out to accomplish was met. It also addressed the purpose, the action that will be taken, what I think about the results and what implication the results have on my topic of study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-confidence, education and commitment allows a person to become empowered enough to express themselves with strength and sincerity of voices. Circumstances that occur in some African American women's youth cause them to lose confidence in their voice, and cause them to be ineffective speakers as adults. They either have the opportunity or are encouraged to use their voices or they do not. Past experiences show that African American women have endured many hardships, but they have also overcome many obstacles. They have used their "voices" in the past to better their futures and the futures of generations to come. History illustrates the different oppressions that African American women have endured and African American women had to find ways to be heard and to change their situations and the situations of others. They did this by using their voices through written documentations, speeches, poetry, music and other genres.

From slavery to the present, African American women have used different tools to develop their voices. In this chapter I reviewed literature for and about African American women and how they used different strategies to overcome oppressive acts and how they used their voices to illustrate their pains and define their triumphs.

There are thousands of African American women who have fought for their foremothers and future generations. I have discussed two women writers, Ellen Craft who fought for African American's during the slavery era and Maya Angelou who was a woman who used her childhood experiences to empower African American women of the twentieth and twenty first century. Next, I discussed the issues that African American

women faced in the past and still face today: being “silenced” at a young age, the many faces of oppression, empowerment and education, a place to talk, spirituality and African American women and the womanist theory.

Ellen Craft

“Ellen Craft was born a slave in Georgia around 1826. As a child, Ellen endured many hardships and was often beaten and worked to exhaustion by the wife of her master. When Ellen was about 11 years old, her masters gave her to their 18-year-old daughter, Eliza, as a wedding present. Years later Ellen met William and they fell in love and in 1846, Ellen and William sought their owner’s permission to marry, but they were hesitant about having any children because they would be born into slavery. Ellen had vowed never to be responsible for bringing another human being into bondage” (McCaskill 1994, 511).

“The young couple thought many times of attempting to escape servitude, but they lived in the Deep South, a treacherous 1,000-mile journey to freedom. The couple, however, had one thing going for them: Ellen's skin was lighter than most other black people's skin so Ellen and William hatched a plan. In 1848, Ellen decided to use her light skin to pass as white so she could travel by train and boat, with her husband posing as her slave. In order for this to work Ellen had to pass as a male. During these trips, they encountered several close calls but the plan worked. Eight days after they began, they arrived in Philadelphia and settled on a Pennsylvania farm (owned by abolitionists) and they learned to read and write. They met William Lloyd Garrison (an abolitionist) and he arranged for them to embark on a four month, sixty town tour to tell their story and they raised money for the abolitionist cause. Soon after their arrival, abolitionists encouraged

them to tell of their escape in abolitionist circles and for the next two years, the Crafts made public appearances where her husband told his story. During this time in society, women were silenced because they disapproved women speaking publicly and she stood nearby so that audiences could see the woman who braved such an escape, so Ellen's husband told the stories" (Brusky 2000, 182).

"In 1850, they went to England for fear that the Fugitive Slave Bill would end their freedom. The Crafts continued to make appearances and made a life in England with their four children. In 1868, they returned to the United States and bought land in Georgia and opened an industrial school for young African Americans and in 1897 Ellen died and was buried under her favorite tree" (Brusky 2000, 190).

Their escape and Ellen's disguise illustrated the nature of race, gender and class, Ellen's passing for a White middle class male had to be successful in all three arenas in order for them to travel undetected. "William's narrative voice actually tells the story and Ellen's voice is given through the filter of William's eyes. Even though Ellen's voice was silenced then, her voice is available for audiences today. Ellen Craft has written letters, reports and reminiscences written and delivered by others that Ellen's story appears and her writings are her way of using her voice for self-empowerment" (McCaskill 1994, 515).

Ellen's story illustrates how in the 1880's, voice was sacrificed and silenced. Nineteenth century African American autobiographies (in retrospect) were created to explain the lives of slaves during enslavement and freedom. Her writings were a way of using her voice for self-empowerment. It is another example of ways (years ago) that

African American women empowered themselves through their writings (Clift 1992, 139).

Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou is another African American woman who took her negative childhood experiences and made them into positive action to empower African American women through her writing.

“Maya Angelou was born in 1928 in Missouri. Her given name was Marguerite Johnson and in her early teens, she was given the name Maya Angelou after her debut performance as a dancer at the Purple Onion cabaret” (Grumbach, 1980, Volume 12). “When she was three years old her parents divorced and the children were sent to live with their grandmother. Angelou called her grandmother “momma” and her love hung over everything she touched. Growing up with her grandmother, she learned how a black girl lived in a world whose rules were set by whites. She learned what it meant to have to wear hand-me-downs from a white woman and the humiliation of being refused treatment by a white dentist. As a child she always dreamed of waking to find her “nappy black hair” metamorphosed to a long blond bob because she felt life was better for a white girl than a black girl. Despite the odds, her grandmother instilled pride in her with religion as an important element in their home. After being apart from their mother the children were sent back to live with their mother and Angelou was raped by her mother’s boyfriend. Because of this violence, Angelou became mute for five years and sent back to live with her grandmother, but no one could handle her except a woman named Mrs. Flowers. With her help, Angelou began to evolve into the young girl who possessed the pride and confidence instilled in her by her grandmother. Years later she went back to live with her mother, but it

became too much for her so she ran away and lived with her father and his girlfriend” (Burt 1998, 2).

“Life with her father was no better so she ended up living in a graveyard of wrecked cars that housed homeless children. She eventually moved back with her mother and her dysfunctional childhood spent moving back and forth between mother and grandmother caused her to struggle with maturity. She began to struggle with determination to prove she was a woman and at the age of sixteen, found herself pregnant” (Burt 1998, 3).

Because of her life, her first works of literature was written, I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings. “It is an autobiography of her disruptive life and it reflects the essence of her struggle to overcome the restrictions that were placed upon her in a hostile environment” (Burt 1998, 4).

Angelou’s fifth autobiography, All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes, “exemplifies an awareness of an even greater sense of connectedness with her African past. She dedicates this book to Julian Mayfield and Malcolm X who both were passionately and earnestly in search of their symbolic home” (Christian 1987, Volume 19).

“Maya Angelou speaks numerous languages fluently and has traveled abroad to Europe, the Middle East and Africa. She has worked as a journalist for foreign publications and has been honored by the academic world, receiving the Yale University Fellowship and being named a Rockefeller Foundation Scholar in Italy. Her life and work are intertwined and her poetry and personal narratives form a larger picture wherein the symbolic Maya Angelou rises to become a point of consciousness for African American people and especially for black women seeking to survive masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and black lack of

power. She has made a commitment to promote black civil rights examining the nature of racial oppression, racial progress and racial integration” (Burt 1998, 4).

Even though Craft and Angelou were born many years apart they both have made positive steps towards improving the lives for African American women. Ellen Craft and Maya Angelou are two powerful African American women who made impacts on society by learning to use their voices. Both of these women used their writings as a means of uplifting their voices and they changed the past and future for African American women. There are other factors that cause African American women to not use their voices. Cultures and upbringing may cause some African American women to remain silent at a young age.

Being “Silenced” at a Young Age

Many African American women are taught, at a young age, “to be seen and not heard” which can affect their abilities to speak when they are adults. Many people have written about this issue, but Danticat’s literature review, Three Young Voices, shares her personal experience of being “silenced” when she was growing up.

Danticat (1996) talks about how when she was growing up in Haiti and “silence was the law of the land.” For example: in the introductory paragraph of this chapter, I mentioned how my culture played a role in “silencing” my voice and how my parents stressed that a child is suppose to be seen and not heard. Danticat talks about how most of the writers she knew were either in hiding, missing or dead. “They were living under the brutal Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti, and “silence was the law of the land.” She learned the code of silence early on and writing was a dangerous activity” (102).

“Danticat writes to communicate with her ancestors, to explore the truth of their lives and to link it to her own. When she writes she thinks of her foremothers, the wives who

were separated from their husbands by poverty and political violence, children who lived off other people's trash, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, all linked by centuries of pillage and slaughter. Danticat had another very powerful reason for writing, "I'm writing to save my life. I write to unearth all those things that scare me, to reach to those places in my soul that may seem remote and dark to others. I write to preserve my sanity and to honor the sacrifices made by all those who came before me. The way I figure, it's a privilege just to be given a voice to speak and to be heard. God and the universe will take care of the rest" (104). Danticat stresses how in her community it was important to show appreciation to the elders and support for the next generation and the oppression that Ms. Danticat faced while growing up in Haiti (104).

Three Young Voices emphasizes how in the past, African American women were not able to use their voices freely and how important it is to use them today. African American women have multiple and intersecting oppressions against them and besides being "silenced" at a young age, they also face racism, classism and sexism.

Several researchers and authors have also discovered the importance of practicing the use of one's voice and building self-confidence to empower oneself as some of the key elements in the effectiveness of women's ability to verbally protect themselves against oppressive actions. Racism, sexism and classism are three of the many obstacles that African American women have had to overcome since slavery. I will define their meanings and give examples of how African Americans deal with the many faces of oppressions.

The Many Faces of Oppression: Racism, Sexism and Classism

Racism usually refers to an unfavorable attitude, and perhaps an unfavorable action, toward people who are members of particular racial or ethnic groups; it may or may not specify the type of relationship that exists between unfavorable attitudes and actions; and the idea of group ranking may be more or less salient. It is based on race, color, descent or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise on the equality of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public (Marable 1992, 96).

Sexism is the mistreatment of women as enforced by the cultures. Sexism denies women power (even over their bodies) and it says that men are superior to women (Neisler 1999, 320).

Classism is the “systematic oppression” of poor people and people who work for wages by those who have access to control of the necessary resources by which other people make their living. Classism is based on the belief that upper class people are smarter and more articulate than working class and poor and it is a way of keeping people down. Classism discriminates and mistreats people based on their socioeconomic class and deprives them with bare necessities (food, clothing, education, respect, communication, etc.) (Neisler 1999, 322).

Many African American women deal with oppression on a daily basis and Paula Giddings is an African American woman who addresses this kind of injustice and oppressive acts against black women.

Paula Giddings

“While working on a program initiated by the U.S. government to produce a series of books on the historical experiences of black women in America, Paula Giddings became determined to do what she could to rectify the situations, so she began research into the book that took five years. It was published under the title, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (Giddings 1984). To write the book she “searched out the hidden primary sources of the past, from diaries to letters and even to obscure novels” (Giddings 1984, 8). “Giddings’ book talks about the impact of black women on race and sex in America and the relationship between them” (5). In her book she talks about the relationship between sexism and racism, the effect of double discrimination on the basis of gender and race on black women. She believes that black women have been perceived as token women in textbooks and token blacks in the feminist circles. Giddings has made her name and reputation carrying out a simple project, recovering the lost voices of silent generations of American black women. She has put her strongest efforts into restoring and understanding the perspective of others and she credits her interest in language to her mother who taught her the importance of having a voice. She talks about numerous important African American women who have contributed to the future of African American women in the past, present and the future. Giddings’ number one priority is expressing herself with words and she believes when black women write about each other it is personal undertaking” (Smith 1992, 403).

African American women use different tools to cope with racism and Utsey and Ponterotto conducted studies on how some African American women cope with racism.

Utsey and Ponterotto (2000) did a study that examined the coping strategies of 137

African American women in managing the stressful effects of racism. "These women used different methods to cope with racism, but the results indicated that when dealing with racism (which also causes stress) on a personal level, women preferred avoidance as a coping strategy" (74). The study's findings indicated that "in individual racist conditions, avoidance coping strategies were preferred by African American women more than problem-solving coping or seeking social support strategies" (76). This study shows how important it is for African American women to learn to use coping skills when they are faced with racism and dealing with everyday oppressions (79).

To cope with racism and sexism and other oppressions, African American women need to seek a higher education, become empowered and learn to express themselves and to help other African American women.

Empowerment and Education

Education enables African American women to learn to become empowered and find different methods to use their voices. When African American women become educated, they have the opportunity to learn of the struggles African American women have suffered for years and they are able to learn to deal with these issues. Collins' book Black Feminist Thought states "knowledge, consciousness and the policies of empowerment. Collins believes that in order for African American women to become empowered they must seek knowledge. "African American women must untangle the relationships between knowledge and empowerment" (228).

Collins offers her views about voice in her book. Collins said, "the first stage of "coming to voice" is breaking silence usually when a person speaking out against some kind of institutional knowledge with a view to advancing the cause of a collective group.

Breaking the silence can be a useful tool for resistance, in conditions of hegemony, even the righteous anger of the oppressed can be incorporated into a toothless identity politics in which difference becomes a hot commodity” (57).

Collins’ book is about the ability for African American women to succeed in a white society. She expresses the difficulties of black women as employees, mothers, wives and women of the sisterhood. Collins is renowned for her theory that black feminist thought can only operate effectively within a social justice project that is dynamic and inclusive of all relationships. She furthermore expresses the psychological effects of being at the bottom of the social and economical stratification. Her work is so rich in understanding of cross generational, gender and social construction for black women.

Collins discusses how important social justice is for African American women, “Empowerment also requires transforming unjust social institutions that African Americans encounter from one generation to the next” (274). Collins also points out how important it is for African American women to realize that self-empowerment is within a person’s ability to succeed, “Change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual women’s consciousness, personally empowering” (118). Self empowerment is an excellent skill for African American women to have, but seeking a higher education can contribute to becoming empowered.

Maxine Mimms, founder of the Tacoma campus of Evergreen State College in Washington, responded to an interview on why a higher education is critical to the self-esteem of African American women, obstacles an adult women returning to school may have to overcome and the advantages of an adult women going back to college. Mimms said, “Adult women who go back to school for a college degree actually stop aging, be

they 25 or 65 and they experience a enormous confidence that comes from the applause or affirmation African American women experience when they earn a bachelor's degree and this affirmation gives women new life" (Edwards 1997, 36).

Ms. Mimms explained why a higher education is critical to self-confidence of African American women. Mimms said, "An education builds up African American women's self-esteem and puts them in control of their lives. The professor is a facilitator for your learning—not a god, but just another human being who has some credentials and is in the classroom to share some information with you. Psychologically all people require applause and for black women it takes a long time to demand applause for ourselves because we spend so much time giving it to others. The applause comes from school because it affirms you. A higher education puts a woman in control of herself and that last a lifetime. It leads to the kind of confidence that comes from believing I know what I know and it does not matter if others disagree" (Edwards 1997, 37).

Ms. Mimms believes, "Education, especially higher education, was considered essential to the progress of African Americans as individuals and as a group". Education and empowerment are excellent tools to help African American women become empowering and to learn to use their voices but when they try to use their voices and they face the many oppressions, they also need "cultural space" a support system for other African American women to talk.

A Place to Talk

Davis (1999) notes that, "cultural space is both a particular location that has culturally constructed meanings and a metaphorical place from which we communicate" (367).

During slavery, African American women used the term "kitchen legacy of slavery". This

term was used for having a “place to talk”, which was the term for enslaved black women’s experiences. The concept of the “kitchen of enslaved black women's experiences” was focused on the relationship between communication and culture. African American women scholars use the kitchen legacy of slavery to create safe spaces from which to resist and talk. The notion of safe spaces is a womanist theoretical perspective which views the world as a dynamic place where the goal is not to just survive or fit in or to cope, but to feel ownership and accountability” (376).

Willis and Lewis (1999) wrote about their experiences in an academy. In their article, “they share reflections and a growing sense of collective consciousness that evolved while they worked together to understand the process and product of their common experiences inside and outside school” (245). They talk about how important it is to create a time and space for sharing their daily experiences with oppressive acts.

These women talk about the different types of oppression they endured while attending the academy. “Our survival as African American women in a large, predominantly White research university has depended on us creating a time and space for sharing our daily experiences. In understanding the role of the process of our lives as African American women, we have drawn on the history of African American women and Black feminist thought. The sharing of our experiences helped us to appreciate as never before the everydayness of our lives, which raised our consciousness to also appreciate the uniqueness of our experiences. Understanding the process has moved us beyond centering our world on Whiteness to re-centering our lives on our individual and collective responsibility to social justice” (248). These women believe that the sharing of their stories serves, “to affirm our existence, to save our sanity or our very lives...the telling

empowers us all” (259). These women stress how important it is for African American women to have a place to share their disappointments and happiness with other African Americans. Because these women were able to speak freely within their culture, this empowered them to speak more freely in general society.

This article expressed an excellent coping strategy that African American women use. The article shared how important it was for these two women to share with one another their everyday oppressions. Having “their space” is important for African American women, but spirituality is another important factor that contributes to African American women’s success and dates back hundreds of years.

Spirituality and African American women

Though religion and the church have always played an important role in the lives of African Americans, the role that black women have played in the church is not as well known. Daughters of Thunder (Thomas 1997, 212) “is a collection of 38 sermons by 14 black women preachers from the 1850’s to the 1970’s. It offers the voices of black women on matters both theological and political. In addition to the sermons, the book gives readers a historical summary of the work of black women preachers because they were the first real black preachers, gathering their congregation in the woods to pray for future freedoms” (122).

“From the early days of slavery, the black church had constituted the backbone of the black community. African Americans were denied access to public space such as parks, libraries, restaurants, meeting halls and other public accommodations and the black church came to signify public space and was one space truly accessible to the black community. During slavery, racial and gender discrimination and the equal rights

movements, the church served as the most effective vehicle by which women pushed down by racism and poverty regrouped and rallied. The church is where African Americans met and congregated for empowerment and a chance to use their voices. Churches would also mark important periods in history” (Higginbotham 1993, 32).

“Church basements served as founding sites for famous African American colleges today, such as Spelman (the new England Women’s college). The most lasting accomplishment and the effort to which they attached their greatest pride was the establishment of Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary in 1881, renamed Spelman Seminary in 1884. From its humble beginnings more than a century ago, Spelman has represented the epitome of black Women’s collegiate education. On April 11, 1881, the school opened in the basement of Friendship Baptist church, it had a student body of eleven women. After summer vacation, the basement schools reopened and 175 were enrolled” (Higginbotham 1993, 36).

African American women even drew upon the bible, the most respected source within their community, to fight for women’s rights in the church and society at large. Because of the fund raising efforts of women, African American churches built schools, provided clothes and food to poor people, established old folks homes and orphanages and made available a host of needed social welfare services.

Higginbotham’s book, Righteous Discontent, is about “how important African American churches are in empowering African American women to use their voices” (44). Black leaders spoke about the importance of higher education to race survival and empowerment and the goal of higher education was, “not to produce a buffer group as much as to produce the representative and authoritative voice of the race” (56). “It

becomes our duty to speak out upon all questions that affect our people socially, economically as well as religiously. Race consciousness did not subsume or negate their empowerment as women, but encouraged it. Higginbotham said, "It was in the church more than in any other institution where black women of all ages and classes found a site for, "signifying practice" for coming into their own voice" (185).

This book points out how important it is for African American women to find ways to empower themselves because of the different oppressions they have endured for many generations.

Higginbotham also explains how important it is for African American women to use their voices. "To learn to speak in a "unique" and authentic voice, women must "jump outside" the frames and systems authorities provide and create their own frame" (134).

Higginbotham expresses a concern that, "in order to reach a authentic self, black women must unite in their efforts to define their own reality and eliminate the imposed histories of the systems" (136).

Bollinger (2000) offers another view of spirituality. Bollinger talks about, "how African American women have used their spiritual experiences for self-empowerment. She stresses how Nineteenth Century black women faced multiple restrictions on their authority to speak publicly, but "like many women of faith before them, found in their spiritual experiences wellsprings of power greater than the silencing forces arrayed against them" (357).

Spirituality has been an important factor in my family. My mother taught me at a young age how important spirituality is and that if we have a problem we cannot solve, to pray and the spirit will guide us. From personal experience, "when I feel depressed about

life, I pray and have faith and usually it goes away or another solution for my problem is revealed”.

From the slavery era until today, hundreds of African American women have fought for the inequities and injustices towards African American women and there are women and people who still dedicate their lives to these causes.

Womanist theorists have dedicated their lives so that African American women and people of color can rise and become strong enough to empower and express themselves to overcome the different oppressions and use their voices.

Womanist Theory: We Shall Rise

The main theory that informed my study is Womanist Theory. I will discuss an African American woman who has dedicated her life to the womanist movement.

There are many African American women who have fought for feminist rights. Toni Bambara, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison are just a few women who broke the “silence” in the 1970’s and helped African American women in the 1980’s and 90’s develop a voice. I will discuss Alice Walker, her definition of “womanist” and her work towards the womanist theory. I chose Alice Walker because she gives an in-depth definition of womanish, womanist and feminist and she has dedicated her life for and against oppressive acts towards women. Walkers’ novels are also centered around African American women and oppression.

Alice Walker

Womanist and womanish was introduced and defined by Alice Walker (1983) in her book, In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.

Womanist 1. From Womanish (opp. Of: girlish, “i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.)

“A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater than is considered “good” for one. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown. “Responsible. In Charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually, appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counter-balance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non sexually, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black? Ans: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden with every color flower represented. “Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m talking you and a bunch of our slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to Lavender. It is a black woman’s self-definition and determination” (15).

“Alice Walker was born in 1944, and at the age of 9, Alice was blinded in her right eye by her brother's BB gun pellet which left scar tissue. When she was 14 years old her brother Bill paid for eye surgery in Boston, but her vision never returned. In 1961, Walker won a scholarship for disabled to Spelman College. Before leaving, her mother gave her three special gifts: a sewing machine for self-sufficiency, a suitcase for independence and a typewriter for creativity. She attended Spelman College in Atlanta, Ga., for two years and was thoroughly involved in the civil rights movement” (Gates & Appiah 1993, 1).

“Two years later, she won a scholarship to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y. where she learned from the writers Muriel Ruykeyser and Jane Cooper. After traveling to Finland (while attending Spelman) and to Africa (while at Sarah Lawrence), Walker gained a love of travel. But soon after returning to school she learned she was pregnant. At a time when abortion was illegal and dangerous, she was fortunate to have a safe one. During her recovery from the depression and anxiety she had suffered, Alice

wrote a short story aptly titled "To Hell With Dying." It was published and she received a hand-written note of encouragement from Langston Hughes" (Gates & Appiah 1993, 3).

"After graduating in 1965, she moved to Mississippi and became involved with the Civil-rights movement. In 1967, she married a White Activist Civil Rights lawyer and it was not until she began teaching that her writing career began to take off" (Gates & Appiah, 1993, 3).

Alice Walker has been widely recognized for her womanist views and she thought it was important to involve certain women in the feminist movement. To show distinction between the "high" feminism that she wanted to develop, she introduced her own term to denominate a "black feminist or feminist of color who possesses strength and persistence for personal development" (Walker 1976, 11). Walker has written numerous books, but three of the books centered around the womanist movement are The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Meridian and The Color Purple.

All Walker's writings reveal "womanish" features. Her first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), which is "ostensibly about a man and his son, it is about women and how they are treated that colors everything" (303). The book is set in the 1920's and it is about Grange Copeland, a poor sharecropper. He is ravaged by fear, humiliation and self-hatred because he is unable to provide for his wife and their young son. The theme is "of destructive relationships between broken men and loyal women" (303). Through many painful experiences, in the end of the novel, Grange devotes his life to his granddaughter, Ruth, and "nurtures Ruth's womanist attitude towards life" (307).

Walker's second novel is about a woman who realized that, "she had an obligation to

social justice.” Meridian is about a black woman who “gives birth to self.” Meridian Hill is a student who gets pregnant, drops out of school, marries her lover and is seemingly destined to an ordinary pattern of life of mother and wife. She finds sex an uninteresting experience, but important because it protects her from her fear of men. Walker also challenges the assumption that motherhood is woman’s “sacred calling”, that all women want to be mothers, and that all women function well in this role. Meridian finds motherhood unfulfilling: “This is what slavery is like,” she says. After some time she leaves for Atlanta to attend college, and falls in love with a young black revolutionary who eventually betrays her. She feels used and discarded, leaves town and settles somewhere else to recover from her sorrows. Finally, she forgives her husband, gains a new sense of herself and decides that her “obligation to the struggle for justice is to live and to keep alive the old songs of her people” (193).

Walker’s most famous book, The Color Purple, had African American critics accusing her of attacking black men and is considered a womanist text and it supports the assumptions, “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (12). Walker’s novel has appealing qualities which generally sell strongly drawn characters, a sense that these characters embody the experience of many people. Walker said, “It’s memorable contrasts between the oppressors and the oppressed, a downtrodden central character who overcomes, abuse and deprivation to bloom into a strong person and above all, an optimistic, some say a fairy-tale, ending” (177).

Walker was criticized by African American critics because they believed she did not write her book as a “healing and redemptive book” as she said. They accused her of, attacking black men and that she wanted to gain popularity among white audience. Her

choice of the director for the screen version (Stephen Spielberg) also suggested that her main concern was not to tell the truth about black families and communities but rather to commercialize her literary work. *The Color Purple* is about being a woman and black, living in the frame of male chauvinism, racist and sexist and being subject to all possible forms of oppression". As Walker in *The Color Purple* quotes Hurston's statement in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "a black woman is the mule of the world because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else – refused to carry". The novel *The Color Purple* is about, "reclaiming one's history, inheritance, language and voice" (183).

Walker finds that the southern black heritage imposes a powerful obligation on its representatives, "No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage that bequeathed to the black writer in the South, a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and in abiding love of justice. We inherit a great responsibility as well, for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate, but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love" (100). Walker's art allows her readers "To encounter That Which is Beyond Understanding But Not Beyond Loving and to say, I see and hear you clearly, Great Mystery, now that I expect to see and hear you everywhere I am, which is the right place" (12).

"Alice Walker is a well-known African American writer who has written over 30 books for and about African American women. Walker is a critically regarded writer of the last two decades and her works reflect black vernacular and the oppression of poverty is thread into her writings. She did not let her disability stop her from trying to find tools to empower other African American women to speak up and use their voices" (Walker 1992). The womanist theory illustrates how it is important for African American women

to obtain the tools to empower themselves and learns to use their voices.

Conclusion

African American women need to confront the different oppressions that they have endured for generations. In order to accomplish this goal, African American women must learn to seek the knowledge to become empowered and learn what a difference using ones voice can make.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research was to learn methods to teach African American students and women how to use their voices to empower themselves. Women were asked to share how they developed self-confidence and how they used their voices to overcome different types of oppression. The main question to be answered through my thesis is: How might African American, through their cultural heritage, learn to build their self-confidence, become empowered and use their voices to overcome different kinds of oppressions?

The research design I used is a case study. I chose a case study methodology because I wanted to capture the breath of voices from a small number of African American women. I decided to interview five African American women, this small number works well because I could hear from them in depth.

Sharing

The participants were five African American women: one African American student, one African American professor, one community leader, one counselor and one school teacher. I chose women in education because my topic objective is to learn strategies for educating African American women, youth and children with exceptionalities. I chose a variety of different careers, generations and perspectives hoping to obtain their view about self-empowerment, the many oppressive acts they have had to endure and their use of voice to overcome their shyness and or fear. These five women are all considered successful because they have all achieved or attempted to achieve degrees in higher education and are acknowledged by their community and other African American women as leaders. They also teach in various disciplines around education and they have

developed their voices to help students and other people of color to build self-confidence and become empowered. They transcend the normal teaching standards and strive to help women of color, particularly African American ancestry women.

Gloriata is a 45 year old African American counselor, who counsels people who are addicted to drugs and or alcohol. She teaches her children how important it is to seek a higher education.

Zenola is a 48 year old an African American student and she is an undergraduate at a university in California. She will receive her bachelor's degree in May 2003. She has expressed her concern about not seeing enough "African American students" at the university she attends and that there are not enough support systems available for African American students.

Leonora is a 55 year old educator who earned her PhD and teaches classes at a university. She is interested in helping African American women develop their full potential, using their cultural heritage as tools for self empowerment and self actualization.

Eunice is a 72 year old African American community volunteer and retired nurse's aide. She volunteers at a local hospital and enjoys her work because she helps people from different age groups and different ethnic backgrounds.

Sarah is a 78 year old African American teacher who recently retired after teaching for 52 years. She taught at a junior high school, grades 6-8. She is concerned about the future of African American students because they do not express a desire to seek a higher education.

Amazing Histories

I interviewed Zenola at my home and the interview took two and a half hours. Zenola has had experiences (during childhood and adulthood) that have empowered her to become strong and to tell other African American women to not to “give up on their dreams.”

I interviewed Gloriata at her counseling office and the interview took an hour. During the interview, Gloriata expressed how when she was growing she was taught “to be seen and not heard.” She believes that this experience has hindered her relationships because when she has a disagreement with her husband, she reverts back to when she was a child and shuts down. She has been helping African American women learn to become empowered and not let past oppressions hold them back.

I interviewed Leonora in her office, the interview took an hour and she shared why she thought it was important for African American women to learn about their heritage.

I interviewed Eunice, at my place of employment because she is the mother of one of the disabled client I am a caregiver for. The interview took an hour and she attributes the use of voice to her age. Eunice said, “Now that I am older (72) I have learned to become aggressive and use my voice.”

I interviewed Sarah at her home, it took an hour and what an amazing woman she is. Sarah is 78 years old, very alert and shared a lot of her history with me. She shared her background history and how she overcame her oppressions. Sarah offered advice for other African American women to succeed in life.

The participants were asked a set of questions that related to the topic of culture, oppression, empowerment and the use of their voices. For example: 1. How do you define

culture? 2. What barriers have you encountered (childhood and adulthood), while using your voice (see appendix for a full list of the questions). The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and given back to the participants for clarification.

Data Analysis

The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. The researcher took the responses for each question and looked for patterns in the participants responses and collapsed the questions and responses into categories.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

My Voice Too Shall Be Heard

After deciding to investigate methods for helping African American women learn to empower themselves and use their voices in public to speak out in general society, I interviewed five African American women (Zenola, Gloria, Leonora, Eunice and Sarah) between the ages of 44-78. I asked these five African American women six questions centered around self-empowerment with concern and interest in how they learned to express themselves openly and discriminately.

Culture

Research Question 1: I asked the participants to explain how they define culture and to discuss how culture influenced who they are and how they expressed themselves.

From interviewing these African American women, I have summarized culture as, “our beliefs, values, morals, the way we view the world which influences who we are and how we speak.”

Zenola, Eunice, Gloriata and Sarah defined culture as being part of their upbringing, their identity, values, families, traditions and the way they were raised. The examples acknowledged by Zenola were, “My culture is the language I use, the food I was raised on (gumbo, fried chicken, barbecue ribs, greens, sweet potato pies). It’s like if you do not know your culture, you do not know your identity and culture is the way people identify with each other.” Gloriata said, “Culture is family oriented, the environment and the beliefs in which I was raised. All my experiences are a part of me in society.” Leonora defined culture as, “one of those all encompassing words, it is a system for how a group

of people survive, what family structure they adhere to, and their family's intra and inter relationships."

When asked how culture influences who you are and how you speak, two of the participants had similar answers and the rest of the participants had different answers.

Zenola and Sarah were raised in the south. Zenola and Sarah both believed that because of their southern accents (both of them born in Louisiana), their culture influenced how they spoke, and how their voices were received. Zenola said, "When I came from Louisiana I did not know how to pronounce some words right. I came from the country and my punctuation was bad and it still is today. Because of this problem I was put into a speech class with other people of color (Mexican students). It was a bad experience because when we did not pronounce words correctly, the teacher would tap us on the hand with a ruler. To me this teacher was taking my culture away from me." Sarah said, "I was born a southerner and so my southern accent comes out. I have been living in California for over 50 years, however, I cannot get rid of my accent. This accent indicates what part of country I am from and sometimes causes me problems when I try to speak in public."

Sarah and Zenola learned to embrace their culture through their work in family practice and education.

Eunice offers another view of how her culture influences how she speaks. Eunice believes that because of her age (72) her culture and her experiences have made her more aggressive. "I was never one to be aggressive, I did not give input in classroom discussion, but now that I am in my seventies, I am a little more aggressive. Because of my different experiences in life (different oppressions because of my skin color) I have

learned to speak up and I think my cultural background has made me that way.”

Gloriata was raised in a very religious family and believes that her religion plays a big part in her culture (because it has taught her to be very positive) and how she speaks.

Gloria said, “My culture is my belief in God, which stems from my family and the way I was raised to believe in God, which has taught me to speak carefully, so as not to harm anyone.”

Leonora viewed culture as the tool that influenced her voice. “I embody what my ancestors have passed through me from as far back as the first slave to come from Africa. I am the embodiment of all my ancestors, including my parents and other parents, as well as all of those young people yet to be born from my lineage. I believe that culture influences how I think about other people, how I feel about the world, what my positionality is in the world as a African woman, what I owe to my ancestors and what I owe to the future generations of Africans on this earth. I include a deference for generational reciprocity, an acknowledgement of my spirituality and a desire to make a difference for the next generation through activism.”

All of the participants believe that their culture stems from their upbringing. They believe that culture is a combination of different factors that were instilled in them when they were children and determines the way they view society. These African American women all value their culture and by valuing their culture it has had an impact on the way they speak.

Culture has played an important role in these African American women’s lives, but while expressing themselves about what culture means, they also discussed the barriers they encountered.

Barriers

Research Question 2: I asked the participants to discuss the barriers they encountered (through childhood or adulthood) while trying to express themselves in their way and or empowerment skills.

After interviewing these participants I better understand that barriers cross discrimination, oppression and degradation, include a lack of access, and an induction of inferiority and hopelessness. But for African people, oppressive acts encourage a resilience that includes working hard, striving for excellence and being resilient because the forefathers and mothers were resilient.

Sarah and Eunice, the most mature members of the group gave similar responses. Gloriata and Zenola gave similar answers and Lenora gave a different answer.

Sarah and Eunice grew up in the 1930's and 40's and experienced discrimination, racism and sexism. Sarah said, "People never believed that the black woman should have the right to speak up for anything. They believed that the black women's voice was meaningless. This was an institutionalized way of discriminating against black women. If black women were treated as though their voices were meaningless they would remain in their places at the bottom of the socio-economic system. At first I was timid and had trouble speaking out in public until I learned that I was a person and I should have the same privileges as everyone else. This was a major barrier that I had to overcome when I was growing up." Eunice said, "When I was growing up (during the 30's and 40's), the color of my skin was a major barrier." Jim Crows laws continued throughout the 50's... Some Africans were still living like slaves. In the south Jim Crow laws controlled the movement, employment, education and living conditions of black people. Segregation

was the law and black people were severely punished if they challenged any part or portion of the law. Sarah and Eunice lived during the Jim Crow era. They experienced first hand the overtness of racism and sexism.

Gloriata and Zenola grew up in the 60's and 70's and offered similar responses. Gloriata said, "I feel that as a child in the generation I was raised in, we were not allowed to speak out about our feelings, especially around elders, especially if we were black, we were expected to accept what was happening to us in this country." For example: This continued throughout adulthood, when you wanted to speak out and say something you would automatically revert back to childhood and the same old barriers arose prohibiting a lot of black women from speaking their mind. Zenola gave her response of growing up and the barriers she faced. Zenola said, "While growing up, I was teased by a lot of the kids because of the way I dressed (coming to California from the country and dressing like a raggedy Ann doll) and the way I spoke. This was a barrier for me because it made me feel inferior to the other children and to other races."

Leonora remembers going to a segregated school and feeling, "valuable and special" because she had African American teachers. But when she went to a school where she was the only African American student, her educational experiences changed. "I was the only African American child in the class and I was perceived by my white teachers to be innately inferior and my southern drawl affected my ability to speak properly. These attitudes and statements to a young girl were very disempowering."

Not all of the women experienced discrimination specific to their skin color. Some of this dialogue has to do with the color line established by the Jim Crow law case of Plessy vs. Ferguson. Eunice's and Sarah's (72 and 78) experiences are a reminder that the

injustices and inequities that were experienced years ago are still experienced by black women today in many cities across the nation.

Color of Skin

Research question 3: I asked the participants if the color of their skin helped or hindered them because they were African American.

After interviewing these African American women, I learned that hindered would mean in this context, “having limited access to success because of one’s skin color was significantly darker than that of the dominant society.”

Several of the participants were hindered by their skin color. Because of their maturity and the generation they grew up in, Eunice (72) and Sarah (78) gave similar answers. The other three participants gave different answers.

In the 1930’s and 40’s, the south was very racist and Sarah and Eunice were both were hindered because of the color of their skin. Following are their responses. Sarah said, “It hindered me because I could not go into certain places. When I was growing up, I walked to school which was about three miles, with the buses passing me, going the same way, but not stopping to pick up the black kids. There were also certain places I could not go into (a Crest store, which was like a five and ten cents store) and certain places I could not eat in. In our hometown, you had to go around to the back or sit in the downstairs lobby and go upstairs to go to the theatre, while the other races went in the front. So yeah, color did play a big part in my upbringing.” Eunice said, “When I was growing up, I had to go in back doors, use the faucets labeled “blacks only” and was treated badly because of the color of my skin.”

Gloriata expresses her feelings about being darker skinned. Gloriata feels that if you

were darker skinned, 'you were not as beautiful' but it changed in the 70's when the slogan, "I am Black and Proud" made a stand for blackness."

Because she was light complexioned, Zenola remembers how the dark skinned African American's treated her in school. Zenola said, "In school, I feel like it was racism against racism. Other students did not like me or my sisters because we were light skinned and society pitted us against each other. It was like black on black racism."

Lenora said that she comes from, "A people of every hue of the rainbow" and she was thankful for the color of her skin and the diversity of skin tone in the African culture. Lenora said, "I do not want to lend credit to the color line perspectives, a Jim Crow law used to historically divide the power of African descent people from each other as well as the dominant culture. You only need to look at TV or read a newspaper to recognize that the dominant culture use darker skinned people to induce fear, the darker one's skin the more they are feared and suspected. However, since the Civil Rights movement African decent people who challenge the status quo, regardless of the color of their skin are suspect and overtly discriminated against in this country. Only those black people who strive to assimilate, and support the views of the dominant culture are seemingly welcomed to the American dream."

Gloriata and Leonora were less religious in their dialogue, they had spirituality in rebellion and a desire to address racism, discrimination and sexism from a stance of power. These women came from the struggles of the sixties. They were indoctrinated by people such as MLK (Martin Luther King), Malcolm X, the black panthers and the feminist movement. They did not live as adults under Jim Crow laws, they are the recipients of battles won for their generation. Leonora and Gloriata were taught

throughout the struggle of the sixties how to embrace with pride their heritage and skin color. Slogans such as: "I am black and I am proud", "Black is beautiful", "Africa the motherland", helped to refute the dehumanizing descriptions of the past.

Three of the participants believed that they were hindered because of their skin color, but two of them were not. Because some of these participants were hindered by their skin color, they learned how to turn this negative into a confidence that awarded them to use their voices.

Confidence

Research question 4: The participants were asked if they had confidence in their voices.

After interviewing these African American women, my summarization of confidence is, "something that it is within us all and we have to work on, practice, take classes to increase it and eventually it will be part of us as it is with all of these women."

Zenola, Eunice and Sarah had different answers and Gloriata and Leonora had similar answer, but all the participants had confidence in their voices. Zenola said, "I did not get confidence until I became educated. I could not look people in the eye until a white professor at MPC (Monterey Peninsula College) told me that when you don't look a person direct in the eye, they think you are lying and that helped me gain confidence." Eunice gained confidence through experience and when she became older, her confidence became stronger. Eunice said, "I have a developmentally disabled son and a lot of my confidence is because of him. Disabled people are treated badly, I have to advocate for him which helped me gain confidence. As I challenged and fought for my son's rights I learned to speak from strength and confidence."

Sarah attributes her confidence to being a strong woman, which she learned from her mother who had a strong distinctive voice. When she was mad, Sarah knew it from the tone of her voice. "I believe in a strong women and I have always been one. I come from a good southern background, a good basic mother who was very strong and I could tell from her voice whether she was angry with me or not."

I believe in order to become a strong woman, we need to make mistakes and learn from them. For example: If I keep touching a hot burner, I know that I am going to get burned, so I would learn through this mistake not to keep touching it and I think this example can be used in life situations.

Gloriata and Leonora felt that practice makes perfect. They felt by practicing they have improved their confidence and their ability to use their voices appropriately. Gloriata said, "Practicing speaking builds confidence and being able to speak is very important because when you speak, you are trying to get points across. I think I have gained confidence in my voice over the years." Leonora said "It has taken me years to build up my confidence. I had to learn to forgive myself for my mistakes. I realized that everyone makes mistakes. I have gained a lot of confidence through my education and the sharing of ideas, trials and tribulations through a sisterhood of African descent women. I had to learn to remove myself and not be so self-conscious. I think as African American women we are afraid that we are going to look foolish in the eyes of the public. I learned to practice speaking through a series of drama classes and by reading scripts for various characters. I developed this spiritual persona so that when I am feeling self-conscious about my voice it helps me to overcome my fears and anxieties."

Some of these women learned confidence through their families and others learned

through drama classes and from other African American women. African American women have sought different means to gain confidence and use their voices.

Confidence is having that “special something inside” that gives African American women the strength to feel good about themselves and speak in general society without feeling inferior.

SELF-CONFIDENCE, EMPOWERMENT AND USING ONE’S VOICE

Research question # 5: The participants were asked to define a. *self-confidence*, b. *empowerment* and c. *using one’s voice*.

a. Self-confidence

After interviewing these women, my definition of self-confidence is the “ability to feel comfortable enough to speak in any situation.”

Three of the participants had similar answers and two participants had different answers.

Eunice, Gloriata and Sarah believe that self-confidence is within us all. Eunice said, “Self-confidence is believing that you can do anything you put your mind to.” Having control of any situation has helped Gloriata build confidence. Gloriata feels that “by feeling that you are in control of a situation helps builds self-confidence.” For example: Gloriata works in the community. She tries to improve the lives of many of today’s youth and when she speaks in public, Gloriata said, “I am very much in control, and if not, I have knowledge of the situation.” Sarah said, “Self-confidence is a belief in oneself and to me, I definitely believe in myself and that is what makes me a strong person.” Sarah has had a strong upbringing, and her upbringing contributes to her believing in herself because her mother always stressed, “It is very important to believe in yourself, be

positive and be a strong woman.”

Zenola feels self-confidence is something we have to work on and learn how to improve. Zenola said, “A teacher at MPC (Monterey Peninsula College) named ... told me that the only way I could have self-confidence in my voice is to take acting classes so I think self-confidence is being able to seek the skills to improve yourself to become self-confident.”

Lenora said, “Self-confidence, to me, is the ability to express ideas, thoughts and beliefs, to know your abilities, yourself and to understand your influence on other people and to know and to feel good about who you are. Basically, feeling you stand for something and that you are willing and able to express it.”

These women all gained self-confidence through family, education and speaking in public. While gaining self-confidence, they became empowered individuals for their communities.

b. Empowerment

After interviewing these women, my summarization of empowerment is, “the ability to find tools (through spirituality, education, other women) to improve oneself and be comfortable enough to empower others.”

All of these participants gave different definitions of empowerment. Zenola found empowerment by reading other African American women’s work. Zenola said, “I learned from Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Audre Lourde on how black women were not educated and these women gave me confidence in myself and empowered me to seek a higher education.” Eunice’s believes that empowerment is being able to overcome the inequities that African Americans face. Eunice said, “Empowerment is being able to

overcome obstacles that black women deal with on a daily basis.”

Gloriata offers another definition of empowerment. Gloria said, “I have tried to be a vocal part of the community. I have tried to promote consistent empowerment for women so empowerment is the ability to empower others.”

Sarah said, “After you build up confidence (which will gradually come) empowerment will come next.”

Leonora feels empowerment should be viewed as a verb and really means “empowering”. “It’s empowering, I think empowerment comes from empowering other people. I want to give young women, the strength, and methods that will permit them to say whatever they want. As an educator, I want to give youth of color a safer environment in which they can express themselves freely and openly, without the fear of repercussions.”

Self-confidence and empowerment are powerful tools that these African American women have learned to conquer, which in turn have helped them to use their voices.

c. Using one's voice

After interviewing these African American women, my summarization of using one’s voice, “learning to gain self-confidence and becoming empowered, a person learns to develop their voice and use it any where, any time and feel comfortable and confident.”

Four of the participants believe that using ones voice is the ability to speak freely and comfortably and one of the participant feels “using one’s voice” means speaking on behalf of the heritage and for the betterment of future generations. For example: Zenola said, “Using one’s voice means feeling comfortable enough to express yourself in any situation”. Eunice said, “Using one’s voice means to be able to say whatever you want,

when and where you want.”

One of the participants believes that using one’s voice connects to empowering. Leonora said, “Using one’s voice, that’s probably an extension of empowering. As an advocate for children, I use my voice as a teaching tool to improve the education of and for underrepresented people and against discrimination and injustice. I believe that using one’s voice just for the sake of using it, is a travesty. The repercussions of just using one’s voice to fill space are that women will lose credibility with men and other women. I use my voice when I have something important to say, something that is additive and promotes healing and teaching.”

Self-confidence, empowerment and using one’s voice are all intertwined. If African American women learn to build their self-confidence and become empowered, their voices will also be developed. After learning all the above skills, African American women can learn how to use their voices to overcome oppression.

Using one’s voice to overcome oppression

Research question 5: The participants were asked to discuss how they use their voices to overcome oppression.

After interviewing the participants, my summarization of how African American women use their voices to overcome oppression is: “they find different strategies and tools to help them overcome oppression and they also learn to speak out and against oppressive acts towards African American women.”

Two of the participants gave similar answers about oppression and the rest of the participants had different responses. Leonora and Gloriata both spoke out in their communities, for organizations. Leonora said, “I lend my voice to organizations that are

about eliminating discrimination and injustice. I am pro-woman and I have been a womanist all of my life. As a black feminist in this country, I lend my voice to subjugated people, especially black women. I have an infinity for helping black women and I think it comes from knowing about women that preceded me, women that fought for black people and whose struggles paid for my existence.” Gloriata explains how she uses her voice to fight oppression. Gloriata said, “Oppression! I fight oppression by speaking in the community to women (particularly African American). I tell them to learn to believe in themselves and work towards goals to improve their lives.”

Zenola said, “I pray! I was taught at a young age that prayer is the answer to all the problems we might have in life, so when I feel really depressed or oppressed I pray.” Eunice really “speaks out” against oppression. Eunice said, “What ever the situation is, I let anyone or situation I encounter know that I am not comfortable with the way they are speaking or acting, I am uncomfortable with the way the conversation is leading, if they don’t leave the room, I really have to get upset and I can get physical. I tell them they do not want to see my get upset.”

Sarah said, “Okay, to overcome oppression that is directed at me I am a talker and I talk to myself and I try to say to myself, “okay everything is alright in a soothing way. I use my voice to let me know that I am alright and I will be alright.”

These African American women have learned to find different methods to use their voices to overcome oppressions. After overcoming oppression, the participants had good lessons to pass on to the next generation of African American women.

These African American women’s lessons to pass on to the next generation are very positive, rewarding and their response can and will help many African American youth

and women now and in the future.

Best Lessons to pass on to next generation

Research question 6: I asked the participants to discuss what is the best lesson to pass on to the next generation of young African American women.

Three of the participants gave similar answers and the other two participants had comments about the importance of one's history.

Zenola said, "Do not say you cannot do it. For example: When me and my sister were going to MPC (Monterey Peninsula College), one of the people that worked there said she was too late to turn in a paper for a scholarship and the competition was hard. My sister came to me and told me the secretary said she was too late, but I told her that she should never let anyone tell her she can not do it. I personally took her to the woman house (a couple of hours before the scholarship was due) and when she received the scholarship she cried. Once you empower yourself, you can empower your family and others." Eunice said, "Stand up for what you believe in and have the courage to speak up and speak out, to be kind in your speech and tactful." Sarah believes that if you believe in yourself everything else will fall into place.

Gloriata and Leonora both believe that African American women must know their history in order to become empowered. Gloriata said, "The best lesson is to gain confidence and be aware of your history. If you do not know your history, things reoccur and it will come back to you and I think this is part of the set plan." Lenora said, "I would like the next generation of Africa decent women to understand their legacy. History is important. Some people think you should leave history in the past, but a lot of what's happening today in this country is based on the legacies of the past. I would like African

decent women to know where they came from and to understand that their ancestors paid with their lives for the opportunities afforded them today.” Leonora also gave her opinion of what African American women must do. “Young African decent women must learn that the have to leave a legacy and pave the way for the next generation. Martin Luther King said, “You either stand for something or you will fall for anything.” Black women as the transmitters of culture must stand for something.”

All of these participants believe that empowerment is a tool that we have to work on by not giving up, standing for what you believe (regardless of the circumstances) and once they obtain these skills, they can empower others.

Conclusion

The participants shared their ideas and experiences with me for the purpose of educating other African decent women. The talked about their cultural heritage, their experiences with intersecting oppressions, the struggles of their era and their methods for dealing with discrimination and dehumanization. All of the participants wanted to impart knowledge to the next generations of African decent women.

African American women need to be aware of their history, aware of their ancestors and how they fought for freedom for African American women hundreds of years ago and still fight for that same freedom today.

From culture to barriers to overcoming oppression and passing on good lessons to the next generation of African American women, all the participants I interviewed gave excellent and empowering advice to African American youth and women. They shared their trials and tribulations of growing up in a world full of injustices and inequities. Through experiences with history, family, education and other African American women,

these women have learned what it means to be oppressed and what it takes to become successful, expressive and meaningful.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

The main purpose of this thesis was to find ways to empower African American women to use their voices in general society. The main ideas that came through in my literature review are that in order for African American women to become empowered, they need to obtain certain tools. These tools include: knowing one's history, education, self-confidence, self-determination, a support system and a spiritual base rich in respect for others, elders and the youth of the culture.

The main findings of my study were that African American women have historically been the leaders, cultural transmitters and the validators of the race. They have faced a multitude of discrimination and oppression from the ideology imposed by this patriarchal white society. Black women are relegated to the lowest realm of class, gender and race stratification models. Historically African American parents have encouraged their daughters to be silent and inconspicuous, to more or less blend into the background and not be heard. While their parenting ideas were meant to protect their daughters, it invariably stunted the voices of many African American women as they became adults.

Some of the other barriers that young African American girls have had to endure and overcome were: being teased about how they looked, talked and dressed. Some black girls were taught to feel inferior because of the amount of melanin in their skin. All African American people have been denied access to specific areas throughout the history of the USA based on the color of their skin. Therefore one of the findings in this study suggest that African American women must raise their daughters to be empowered

speakers for the race. They must express to young African American women the need for education, effective voices and the courage to address discrimination when observed.

African American teachers must recognize that cultural beliefs and histories may dictate the behavior of many African American youth. They must develop curriculum that allows African American youth to learn, within a safe environment, how to effectively use their voices.

The African American women that I interviewed are empowered individuals that have learned through education, self-determination and observation how to use their voices in the most effective manner.

The theme that seems most significant throughout my work is that many African American women are intrinsically familiar with their histories. They know about the trials and tribulations of African American women and they have learned how to approach oppression, discrimination and domination with specific communication skills. African American women of every generation are discovering the ostensible privilege of being able to make choices about their education and careers. While they face discrimination on a daily basis they have determined that the power of education is empowering, their most salient philosophies include spirituality, empowerment, education and womanist theory.

Implications and Recommendations

This action thesis will provide teachers of African American youth a better understanding of how to encourage the voices of black girls and other youth. My hopes are that this thesis will provide guidance in how to empower shy and insecure African American youth and or women to use their voices effectively as they express themselves in groups, communities and the general society. I believe that when we know that cultural

beliefs have affected a youth's behavior we as educators can accommodate the deficits with the appropriate curriculum to empower students of all colors. Secondly, African American women can use this thesis to gain a perspective about their own reservations and to develop the courage to express themselves in ways to help others overcome a lack of confidence and power.

From this study young African American women may learn that they would gain a substantial amount of confidence by learning about past African American women and their histories. They might furthermore gain courage in using their voice by understanding that African American women were the first women to speak out against slavery, oppression and discrimination with little regard for their lives. The teachings of the African heritage would permit young women to understand their role as activists, spiritual leaders and transmitters of the culture for future generations. African American women can become better teachers and parents by understanding the reasons behind many of the limitations placed on African American children by their families. They may develop strategies to improve the communication skills of African American youth as they navigate through domination, power and discrimination imposed by this white patriarchal society. By teaching them how to use their voices effectively instead of denying them access to self-expression African American youth could become successful leaders in this country as demonstrated by the leaders of the Civil Rights movement. With this knowledge teachers may creatively develop curriculum that permits African American youth an opportunity to learn and practice communication skills that will build their self-confidence.

Area for future study and Conclusion

There was very little data available on how to empower African American youth and or women to use their voices. My participants made several suggestions on how to attain self-confidence. They willingly shared their knowledge about the importance of developing skills that allow youth to express themselves. African American women need to learn about ways to empower other African American women. The ability to speak out, express one's self by writing, singing, dancing, talking, praying and seeing are all ways that one can improve their self-confidence. This thesis can be further developed through more research on teaching strategies and models that could help youth learn to express themselves openly without fear and with freedom of choice. Additional studies about the communication skills of African American women could uncover the historical and the contemporary voice of leadership and activism. Some of the creative skills used by African American women would be useful in developing curriculum to teach communications applications for black youth.

It is my desire that by learning about the history of African American women, and understanding the cultural ethos of African American parents and teachers can better encourage and facilitate the growth and self-confidence of young black students. Maybe most important, African American parents can equip their youth with ways to express themselves to connect spiritually, generationally, educationally and through observations so that their ability to make life choices are not impacted by internal or external forces.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE OF CONSENT FORM

The Power of Voice: African American Women and Empowerment

Debra Bolger: (831) 884-0376

You are being asked to read the following material and to participate in a research study. If you consent to this research study, signing this form will indicate that you have been informed and that you give your consent. Federal regulations require written informed consent prior to participation in this research study so that you can know the nature and risks of your participation and can decide to participate in a free and informed manner.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to learn methods to teach African American students and women how to use their voices to empower themselves.

SELECTION CRITERIAL

You are being invited to participate because you meet one of the following criteria:

_____ African American Female Community Leader and or Professional

_____ Between ages of 44-78.

_____ African American student at CSUMB.

PROCEDURES

If I agree to participate, you will be asked to consent to the following:

- Participate in an interview.
- The interview will take from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes.

You will be asked the following questions:

- How do you define culture?
- How does culture influence who you are and how you express yourself?
- What barriers have you encountered (childhood and adulthood) in trying to empower yourself to use your voices?
- Did the color of your skin, help or hinder you because you were African American.
- Do you have confidence in your voice?
- How do you define self-confidence, empowerment and using one's voice?
- How do you use your voice to overcome oppression?
- What would you say is the best lessons to pass on to the next generation about developing voice for young African American women?

The interviews will be audio taped. Interviews will be conducted in location specified by interviewee. You will be asked identifying questions such as: age, background, location and education.

POTENTIAL RISKS

The risks could include the negative memory of past oppressions. I will stress to the participants that they have the choice about what they wish to disclose. By the participants determining the information they want to share, this will mitigate the risks of any psychological risks.

BENEFITS

The benefits to the participants are the sharing of each other's experiences on how they have empowered themselves to overcome different types of oppressions.

The benefits to others is learning to use strategies and teaching skills to help other African American women to overcome oppression's They will learn strategies for teaching African American women how to become speakers, using their voices and a way to increase self-confidence through practicing knowledge.

The research will benefit the researcher because she will be able to learn methods to empower herself and use it as a teaching strategy when she teaches Special Education students.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission as required by law.

The information will also be released to the library (I will submit a CSUMB Masters Thesis Agreement form from the library to submit my thesis) where it will be kept for three years. The information will be used as an action thesis paper and will be viewed by staff and students in the Masters of Education program at a capstone festival.

Pseudonyms will be used in all written materials.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Chair of Human Subjects Committee, Henry Villoanueva at California State University Monterey Bay, 100 Campus Center, Bldg 1, Seaside, Ca. 93966; 831-582-5012.

AUTHORIZATION

I acknowledge that I am over 18. Before giving my consent by signing this form, the methods, inconveniences, risks, and benefits have been explained to me and my questions have been answered. A copy of this signed consent form will be given to me.

Type or PRINT Full Name	Date
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Subject's Signature	Print choice of Pseudonym
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INVESTIGATORS'S AFFIDAVIT

I have carefully explained to the subject the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who is signing the consent form understands clearly the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation and his/her signature is legally valid. A medical problem or language or educational barrier has not precluded this understanding.

Signature of Investigator	Date
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APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

The participants will be asked the following identifying questions;

1. What is your age?
2. What level of education have you completed?
3. Where were you raised? Where you raised in a two-parent family?
4. What was your parent's highest level of education?
5. Can you share some of your background (social status, etc.)?

The participants will be asked the following set of interview questions:

1. How do you define culture?
2. How does culture influence who you are and how you speak?
 - a. Is their confidence in your voice?
3. How do you define self-confidence, empowerment and using one's voice?
 - a. How do you use your voice to overcome oppression?
4. What barriers have you encountered (childhood and adulthood) while trying to use your voice?
 - a. Did the color of your skin (light-complexion versus dark-complexion) affect you?
 - b. When you encountered barriers, did you have a support system?
5. How do you use your voice to overcome oppression?
6. What would you say is the best lessons to pass on to the next generation about developing?