2010

Altgeld Gardens: Evolution of Culture and Education in an Isolated African American Community

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

ALTGELD GARDENS: THE EVOLUTION OF CULTURE AND EDUCATION
IN AN ISOLATED AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY
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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
DECEMBER 2010
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I am indebted to the people who participated in this study with their candid and in-depth remembrances of life in the Altgeld Gardens community and Carver Primary School. They generously shared their time and life experiences with a very appreciative stranger. Without them this study would not have been possible. Dr. Robert Roemer’s encouragement and guidance supported me throughout this journey and is greatly appreciated. I thank all the other knowledgeable people who were involved and responsive with their advice and support.
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ABSTRACT

Altgeld Gardens, a Chicago public housing project, was selected for this study because its unique attributes were designed as a model, self-contained complex located in a geographically and socially, isolated area of Chicago built to house African American war armament workers and their families beginning in the mid-1940’s. Oral testimonies from teachers and community members chronicle significant changes to the local culture and the primary school’s efforts to provide effective instructional services within the cultural context of this community. The most effective and frequently used modification of instruction was the incorporation of culturally relevant pedagogy. The goal was to effectively facilitate the linking of the child’s prior knowledge and life experiences with new learning. Successful connections of home and school cultures enable students to utilize a scaffolding process that enables better academic performance. In the event the connection of the two cultures is not made, the school fails to teach and the student fails to learn. The issue of geographical isolation was mainly addressed through selective field trips that enriched and broadened the students’ life experiences and world view, as well as, supplementing classroom learning. Teachers describe culturally relevant teaching techniques and materials in use that are effective and least disruptive to the structure of the original lessons. The concept of dual identities as both African Americans and members of American society is explored relative to students’ personal development and self-esteem and expansion of their world view and knowledge base that can enable
improved academic performance using the predominant textbooks and materials written from the mainstream white, middle-class perspective. Mainstream knowledge and life experiences translate into social currency which better prepare students for achieving their life goals.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Background

The history of low-income housing in Chicago is long and complex. The need for specialized housing was evident early on during the peak period of the First Great Migration of blacks from the south to northern states between 1910 and 1930’s. This migration was prompted by their expectations of better and more plentiful jobs and freedom from Jim Crow segregation laws. Within this period the black population in northern states increased by 40% (Hirsch, 1998, p. 17). In Chicago, the black population of 44,103 in 1910 grew to 233,903 by 1930 (p. 17). During the Second Great Migration, from 1940 to 1970, five million people migrated from the south to a wider range of states. In addition to northeastern and mid-western states, they also relocated to California seeking jobs in defense plants. Between 1940 and 1960, Chicago’s black population increased by 1,534,906 people (p. 17). In the context of the general wartime shortages, the coincidence of plentiful jobs and scarce housing simply produced added frustration within Chicago’s Black Belt. The eventual expansion of the Black Belt’s boundaries was in part facilitated by white flight from the center of Chicago to its fringes, as well as moves to the suburbs. In spite of vacancies created by whites relocating, the availability of housing for blacks did not keep pace with the demand (p. 20).
Bowly (1978) states that between 1895 and 1930’s architects and philanthropic trusts responded to the housing needs of low-income families. For example, he cites the efforts of Frank Lloyd Wright, founder of the Prairie School Movement of architecture, who designed Francisco Terraces on North Francisco Avenue in 1895. The design was inspired by Wright’s travels through English villages. These apartments were demolished in 1971. The most ambitious and largest building project was financed by Philanthropist Julian Rosenwald. The Michigan Boulevard Gardens Apartments (Rosenwald Gardens) at 4600 South Michigan Avenue was built in 1929. This three-hundred unit high-rise complex has the distinction of being designed to suit the needs and desires of low-income tenants as well as affluent African Americans. Rosenwald’s grandson and biographer, Peter Ascoli (2003), states that in addition to rental units, the complex housed 13,400 square feet of retail space, as well as two nursery schools, ballet studio, and a Boy Scout troop. Subsequent to the U.S. Supreme Court’s finding in 1948 that restrictive covenant laws were unenforceable, the more affluent tenants moved out, thereby reducing the economic base to a level that could not support the maintenance of this complex. The Business Wire website (2005) reports this building has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1981, followed by the closing of the property in 2000 because of a gas leak. In 2003 it was listed as one of American’s ten most endangered buildings by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The property was auctioned by Inland Real Estate Auctions on August 24, 2005 for conversion to city approved condominiums. Bowly’s judgment is that these utopian models were esthetically pleasing, but construction could not keep pace with the need for low income
housing and the developments were economic disasters. In addition, Bowly writes, “In many respects the public housing movement was a successor to other social experiments such as the settlement-house movement. During the 1930’s and 1940’s reformers saw it as a major solution to the urban problems of slums, crime, and even as a way to lift people out of poverty. The expectations that it would perform that function were probably unrealistic from the start” (pp. 17-18).

Contrary to these efforts, an earlier low-income housing complex designed for industrial purposes was successful for some years. Buder (1967) reports on a low-income model constructed on 4,000 acres ten miles outside of Chicago in 1880. According to Ely (1895), this development was constructed in 1880 by Industrialist George M. Pullman, whom Ely characterized as “a social reformer.” Ely further reports Pullman’s purposes were to provide an industrial center to manufacture Pullman Palace railroad cars and a low-income, self-contained housing complex for his factory workers (p. 455). Ely further states the community was comprised of 900 Victorian row houses with indoor plumbing, sewers, and gas (p. 461). Tenants were provided a market hall that sold fresh produce, meats, and baked goods. A church, school, the Florence Hotel, and an arcade were also built in the community. According to Ely, the first residents came in 1881 and the population grew to 8,203 residents by 1884 (p. 460). Buder reports that as part of Chicago’s expansion, the Pullman community was annexed in 1889 (p. 42). In 1893, a declining demand for Pullman cars created a reduction of laborers’ work hours and layoffs, but the rental rates remained the same. This and a workers strike began a loss of business from which Pullman never fully recovered. Following Pullman’s death in 1897,
the Illinois Supreme Court required the company to sell off the town. Within 10 years all non-manufacturing property – the buildings and row houses were sold to the individual occupants. By 1972 the Pullman Historic District had obtained National, State, and City landmark status to preserve the 900 original row houses and public buildings. The last Pullman factory cars were made in 1982 for Amtrak.

In the 1930’s, both the national and state governments were cognizant of the need for suitable, economically sustainable low income housing. In 1937, Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was created with the goals of providing low-income housing, slum clearance, and redevelopment of blighted areas (CHA, 1949, p. 9). These goals were revised in January, 1942 to exclusively address the housing needs of World War II veterans (CHA, p. 10). Ida B. Wells was the first project built at 35th Street and South Parkway (now Martin L. King Boulevard) in 1942 for this purpose. Several others were built, among them was Altgeld Gardens.

**Altgeld Gardens**

Altgeld Gardens public housing project was of special interest for this study because of its particular characteristics not present in the other projects of that era. In addition to being occupied exclusively by African Americans, this project was designed to be self-contained and located in an isolated area of Chicago. In response to rapid population growth and the advent of World War II, Altgeld Gardens public housing project was designed and constructed with the goals of providing low-income housing specifically for African American WWII veterans and armament factory workers in the Calumet River area at 130TH Street and Ellis Avenue (CHA, 1947; Bowly, 1978; Fuerst,
During the planning stage, CHA described the project as “…a garden city with every good feature of modern planning.” CHA describes Altgeld Gardens as a 1,500-unit development situated on 157 acres surrounded by Interstate highway 94, Beaubien Woods Forest Preserve, Illinois Central Railroad tracks, and a branch of the Little Calumet River.

Fuerst (2003) reports that this model, self-sufficient community, completed in 1945, was comprised of low-rise apartments, a shopping plaza, churches, community center, health care facilities, athletic fields, and a library. CHA (1947) states the Children’s Building was designed especially for Altgeld Gardens. It housed a health center, three-five year old nursery, auditorium, public library, large community kitchen, and several meeting rooms. CHA reports further that this building was financed in part by Federal Works Agency for this purpose “…because of the special need for serving a ‘city’ of people in an isolated area.” Dr. Louis Goggs opened a private medical practice in 1949 at 131st and Corliss Avenue (Alumni, 1992, p. 40). In 1954, Phillip Murray Homes were built adjacent to the southwest edge of Altgeld Gardens. The new 63 low-rise buildings containing 500 apartments were constructed as an annex in response to African American war factory workers still in need of low-income housing. Even in recent times, the CHA points to the distinctive, self-contained character of Altgeld Gardens. This project is one of 20 housing developments, dedicated to families, located across the city that was selected for renovations. CHA maintains and periodically updates Change, an informational website that reports the history, current status, and future plans for these sites. All 20 of them are part of CHA’s Plan for Transformation.
initiated in 1999. CHA (2005) reiterated its assessment of Altgeld Gardens as “…CHA’s most structurally comprehensive and self-contained development. As one of the first public housing developments ever built in the United States, it is considered a historic landmark property.”

The importance of the success of this model public housing project was evident in two ways: (1) the extensive tenant selection process and support of tenant initiatives and (2) by the wide spread attention the project garnered. First, the 1947 CHA report lists the general guidelines for tenant selection: (1) must be in low-income group within defined maximum income limit, (2) except for aged and infirm couples, each family must have at lease one child under age 17, (3) former dwelling must be substandard by definition, (4) lessee must be U.S. citizen and live in Chicago 12 months (residency rule waived for war housing projects, (5) preference given to families with lowest incomes among war industry workers who alone were eligible for this group of projects. Fuerst (2003) reports that in addition to the general screening, home visits were conducted to evaluate prospective tenants’ current housekeeping practices and general mode of living. Also, school age children’s academic performance and behavior were taken into consideration. Another example of the special attention given to Altgeld Gardens (CHA, 1947, p. 22) was that 22 men and women residents attended a two week recreation institute in preparation for their volunteer work as community organizers of the children’s athletic programs. In turn, the selected tenants would agree to meet CHA’s expectations, also listed in the 1947 CHA report. Tenants would form tenant cooperative groups to develop
and monitor community activities. The cooperative agreed to keep up the property interiors and exteriors, including mowing lawns and growing gardens.

Secondly, Altgeld Gardens had site visits by representatives of the Chicago City Council, CHA, newspapers, and celebrities. Alumni (1992) states these visits included children’s musical programs, sports events, picnics, and parades, in addition to property inspections. Actor, singer, activist Paul Robeson participated in the dedication of George Washington Carver School, their first elementary school, on September 5, 1944 (Fuerst, p. 160). In September, 1947, World Heavyweight Boxing Champion Joe Louis attended the dedication of the Children’s Building and Carver Park. Also, Olympic Gold Medalist Jesse Owens made several appearances to encourage the youth athletic programs organized and managed by parent volunteers.

The potential for success of this model, self-contained project was not left to chance. The confluence of CHA’s tenant selection process, provisions for appropriate services and ongoing monitoring and support of community activities resulted in a community that functioned as intended. With a new found sense of empowerment, residents assumed a pro-active role in determining the direction of their futures. The emergence of one dominant culture was formed by a homogeneous group with shared values, goals, and world views.

Development Problems

Life in Altgeld Gardens was an improvement, but inherent problems in the physical location of the project were present from the beginning. The most common problems were related to health and geographic isolation. Over the years, people noted
the high incidence of lung and breast cancer in the community. On days when the wind blew from the southeast, they had difficulty breathing because of noxious fumes. In 1979, the residents took action that gained them national attention. Hazel Johnson founded *People for Community Recovery*, a grassroots community-based environmental group. As a result of their efforts, the nearby hazardous waste incinerator was closed and they successfully lobbied for the creation of a health clinic in Altgeld Gardens. Johnson received awards at the White House from both Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton for her work (Fuerst, pp. 189-90).

The quality of the air also had a negative effect on students and school operations. In an interview (Catalyst, 2004), Linda Randolph, Principal of Carver Primary School, stated that the long-term effects of air pollution have caused frequent student absences due to asthma and other respiratory illnesses. Also, Randolph reported that polluted air scared off prospective teachers. If the wind was blowing the wrong way on scheduled interview dates, interviewees were not interested in teaching at Carver. In the same article, Marion Byrnes of the Southeast Environmental Task Force reported that these respiratory illnesses had an adverse effect on student learning. Students were lethargic and found it difficult to concentrate.

In addition to air and soil pollution problems, Altgeld Gardens experienced significant changes in the community’s population. Over the course of the first two decades of Altgeld Gardens’ existence (1945-1965), the emergence of one dominant culture, facilitated by the extensive tenant pre-screening process, was formed by a homogeneous group with more shared values, goals, and world views than differences.
In the absence of easier accessibility to friends and family members separated by distance and time, they formed new friendships. Testimonies given by residents from this period (1945-1960) frequently mentioned the practice of not locking their doors in the daytime as the litmus test for the level of safety, mutual trust and support they experienced (Alumni, 1992; Fuerst, 2003).

In the mid-1960’s, the residents of Altgeld Gardens witnessed the effects of system-wide CHA policy and management changes. Those who had met their goals of children graduating from high school or had the financial resources to relocate began to move out. Their interviews often cited CHA’s neglect in making needed repairs to the facility, changes in the quality of life and increased crime (Alumni, 1992, p. 42). In the beginning years, Elizabeth Wood served as CHA’s Executive Director 1937-1954, vigorously enforcing their goal of equitably providing safe low-income family housing in Chicago (Fuerst, 2003, pp. 3, 4; Hirsch, 1998, p. 229). Standards established for tenant selection and rule compliance were enforced. Tenants and CHA shared the responsibility for maintaining the buildings and grounds. Non-compliance could result in fines or eviction. As the years passed, racial tensions across the city increased. Wood lost support for promoting racially integrated housing complexes and scattered site housing that allowed African Americans mobility outside the Black Belt. As part of ‘reorganization’ Wood was replaced in 1954 (Fuerst, 2003, p. 6). During the 1960’s and 1970’s, Wood’s successors virtually eliminated tenant screening, failed to enforce rules and neglected basic maintenance, attributing the neglect to the lack of federal funding (Fuerst, p. 6). In addition to neglect, two other factors contributed to the
reduction of facility maintenance standards. First, as working class, two parent families exited they were replaced by nonworking, single parent families. A cycle began that spiraled CHA’s reputation as managers from excellent to incompetent. Reduced rental income meant less money available for maintenance, which resulted in further deterioration of conditions, which prompted those with options to relocate (Fuerst, p. 179). The second element was the 30% rent rule. Fuerst explains the 30% rent rate change was first mandated by U.S. Congress in 1969 with the “Brooke Amendment” (p. 179) Named after Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts this policy change set the rent at 30% of a tenant’s income (up to a limit). Fuerst further states that, although well intended, the effect was unemployed tenants had no incentive to work and could not accumulate the funds necessary to move to private housing. Their only alternatives were not to work and maintain the status quo or work at jobs that paid unreported cash salaries (p. 30). In 1982, U.S. Congress removed the income limit and the 30% rule was applied to all income sources. Many working families immediately faced a massive increase in their rents and left Altgeld Gardens. The majority of the remaining families were unemployed and like Rosenwald Apartments, they generated less than the required rental revenue needed for facility repairs and maintenance (Fuerst, pp. 140, 191).

Another significant change for which CHA management had responsibility was the selection of tenants. Fuerst (2003) reports the testimony of a project manager in 1977 who speaks to this issue. As noted earlier, the selection guidelines were less strict after the CHA reorganization and the prospective tenants were often approved by the Central
Office (pp. 29-32). Local project managers were not allowed to inquire about applicants’ previous arrest records or take into consideration known criminal activities. The project managers were cautioned by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) not to infringe on applicants’ civil rights. Repeated testimonies of Altgeld Gardens’ original tenants noted evolving values and practices in the community. There was a noticeable increase in local crime which prompted the new practices of locking their doors and restricting interactions with the new neighbors (Alumni, 1992, p. 24). In response to this development, in 1988 the Chicago Police Department took over several apartments to establish a staffed satellite police station within Altgeld Gardens’ boundaries. As a child, William Shaw lived in the community until 1955. He returned as Police Commander for the Kensington Police District that encompasses Altgeld Gardens. He testifies (Fuerst, 2003, pp. 114-16) that during his boyhood, the low crime rate was derived almost entirely from 5% of the families in the community. When he returned in 1988, he noted that these families were still there. By that date, the original 5% was still there, but so were their children and grandchildren. The original 5% responsible for crime had now expanded to 85% of the residents. These events and tenant experiences chronicled above were not unique to Altgeld Gardens.

Over time, all projects within the CHA system felt the effects of national and local political and social changes. The following is a brief review of several other public housing projects (constructed within a few years of Altgeld Gardens) and their experiences and observations about life in their communities. They have many attributes in common. However, Altgeld Gardens has one unique significant variable. The others
are situated within residential areas of Chicago’s south side whereas Altgeld Gardens is geographically isolated. This comparison serves to help determine what influence this isolation factor has on Altgeld Gardens that is not evident in the other projects that are centrally located.

**Housing Projects Comparisons**

These public housing projects are selected for comparison with Altgeld Gardens because they have more attributes in common with Altgeld Gardens than any others that are of the approximate age, tenant population, and architectural design.

The Ida B. Wells development, located at 37th Street and Martin L. King Drive, was the first project built by CHA and housed only African Americans. The first families moved into this low-rise complex in January, 1942. The average family income was $767.28, one of the lowest income groups ever to move into a public housing project in the nation (CHA, 1947, p. 10). Fuerst (2003) states that over 18,000 applications were received in hopes of getting one of the 1,662 available units. In response to unmet housing needs, two more sections (Madden Park and Darrow Homes) were built between 1940 and 1970 (p. 2). The completed combined site covered 94 acres. Completed in 1961, the now demolished Darrow Homes and Madden Park Homes, built in 1970 consisted of a mix nine-story and three story buildings (CHA: Change, 1999). Oscar Brown, Sr., the first property manager, arranged with the Chicago Health Department to bring doctors and dentists to the site to provide free health services for tenants that were not readily available to others in the surrounding privately owned buildings. Residents referred to Ida B. Wells as the ‘Well Town” (Fuerst, 2003, pp. 4, 10-11). This project
was the first to have a park, swimming pool and playground for their residents. Several of the early residents attest to their improved quality of life, their pride in living there, and the close lasting relationships they developed with their neighbors (pp. 12, 52, 54, 55). The stability of the community was attributed to the predominate two-parent households that were later replaced by single parent households with weaker parenting skills (p. 54). They, like Altgeld Gardens, did not lock their doors during the early years (p. 48). This is the first group of residents to comment on how their children’s hard work in school prepared them to benefit from affirmative action programs (p. 52).

A similar series of events took place in 1947 at Wentworth Gardens located at 37th Street and Wentworth Avenue. Over 3,500 tenant applications were received within the first two days the project was ready for occupancy. Of those submitted, only 1,200 could be accepted to fill the 422 low-rise apartments available (CHA, 1947, p. 12). Long term tenants complained that no modernization has taken place since 1950. They claim CHA ‘squandered’ funds and compared the later management with the good management practices under Elizabeth Wood. Tenants noticed changes in the community in the 1970’s, when CHA failed to enforce tenant and property management guidelines. Property deterioration and the drastic increases in rent based on the 30% rule were the most common reasons given for moving out (Fuerst, 2003, p. 182). The common complaint of unruly children and single parent households were also cited as drastic changes in the community. A second-generation tenant who has lived there for over 50 years stated that before 1980, doors were not generally locked, there were close
community relationships, and tenants who did not comply with the rules were fined or evicted (p. 191).

Dearborn Homes was built in 1950 as the first public housing development of its kind that used elevators. This property is located at 27th Street and State Street immediately north of Illinois Institute of Technology and is a complex of 16 six and nine-story buildings with a total of 800 rental units. It was racially integrated for only the first two or three years of operation (Fuerst, 2003, p. 14). The white families moved out, which one family attributes, in part, to their refusal to sign loyalty oaths in 1952 and 1953. Congress required all public housing residents to sign this loyalty oath as a commitment to remain in public housing for a specified period of time. Following a Supreme Court ruling in 1954, the oath became ‘voluntary’ (p. 213). Both black and white residents considered public housing to be a step closer to upward mobility (p. 2). The buildings and interiors were all new, a close community spirit developed, and designated days for tenants to clean stairs and hallways were accepted without complaints. The elevator was kept in good working order and was not considered a nuisance or unsafe because it was constructed as part of the interior of the building (pp. 72, 97, 103, 104). An elevator constructed for tenants’ use is the only architectural element that does not exist in Altgeld Gardens or any of the comparable projects. A tenant, who left the building in 1967, returned for a visit in 1984 and noted drastic changes. The facility was in disrepair and the elevators did not work. The residents were largely young, single parents and the levels of congestion and noise were noticeably higher (p. 146).
In summary, the shared experiences and life style improvements reported by the tenants in these housing projects are emblematic of the goals CHA achieved in the first two decades of the projects’ existence. For the first time many of the people in these communities took a pro-active role in determining the direction of their futures. Mutual support, shared values and goals were instrumental in the realization of their empowerment and attainable goals, mainly upward mobility and social capital facilitated opportunities. These are the early experiences they share with Altgeld Gardens. In later years CHA’s systemic problems common to all projects that were identified by tenants, related to careless management of tenant application approvals and subsequent behavior, as well as, deteriorating facilities, and the 30% rent rate changes. The only distinguishable attribute of Altgeld Gardens absent in all the other locations is its geographic isolation. All the others were built in the midst of established residential neighborhoods and the children attended their neighborhood schools. In the following chapter, the results of the oral history interviews are analyzed and discussed to determine, based on the data, to what extent Altgeld Gardens’ unique isolation factor influenced the culture and educational services in the local school.

**Purpose**

Initially, in the 1940’s, the tenants enjoyed an improved quality of life in a new, safe environment; they bonded with their neighbors who they treated like an extended family. The communities encouraged good character traits and academic achievement in their children. By the 1960’s, systemic problems within CHA permeated their property management practices. Also, the quality of life of residents in all the projects declined.
Residents in each project reported poorly maintained apartments and grounds. Lax tenant selection and enforcement of rules were mentioned as the causes of some problems. Also, the influx of single-parent families with different values and world-view who replaced employed two parent households, as well as the 30% rent rate change were named as additional reasons for cultural changes.

However, in Altgeld Gardens a constant and unique factor in its culture is geographic isolation. Given that, it is possible to wonder about the effect such isolation had on the local culture and in turn what influence that culture possibly have on the schooling provided within this self-contained community. Altgeld Gardens’ design included Carver Elementary School built within its boundaries and dedicated to the education of the children in this community. The students’ prior learning is embedded in their local culture. The local schools are part of the Chicago Public School system and as such, are faced with the usual challenges (common to all schools within the system) of meeting the mandated academic and student developmental goals. In addition to addressing those goals, special circumstances related to their isolated location also demanded the attention of the local school. Effective schools evolve and adapt to the changing needs of the students and communities they serve. In the case of Altgeld Gardens, the constant cultural element of geographic isolation is a permanent influence. It brings into question what effect does this isolation have on how the local school operates and delivers educational services in this community.
Most Important Aspects

When possible topics for a dissertation were initially under consideration, Altgeld Gardens was finally selected because of its unique remote location from Chicago’s central environment and contained a primary school built within Altgeld Gardens’ boundaries for the education of children in that community. Built for occupancy in 1945, the project represented brand new public housing whose remote location required tenants and CHA to develop and sustain an effective social system in an environment where none existed before. Given that the local culture influences students’ educational needs, interesting questions for examination were how this particular culture influenced the schooling of the children in the community. The history of Altgeld Gardens has two distinct periods. The first period began with the completion of construction in 1943 and ended about 1964. The first two decades span the residency of most of the first tenants in the community. They formed and sustained a homogeneous culture due to CHA’s micro-management of the tenant selection process to ensure shared values, beliefs, and goals were the foundation of this new social system. Families thrived, children were safe and nurtured in a community that practiced the philosophy of a whole village’s onus to raise children in an atmosphere of trust and support offered to everyone as an extended family. As part of their desire for upward mobility, they valued education for their children. In earlier studies, these residents reported their tenancy in Altgeld Gardens was planned to extend to their children’s graduation from high school. Parents instructed their children to learn, behave well, and follow the teacher’s instructions.
Questions asked:

1. What were the vital components of a sustainable culture in Altgeld Gardens?
2. What beliefs and/or practices reflect the unique nature of Altgeld Gardens’ culture?
3. What is the impact of students’ home-culture on academic achievement?
4. Does the absence or inclusion of the home-culture influence students’ ability to relate to the school environment and acquire and apply literacy skills?
5. Within the context of national events in the 1960’s, how did Altgeld Gardens’ culture change?
6. Are there examples of how the cultural evolution created changes in Carver Primary School’s climate and teaching methods?

The second period began with national and global political and social events of the 1960’s and later that brought about changes in America’s culture and by extension changed Altgeld Gardens and Carver Primary School. The U.S. Congress enacted President Johnson’s Civil Rights Act and Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 with the goals of to alleviate poverty and create racial equality. During this same time women’s groups sought personal empowerment and young adults questioned conventional wisdom.

It was during the 1960-70’s decade these national and local events were influencing significant changes in Altgeld Garden’s culture. CHA relaxed their tenant screening policies; a younger, more independent group of single parents moved in to replace the original group of tenants. Also, CHA claimed a reduction of rental revenues caused a decline in facility maintenance and renovations. Historical data indicate that as
time passed significant changes in demographics and cultural values, customs and practices changed which required adjustments to educational practices. Within the context of these cultural changes, the study proposed to identify significant changes, chronicle the causes and their effect on schooling at Carver Primary School. Within the context of these events, the six questions shown above were still valid and would serve to identify significant cultural changes, chronicle their causes and their effect on primary schooling at Carver Primary School.

The second important issue to be explored was determined by the school and community was geographically isolated from other residential and commercial area of the city by physical barriers. The design and plan for operation included retail stores, parks, churches, school, medical clinic, and leisure activities that were intended to compensate for their remoteness. This design was very much like the Pullman project of the late 19th century. The notion of this isolation factor was important and the study sought to determine to what extent isolation had on the community’s quality of life, as well as, a possible negative impact on the children’s schooling. The validity of the isolation factor’s inclusion in this study was supported and perpetuated by both residents and teachers who lived and worked in the community with their belief being ‘these poor children living way out here’ were somehow being harmed by the experience. The oral history questions relative to the isolation element were designed to identify instances of isolation related experiences or events and determine to what extent the culture and schooling were affected.
Upon the review of the teachers’ responses, it was evident they went beyond the scope of the original questions by their awareness of significant differences between the school and home cultures. They provided in depth descriptions of how lesson and class activity modifications incorporated culturally relevant materials and teaching strategies deemed to be necessary to improve students’ academic achievement and personal development. These unanticipated responses prompted a second set of questions regarding the teachers’ level of awareness of and the importance given to the school and home cultural differences. Also, the described teaching methods and scope of their responses disclosed the use of pedagogical modifications. The additional line of inquiry seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How teachers noticed any evidence of effects of this isolation on their students.

Fierro (1997) posits that each child has a personal learning style that results from innate tendencies and environmental experiences. Because cultural groups often share common values, the experiences of children growing up with those values are reflected in their classroom learning behaviors. Saville-Troike (1978) adds to this issue, “Research on culture and learning begins with the assumption that children are not ‘empty vessels’ when they enter the educational system. They have already internalized standards of communication, interaction, language use, and behavior from their home environment.”

2. Did the schooling manage to give students an awareness of the world beyond the community’s boundaries or was the result that the students were unable to cope with a larger world?
Johnson (2003, p. 7) asserts it has long been recognized that cultural variables influence how children present themselves, understand the world, and interpret experiences. Some of these experiences may be focused on encouraging learning. More common are the activities that provide implicit, unintentional support for various types of learning in the context of everyday activities (“Cultural Diversity and Early Education: Report of a Workshop,” 1994). Delpit (1988), a strong advocate of teaching children about their own cultures, nevertheless stresses the obligation of the schools to teach mainstream skills. She states that, “To imply to children…that it doesn’t matter how you talk or how you write is to ensure their ultimate failure.”

3. Do the teachers’ lessons and class activities suggest that broadening students’ world view was an instructional goal?

Culturally responsive pedagogy is consistent with the very nature of good teaching which in addition to instruction focused on academic achievement includes students’ personal growth, development and self-esteem (Johnson, 2003, p. 7). Mainstream schools (and instructional materials) are often structured to reflect and operate according to middle-class European American cultural standard (p. 51). Culturally sensitive instruction aims to facilitate the acquisition of skills that schools provide as a common core of learning in society and works to ensure that all students have the chance to learn those skills in the way best suited to their individual needs. Culturally sensitive instruction might therefore be viewed as a technique used to ensure, not undermine, equity for students (pp. 8, 52).
4. Have teachers acknowledged the value of the students’ culture by adapting their activities and instructional materials to be culturally sensitive. Advocates of cultural congruence urge teachers to use culturally sensitive instruction as a readily accessible and immediate source for improving achievement (Johnson, 2003, pp. 81-82). Ladson-Billings (1994) adds, the notion of cultural congruence is meant to signify the ways in which the teachers altered their speech patterns, communication styles, and participation structures to resemble more closely those of the students’ own culture (p. 16). Johnson (2003) states, (Teachers) must do more than be ‘aware’ or ‘tolerant’ of cultural and linguistic differences. They must do something about their teaching processes. That something should involve using students’ cultures, experiences, and orientations as instructional tools for increasing student achievement. In other words, much more teaching ethnically diverse students should be filtered through students’ own frame of reference than is currently the norm (pp. 57-59). Addressing the issue of the absence of culturally relevant teaching, Jordan (1984) writes about the potential harm of a disconnect between the student and school (p. 61). He summarizes the process of culture conflict, “By the time children come to school, they have already learned very complex material as part of being socialized into their own culture. This means that in minority schooling, we are dealing with a situation involving two cultures - the culture of the school and the culture of the child. When the two are not compatible, the school fails to teach and the child fails to learn.”

Chapter II is the literature review. In Chapter III, the interview responses are reported and analyzed. First, interview excerpts that reflect the observations and
experiences of the participants relative to the formation and evolution of Altgeld Gardens’ culture and isolation are reported and discussed. This is followed by an examination of the responses given by current and former teachers at Carver Primary School that reflect their level of awareness of the local culture’s influence on the school’s operations and instructional modifications to serve the students’ academic and developmental needs in this environment.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter I discusses what scholars have provided as a rich legacy of research that follows the historical path of the development of low income housing in Chicago from the 1880’s to the 1990’s. Their perspective of events that relate to the actions of the participants in the public and private sectors of society that influenced the direction of its growth and quality of life and services provided for the tenants and their communities based on racially inequitable availability of modest housing for poor people were most relevant to the focus of this study.

One of the earliest efforts to provide low-income housing was constructed by George M. Pullman on the far south side of Chicago’s boundaries. In response to a severe shortage of housing for the working class drawn to Chicago by the opportunity for better wages and upward mobility, they found jobs, but lacked housing for themselves and their families. Ely (1895) reports in detail the housing complex, one of the first designed to be self-contained. A manufacturer of railroad cars, Pullman constructed a village of Victorian row houses and the self-contained lifestyle supported by buildings for the required goods, services, churches, and community hall (Bruder, 1967; Ely, 1895). Several failed efforts by philanthropists and architects were reported by Bowly (1978). He goes on to report how Frank Lloyd Wright designed housing reminiscent of English
cottages. Julian Rosenwald designed an ambitious housing complex with the goal of providing mixed income housing units for both low-income and more affluent blacks in the late 1920’s. The black middle-class of the times were financially capable of living in different areas of Chicago, but racially divided housing traditions restricted their options of living outside of the Black Belt; the racially designated area where blacks could live at the time (Bowly, 1978). In 1937, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was formed charged with the responsibility to raze the slums and build new housing for low income families. The advent of World War II changed this directive to focus on housing for armament factory workers in the early 1940’s. The CHA ten year anniversary reports chronicle the progress of public housing construction and management during this period (CHA, 1947). It details the names, locations, housing capacities of each complex and the rationale for selection of the sites. Over the years, subsequent CHA publications and websites reported on the progress of public housing in Chicago, as well as plans for reorganization of CHA. Their plans for the design, purpose modifications and new locations were adjusted to suit the needs of low-income tenants as economic and social changes occurred over time ([http://www.thecha.org/transformationplan-summary.htm](http://www.thecha.org/transformationplan-summary.htm); [http://www.thecha.org/aboutus/overview-gallery/html](http://www.thecha.org/aboutus/overview-gallery/html). Other websites follow the history of individual projects, as with Altgeld Gardens ([http://www.thecha.org/housingdev/altgeld-murry-homes.html](http://www.thecha.org/housingdev/altgeld-murry-homes.html)). Photographs and a brief history of the development are given as well as its historic landmark property status and CHA’s plans for rehabilitations.
A historical perspective of the traditional pattern of containment of the black population in Chicago from 1940 to 1960 reviews the political, economic and social forces that perpetuated racially segregated housing until the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. Specific references were made to CHA’s management of Altgeld Gardens over the years from the beginning of construction to events ending in the 1960’s (Hirsch, 1983). Another insightful publication was produced by the Altgeld Alumni Association that contains first person testimonies as to the mindsets, and living conditions of tenants prior to relocating to Altgeld Gardens and after. They describe in detail their life experiences in that community, reasons for moving there and the changes that occurred over the years (Altgeld-Carver Alumni, 1993). They attest to the positive effect Altgeld Gardens had on their children’s formative years. They also report the sense of pride and stake owner status they felt being a part of this community. Tenants used official site visits by newspapers, city government officials, CHA directors and celebrities as occasions to show their pride and successful living through sports events, choir recitals, flower garden competitions, and parades. The Altgeld Carver Alumni Society was formed by ‘old timers’ who moved to Altgeld Gardens in 1944 and 1945. According to Fuerst, this organization’s members still meet weekly and offer mentoring services for the current Carver High School students. They give academic scholarships and offer moral support. One alumnus noted the students there reported seeing people getting shot and killed. “I go into people’s homes. But my children won’t go with me” (p. 92). Community organizations with an interest in public schools and their impact on communities offer interviews with Carver Primary School principal regarding the impact
of their isolated location on the quality of life, high incidents of respiratory ailments due to polluted air conditions and the associated challenges of recruiting teachers (http://www.catalyst-chicago.org.11-o4.1104healthprint.htm, 2004).

A very comprehensive examination of public housing in Chicago comes from oral histories gathered from former residents of public housing over several decades (1960-1990’s). These interviews offer the personal experiences of the residents and their reflections on the positive and negative aspects of living in public housing. Those interviews, specific to Altgeld Gardens, reflect on life in an isolated community. Those who were children there describe their memories of a safe, care-free lifestyle in a community that followed the philosophy of a whole village raising children. Adult former tenants comment on almost idyllic experiences which changed drastically as changes in facility maintenance, tenant demographics and the demands of life over time. In addition to gathering these observations and reflections, the history of public housing is followed from the perspective of what was accomplished compared to the promise of public housing in Chicago as an example of an opportunity for upward mobility (Fuerst, 2005).

The specific effect of isolation on the quality of life in Altgeld Gardens and the influence this isolation had on the social order, practices and schooling in the community can be explained, in part, by studies that explore the impact of isolation on social development and access to resources that can facilitate life changing opportunities for a better future. Two particular sources explore the issue of inner-city African American families in disadvantaged Chicago neighborhoods and the connection of social isolation
to resident’s reduced life chances. The issue of acquiring social currency is discussed as being an important factor that can enable upward mobility (Rankin, 2000). Another perspective of the causes of the lack of access to knowledgeable resources that can direct low-income families to services, education and job opportunities as a means of acquiring social currency is provided. This source also offers a working definition of social isolation as it relates to inner-city African American families (Wilson, 1987).

One of the issues that influenced the quality of life in Altgeld Gardens was incidents of gang violence and a marked increase in crime over time; most noticeable in the 1980’s. This situation of experiencing and dealing with crime within the community was not restricted to Altgeld Gardens. Reports of studies done in other Chicago public housing projects report their experiences with similar crimes and the pro-active role the residents adopted to cope with the attendant fear for their personal safety and their children’s safety. One community developed non-confrontational strategies to avoid encounters with neighborhood youths known for criminal activity (Dubrow, 1989). Another community reported a grassroots organization formed by parents of youths with prior crime involvement in their neighborhood. Resources were contacted who provided them with strategies for identifying behaviors and other signs of impending violent incidents and helping their children avoid being involved (Howard, 2003). A third report describes single women in Chicago’s public housing who sought out non-confrontational danger management strategies as a means of coping with violent crimes against them and their children. Tactics of identifying and informally tracking the activities of known perpetrators, avoidance of interactions with these people and avoiding areas that they
frequent were developed, but none were reported effective in reducing the level of crime in the area (Jarrett, 2004).

One of the characteristics of family units in public housing in the 1970’s is the predominance of families headed by single mothers. In the case of African American families, the social structures and policies of single mother financial support have a pattern of instituting guidelines for qualifying for public assistance fund that restrict or prohibit the two-parent family structure in the same household. This aspect combined with national social customs gaining acceptance in most cultures, regardless to race, is a greater willingness to financially support young, single mothers without jobs. In the African American community, practices established during slavery placed a value on keeping African families in tact. The dominant group did not recognize or value the African family unit or have any compunction to keep it in tact (Assante, 1995). In Altgeld Gardens, a family structure of single mothers with children, as well as the evidence of family structures that are a combination of close relationships between single women who have children by the same man, but live in separate apartments was the subject of comments by other Altgeld Gardens’ residents and are considered to be, in part, an outgrowth of their isolated living situation that is comprised of single women who greatly outnumber single males. A historical review of African American and other cultural groups’ family structures are referenced by Campbell (1999) in the context of cultural and religious practices opines that this arrangement may appear to be another form of polygamy. This paper also offers results of another study (Thompson, 1998) that included interview data from the single black males’ perspective. A third source, Stack
(1974) describes these multiple unions as typical male behavior in low income communities. There is also a paper that offers the notion that this behavior is the result of ‘situatedness’, a term used to define behaviors, worldviews, or cultural values that exist only in the specific environment where these practices take place. The implications of any behavior, in this case, participation in a relationship with the opposite gender that resulted in the birth of a child, is the product of its specific environment and may not reflect core values or long held cultural beliefs (Rohlfing, 2003). An additional article questions the research results on African American single mothers and their families using conventional paradigms based upon models of the dominant culture. The author states this practice has resulted in the creation of stereotypes and misconceptions about ‘the black family’. In this collection of essays, the African American mother-centered family is reevaluated to present a clearer and more affirming picture of its actual structure and function presented by an informed insider view of the African-American single mother household (Dickerson, 1995).

The balance of this chapter and the remainder of this dissertation will examine the research-based studies and literature of educators and scholars who have explored the interconnectedness of race, poverty, lack of opportunities, and institutionalized educational beliefs and practices that influence the education or mis-education of non-white students, particularly, African American children. The community selected, Altgeld Gardens public housing project, has experienced all of the above with the addition factor of being geographically isolated from the city’s core. The impact of social and geographical isolation on the culture and educational services provided in this
community will also be examined, as well as, the ensuing deficit of social currency curtailing their life chances. Generally, oral histories are not considered to be objective research. However, the information gathered from this source provides valuable insights and observations from teachers and school administrators who are first hand experiences contribute a perspective not easily gathered from second or third-party research studies. Each one has a story reflective of their backgrounds, experiences and their personal values.

**Social Isolation**

Within the context of this dissertation, isolation is defined as “the lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society (Wilson, 1987, p. 60). Isolation is a mechanism that plays a major role in the disadvantaged status of the ghetto poor. The significance of the social isolation concept is that it serves as a ‘critical link between macro-level social and economic processes and the behavior of poor people (Fernandez & Harris, 1992, p. 257). The central concern in Rankin’s (2000) study was to determine the extent to which the social isolation of poor ghetto residents is due to the fact that they are poor and otherwise disadvantaged and the extent to which it is due to the fact that they live in poor neighborhoods where opportunities for interaction with socially connected persons and access to institutional resources are limited (p. 140). The vitality of a community’s institutional structure depends to a large extent on the economic support and involvement of working people, especially the more affluent middle class. When a critical mass of this social stratum is lacking, as it is in many high-poverty neighborhoods, key community institutions decline
and often disappear leaving resident cut off from institutional resources and the benefit they can have for families with fewer knowledgeable and experienced resources of their own (Wilson, 1996).

Several forms of social capital defined as social-network resources that support individuals in their efforts to realize their goals, are thought to be lacking in high-poverty, socially disorganized neighborhoods (Rankin, 2000, p. 142). Weakly organized neighborhoods often suffer from a deficit of effective community norms, such that residents are exposed to cultural socialization and role modeling that reinforces non-normative attitudes and behaviors. In this climate, not only are youth and adults alike less likely to internalize conventional attitudes toward education, steady employment and family stability, but lack normative reinforcement.

**Culture**

Definitions and understandings of what the term ‘culture’ denotes originated in research studies of anthropologists and have since gained acceptance among researchers in the field of education. Johnson (2003) states the term ‘culture’ as used in her paper refers to ways of being, knowing, and doing (p. 5). Originating in the field of anthropology, this type of usage is often found in research that examines the impact of culture on cognition, communications, motivation, language development and behavior which are also issues of interest in education. Instead of explaining what students learn, this dissertation strives to highlight how students best learn and what can be done to improve academic performances. The aspects of culture listed above are all elements
subject to exploration in a quest for answers within the context of culture’s influence on a student’s learning experiences.

According to Feagan (1999), the concept of culture represents the shared values, understandings, symbols and practices of a group of people (p. 5). The validity of Feagan’s theory, for our purposes, is manifested in the careful selection of Altgeld Gardens’ tenants using the criteria of shared values, world views, and cultural practices in the original tenant selection process. Altgeld Gardens’ situation is unique in the sense that they moved into and created a community that was newly formed with their arrival. Cultural components were selected by consensus and were sustained by their empowerment. According to Murdock (1965), culture adapts to environmental, biological and psychological changes of man (p. 84). Culture changes and evolves with the varying and cumulative experiences of individuals in social groups. The events of the 1960’s and 70’s chronicled in Chapter I that influenced the restructuring of Altgeld Gardens’ culture are classic examples of culture’s fluidity and dynamic nature. As a result of significant cultural changes in Altgeld Gardens, the school provided in that community is required to develop and implement modifications to the pedagogy and school operations that more closely reflect appropriately revised goals for improving students’ academic achievement and personal development in this evolving environment.

To this point, the review of literature regarding cultural relevancy has stressed their basic importance as elements in a culturally sensitive and congruent learning environment for the benefit of all children, especially underachievers. However, the central issue of what Afrocentricity is and how its characteristics represent the African
culture origins is represented in the writings of Assante (1990). His approach to scholarly inquiry is consistent with the ways in which people of African descent see and experience the world. The criterion for research participation in his research was an agreement that the African American child and community were the subjects and not the objects of the study. This approach was used to ask what could be learned from African American students and their teachers that maintain the integrity of their culture and their world view (Assante, 1987). His literature is a wealth of information that explores aspects of African American beliefs, customs and behaviors today that have their origins primarily in West African cultures, as well as, the importance that they be honored and have a rightful place in the education of African American children. The wealth of literature now available that supports cultural relevant teaching methods for African American students offer instructional materials, strategies, and grade level appropriate activities that are founded on current cultural practices in West Africa.

According to Ladson-Billings (1994), Afrocentrism is more than information or textbook knowledge about Africans and African Americans (p. 146). It represents the building of a new scholarly tradition. An anecdotal example that illustrates the selective use of Ebonics communication techniques celebrating African American oral traditions while supporting diverse students’ academic success. The techniques discussed proved useful for rote learning, and as an Africanized form of pneumonics (Bohn, 2003). Another report focused on practical activities and techniques for teachers that facilitate the connection of African American culture and literacy instruction. The history of ‘call and response’ practices was traced from current usage in West Africa through slavery in
American to black church services today. A sample detailed instructional plan was presented that illustrated the interaction between speaker (calls) and listeners, who in turn, express reactions (responses) (Foster, 2002). Both of these articles speak to the issue of cultural congruency. Another study explores how African American culture is embedded with and is significantly shaped by West African world perceptions and culture. She uses examples of the higher order thinking process, speech patterns, and the arts to draw parallels between the two cultures. She affirms her established position that pedagogy lacking knowledge and incorporation of the students’ home culture creates a disconnection that is directly related to below average academic achievement (Hale-Benson, 1986).

**Cultural Relevancy**

The resources discussed above serve to provide researchers’ prior theories and thoughts regarding culture and its components that determine individuals’ beliefs, behaviors, and customs within a group. The impact of this culture on children’s early introduction to formal education is often an important determinant of how well they adjust to the school experience, their learning progression and expansion of their knowledge-base about themselves and their place in an expanding world. The following examination of the question of what are the best practices to accomplish a favorable outcome brings us to exploring culturally relevant pedagogy methods as a means of achieving that goal taking into account children do not enroll in school as “empty vessels.” Also, addressed are issues of power within and outside educational institutions that influence the direction of education and what groups participate and are included in
the decision-making process regarding race relations, instructional policies and school funding. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), teaching culturally relevant pedagogy empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (pp. 17-18). These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right.

A similar position regarding the importance of culturally relevant methods is expressed by Johnson (2003), who states culture and learning are interconnected in a student’s learning process. One culturally relevant pedagogy goal is to provide linkages between the African American home culture and that of the instructional beliefs, practices and materials used in classrooms that reflect the mainstream culture. The notion of cultural congruency is discussed by Johnson, whereby teaching strategies are employed to provide linkages or bridges between home and school culture (p. 25). These methods serve to better students’ understanding of the concept or skills being taught. A study conducted by Mohatt and Erickson (1981) concluded that teachers who were most effective in communication with students used an interactional style which can enable the development of an effective relationship between teachers and students. Cultural congruence is signified in the ways the teachers altered their speech patterns, communication styles, and participation structures to resemble more closely those of the students’ own culture.

A strong proponent of culturally relevant pedagogy, Hale-Benson (1992) has written extensively about the need for educators to dignify the language and cognitive
experiences as one aspect of the literacy learning style of African American children. She cautions that teachers must understand African American cultural styles if they are to create continuity for African American children who attend schools dominated by white culture. Culturally relevant pedagogy practices of four urban, African American elementary teachers are chronicled in anecdotal form. They report their classroom experiences and also attest to the efficacy of their culturally relevant approaches. The three major pedagogical themes are discussed: holistic instructional strategies, culturally consistent communication competencies, and skill-building strategies to promote academic success. They reported student responses indicated that cultural relevant teaching strategies had a positive effect on student effort and engagement in all content areas. Also, students preferred teachers who were caring, who established community and family-type classroom environments, and who made learning entertaining and fun (Howard, 2001, 2002).

Lacking congruency or synchronization of home and school cultures, a cultural discontinuity or cultural conflicts for African American students can be created with an adverse effect on student learning, such as time spent on task, period of engagement, comprehension, participation and less than acceptable level of academic performance. Teacher practices are examined and to determine ways they can contribute to or deter home-school connections for diverse families. It was noted that deterring practices were exclusionary curriculum, non-inclusive participation and deficit views of diverse students. Practices that facilitated connections were relevant tasks and literature selection, talking with students and parents, and utilization of students’ knowledge and
backgrounds as cultural contexts (McCarthy, 1999). Another source that highlights the important influence teachers’ practices, beliefs, and perceptions have on the education of non-white students is examined in a compilation of papers that focus on these issues. Each contributor agreed on the need for a connection and continuity between school culture and the students’ culture. One contributor used the term ‘dysconscious racism’ to describe the unexamined practices, beliefs, and attitudes of teachers who maintain without question, the status quo. Since children whose backgrounds and experiences differ from their teacher’s, these teachers often bring a skewed or distorted way of thinking about people unlike themselves. The writers provide a theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding why teacher cognition as a context specific phenomenon is important and how these learnings inform the preparation of culturally responsive educators (Rios, 1996).

Teaching and school practices found in American public schools transmit and focus on primarily the dominant White culture and transmits the use of this culture’s traditions, values, beliefs, language and learning styles as the standard of academic performance, social customs and beliefs for all children, regardless of their race or ethnicity (Lipman, 1995). In addition, schools function as a vehicle that teaches the value of and rewards, knowledge and skills that reinforce the frame of reference of the dominant group. This function of schools creates what Bourdieu (1977) calls ‘cultural capital’ in the schooling process. This process silences other groups and assimilates them into the dominant group. The cultural orientation of the dominant group influences the concepts, values and skills that schools transmit to students of all groups and becomes a
method through which a single dominant cultural hegemony is sustained. As a result this schooling process is problematic because it leads to the suppression of other groups’ cultural orientation and limits possible avenues for these groups to express and utilize their cultural elements as part of the learning process. Cultural capital of minority students is not rewarded or valued because they are expected and encouraged to assimilate into the dominant class culture. This method of schooling may lead to cultural dissonance and/or mismatch for some minority students and consequently to the underachievement of these students (Lipman, 1995).

This position of non-whites not being empowered to express their cultural orientation and the need for participation of teachers in the dialogue regarding the mis-education of African American students is addressed by Delpit (1995). In a series of essays, Delpit suggests that many academic problems attributable actually stem from a power structure in which the worldviews of those with privilege are taken as the only reality, while the worldviews and culture of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential or deficient. She outlines the culture of power which is enacted in classrooms, participating in power and the similarity of the rules of the culture of those who have power. She adds that those with power are frequently least aware of or least willing to acknowledge its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. She states dialogue is silenced when ‘insiders’ are the minority and ‘outsiders’ are the majority when school issues are discussed relative to the education of minority students. Delpit states expression of ideas is stifled by a lack of observable acceptance by outsiders. Insiders are frustrated and stop talking. Insiders think the issue is resolved.
This was discussed further in the context of teachers of non-white students seeking to express their views or fully participate in the dialogue. Delpit expressed the need for children to acquire critical literacy and learn to think critically which facilitates their analysis and judgment of the veracity of events and completeness of written material by taking into consideration the information’s source and motivations. A different perspective of Delpit’s position relative to teachers’ value as participants in the ongoing dialogue about the future direction of education in their local school for non-white children is offered by Dickar (2008). In a series of interviews with teachers in a racially diverse school, Dickar stated, one cause for the lack of communication between white and black teachers around race, culture, and their relationship to the education of black children. She also stated that Delpit opined that educators of color often felt their deep knowledge of the local communities and cultures of their students is devalued because it is often grounded in their experiences rather than in objective research. In this sample, black educators at this school described a strong sense of racial solidarity with their students, a theme frequently raised in studies of black teachers. However, these educators also noted that racial solidarity was an expectation black students held of them. Such expectations, Dickar noted, placed black educators in the ‘crossfire’ between student demands of solidarity and the demands of their professional roles.

Researchers’ results have explored the efficacy of culturally relevant pedagogy and its positive effects on improving the academic performance and personal development of underachievers. Also, the detrimental influence of discontinuity and cultural disconnection on underachievers was also examined. Classroom teachers are the
students’ primary source of instructional materials and teaching strategies. The teachers’ perceptions of students’ ability to learn can influence the pedagogical choices they make. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), culturally relevant teaching aims at a higher level of academic performance—excellence—and transforms shifting responsibility into sharing responsibility (p. 23). As they strive for excellence, such teachers function as conductors or coaches. Conductors believe that students are capable of excellence and they assume responsibility for ensuring that their students achieve that excellence. In the classrooms of assimilationist teachers—those who seem satisfied with the status quo—there is a belief that failure is inevitable for some students (p. 44). The classroom dynamics of student/teacher interactions convey their expectations of students’ abilities, performance and value of what students have to contribute to the learning process. Ladson-Billings continues, in many classrooms the teacher is regarded as all-knowing and the students are know-nothings or at least so know-very-littles (p. 55). The teacher may assume that because of poverty, language, or culture, the students know little that is of value in a classroom setting. The relationships between teacher and student are hierarchical or top-down. Teachers practicing culturally relevant methods understand that these typical roles can interfere with students’ ability to succeed, as opposed to assuming the role of conductors, as culturally relevant teachers have. Assimilationist, who seek to maintain the status quo adopt the role of custodians and referral agent who shifts responsibility to social workers, write up referrals for special education screenings, or ignore them, leaving them to their own devises. According to the assimilationist perspective, the teacher’s role is to ensure that students fit into society. And if the teacher
has low expectations, the place that the teacher believes the students ‘fit into’ is on society’s lower rungs (p. 22).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is historical in nature. A comprehensive review of the relevant literature combined with historical/documentary primary sources and personal interviews for two purposes. First, they form the basis for identification and examination of the culture in Altgeld Gardens, as well as the question of how the culture evolved over time. The influence of the local culture on Carver Primary School’s pedagogy was also examined. The second issue of the study was exploring the influence of Altgeld Gardens’ geographical isolation on the community and educational services provided due to this isolation.

Location and Collection of Materials

Archival research was gathered from Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) publications specific to the Altgeld Gardens family housing project. Statistical data regarding the design, purpose and location of the property and residents’ demographics were acquired from the CHA annual reports and website. Recent Catalyst articles provided supplemental information regarding the geographically isolated situation of Carver Primary School and the impact of polluted air and water on the community, student body and school staff. Documents held by the Chicago Historical Society were also sources of information. Especially valuable was a book written by the Altgeld
Gardens' residents and Carver High School alumni from 1944 to 1960 which chronicle their experiences, observations, and reasons for residing in this project.

Oral histories chronicle how people and institutions experience history. Initially, individual interviews of eight non-identifiable teachers and administrative staff members were scheduled. They were selected because of their 15-30 service or residency in the community or had taught in the school. Also, current and former residents of Altgeld Gardens were interviewed. Questioning focused on their observations and insights into the special nature of the local culture and its effect on the community and school over the years. Two of the teachers were also former residents of the community, so their dual roles documented both their daily lives and professional experiences. Two long-term residents of Altgeld Gardens agreed to be interviewed reflecting on their personal experiences as community residents and students in Carver Elementary School.

The participant selection process started with informal conversations regarding the proposed study of Altgeld Gardens. They were informed that oral histories would be gathered. Initially, eight people indicated an interest. All future contacts with them were conducted by telephone to determine their level of interest and making an appointment to conduct the interview after getting a signed consent form. All personal and telephone contacts were made individually and outside of the Altgeld Gardens boundaries. More data was gathered as additional participants became available through referrals from other participants. A total of 17 people volunteered to be interviewed.

Confidentiality was maintained by not identifying interviewees by name, address, or position held in the school or community. No specific information gained during the
interviews and printed in the dissertation was identifiable or attributable to any specific participant. The interview tapes were exclusively used by the researcher and constantly held in their possession. At the completion of the project, the researcher destroyed the tapes.

Participation was strictly voluntary. Prior to participation interviewees were fully informed of the scope and purpose of the questions and the precautions taken to assure their anonymity. It was explained that they had the right to decline participation and may stop at any time after the interview starts. They were assured that no harm or embarrassment would come to the interviewees.

**Most Important Aspects**

The two main issues to be examined are (1) how a unique African American culture could be formed and sustained in modern day Chicago due primarily to its geographical isolation from the city’s core; and (2) how this culture affects the pedagogical foundation of instruction in Carver Primary School over the years.

The history of Altgeld Gardens has two distinct periods. The first period began with the completion of construction in 1943 and ends about 1964. These two decades span the residency of most of the first tenants in the community. The second period begins with national and global political and social events of the 1960’s and later that brought about changes in America’s culture and by extension changed Altgeld Gardens and Carver Primary School.

This African American community’s formation and later evolutions in their culture are important elements in the design and delivery of a culturally relevant
curriculum that increases the potential for academic achievement and personal
development of the student body.

Questions asked:

1. What were the vital components of a sustainable culture in Altgeld Gardens?
2. What beliefs and/or practices reflect the unique nature of Altgeld Gardens’
culture?
3. What is the impact of students’ home-culture on academic achievement?
4. Does the absence or inclusion of the home-culture influence students’ ability
to relate to the school environment and acquire and apply literacy skills?
5. Within the context of national events beginning in the 1960’s, how did
Altgeld Gardens’ culture change?
6. Were there any changes in Carver Primary School’s climate that reflected a
cultural shift?

Upon the review of the teachers’ responses it was evident they went beyond the
scope of the original questions by their awareness of significant differences between the
school and home cultures. They provided in depth descriptions of how lesson and class
activity modifications incorporated culturally relevant materials and teaching strategies
deemed to be necessary to improve students’ academic achievement and personal
development. These unanticipated responses prompted a second set of questions
regarding the teachers’ level of awareness of and the importance given to these cultural
differences. Also, the described methods and scope of their responses disclosed the use
of pedagogical modifications. The additional line of inquiry seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How teachers noticed any evidence of effects of this isolation on their students.

2. Did the schooling manage to give students an awareness of the world beyond the community’s boundaries or was the result that the students were unable to cope with a larger world?

3. Do the teachers’ lessons and class activities suggest that broadening students’ world view was an instructional goal?

4. Have teachers acknowledged the value of the students’ culture by adapting their activities and instructional materials to be culturally sensitive?
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter contains the oral histories of 17 Altgeld Gardens’ residents and past and present teachers at Carver Primary School. These responses are generally presented in the same order as the study’s questions to which they relate. Teachers reported their self-reflections and observations based on visual and informal assessments of the students’ prior learning experiences, their world views within the context of their isolated environment, the local culture, and how these factors influenced the school’s educational program that address students’ needs. Also, the teachers contributed their own professional and personal experiences and how they evolved as students’ schooling needs changed over the years. The former and present community residents’ testimonies reflect their experiences and observations of how the cultural changes affected them and the community over the years. The italicized paragraphs are excerpts taken from the oral testimonies gathered from the participants.

Life in Altgeld Gardens

The earlier residents (1945-60’s) generally reported living in Altgeld Gardens was a positive experience. It represented an opportunity to achieve upward mobility for themselves and their children. They now lived in a community where the level of personal safety was elevated and it provided housing in a new development surrounded by employed, two parent families with similar values, customs and life experiences.
Regarding their safety, the most common comment was how they felt safe enough and trusting enough to not lock their doors. The following testimonies are examples of the participants’ observations:

*I lived in Altgeld Gardens with my mother, two sisters, and baby brother... This was in the 1960’s and we really liked it. We knew all our neighbors... they were friendly and a lot of times we didn’t lock our doors.*

*I moved into Altgeld Gardens with my five children. We applied for Altgeld Gardens and were accepted. In the beginning, it was nice. We had nice neighbors and the kids had friends. They played outside all day and I didn’t have to worry about them. We didn’t lock doors and windows during the daytime.*

The tenants, who started their tenancy in 1970’s or later, have different observations of life in Altgeld Gardens. They are more demographically diverse as opposed to the earlier two parent working class tenants. The later tenants were predominately younger, unemployed, single parents. Another group was young single parents who worked and/or attended school with intentions of remaining in the community for a short period of time. The third distinctive group was single parents who were second or third generation Altgeld Gardens’ residents. They report a variety of ways they dealt with interacting with neighbors depending on their goals and prior life experiences.

*...After I moved there (Altgeld Gardens), I found out it was far away from Chicago, but better than those high-rises on State Street.*
didn’t make any friends and only spoke to a few people. I didn’t like it and was determined to get a better job and move out as soon as possible. I only lived there about ten months.

I came to public housing because I had no money. I lived there from 1994 to the beginning of 1996. I’m a single mother of one child and needed help while I finished up school. ...These aren’t the kind of people I usually associate with. We kept to ourselves because I only planned to live there a short time. Soon as I graduated and got a better job we were gone. There were some neighbors that were nice, but I didn’t get involved socially.

Everyone who was dissatisfied with public housing did not have a viable plan for change. There are testimonies taken from teachers who had conversations with parents wanting a change in their lives, but lacked knowledge of how to achieve it or whose efforts were not successful. They also report situations of parents without hope of upward mobility based on their prior life experiences. There are testimonies of some former tenants whose goals for upward mobility report successful outcomes. However, a segment of the population lacked faith that this was in their future. The availability and assistance of knowledgeable preparation and an ongoing support system were not mentioned which made success less likely to occur. The following testimony was based on a teacher’s testimony relative to the late 1980’s and 90’s.

I see many of these young parents as being without any hope for a better future for themselves and their children. They lack hope because
they can’t see a better long term future is possible. It’s not envisioned based on their life experiences. Many have never lived anywhere else and don’t know how to make it on their own.

Parents talk to me and say they aren’t happy with their current situation, including housing, but don’t have a plan for making life changes. Every year children are taken out of school because the family is moving to Wisconsin or Minnesota or somewhere else different from the Gardens. They usually return within the next school, if not the same year. I think this happens because they move to a totally new environment they are not prepared for and cannot make the necessary adjustment to make it work. It would be like me going to a foreign country. They come back to a place where they are relatively comfortable and have learned to cope with predictable events and situations. They also have family and friends close by that are their support group. They may view this failure to adjust as proof that for them, change is not possible.

Regardless of the timing of their tenancy, they report their observations of family mutual trust and support, especially among children. In the earlier years, neighbors were treated like an extended family who afforded them a sense of safety, comfort and support over a broader range of people. Older siblings were often given some responsibility for caring for the younger ones when both parents worked outside the home. As the cultural dynamic changed in the 1970’s, the scope of trust diminished to primarily include family members only. They reported an increase in crime, drugs, and gang activity. This also
helps to explain why those single parents without other family members in the community often opted out of social interactions with neighbors. Within the family there were many instances of siblings taking responsibility for the safety and welfare of younger family members.

*My mother worked and as the oldest, I had to look after my sisters and brother before she got home. After school, I went to the babysitter’s and picked up my baby brother. I remember walking through the snow carrying him in my arms. When we got home, I looked after them until my mother came home.*

The following testimonies represent the observations of teachers of the 1980’s-90’s era.

*I remember one family of three brothers. The school’s breakfast program operates cafeteria style and they eat with their class. In this case, everyday the older boy collected the food for his two younger brothers, seated them with their class and opened all the wrappings for them. After that he would go to the middle school and got his breakfast.*

*What I noticed is the children have close family ties and protect each other. This is true for siblings living in the same house as well as their step-sisters and brothers. Yes, they know about each other. The older ones protect the younger ones, if confronted by an older or bigger child. Sometimes a grownup would pickup kindergarteners. (laugh) There*
was one older man that would come up to the school everyday on a bike. The little girl rode home on the handlebars.

These children have everyday life experiences and problems they solve themselves. I remember something that happened several years ago, there were two second graders who, for whatever reason, thought they didn’t get as much food as they and their younger siblings wanted. These two little boys worked out a plan that if either of them got any food stamps they would buy food and share it among all of them.

At lunchtime some children would ask me if they could take home their fresh fruit or any wrapped food to eat later or to share with a younger sister or brother. These children anticipated problems with getting enough food at home and took what steps they could to prevent or lessen the problem for themselves. Teachers usually knew who had a big appetite and would allow them to have a second lunch. It was against the rules, but we did it anyway, especially on Mondays and Fridays. On field trip days, the school provided a bag lunch. If they only ate the lunch they brought from home, some would ask to have a bag lunch to take home.

Several interviews produced interesting comments regarding the issue of isolated living and schooling in Altgeld Gardens. As one person stated, “Living in Altgeld Gardens was both a blessing and a curse.” For some in the 1950’s, the remote location and geographical layout provided welcomed barriers between their former living conditions at city-center in crime ridden sub-standard housing. This move represented
new beginnings in a safe, new community. While reaping the benefits of their remoteness, they also recognized this same separation caused regret for not having easier access to all a growing major city like Chicago offered; how they could be more aware or take advantage of social services, employment preparation and procurement. Also, the skill sets required to negotiate travel in the city and successfully interact with a demographically diverse population in order to find housing, employment, and social relationships. They lamented a childhood and early adulthood bereft of this social capital. The degree they acknowledge how this deprivation has affected their lives varies from one person to another. These observations are those of residents who grew up in Altgeld Gardens between 15 and 20 years ago. The first one is an example of what several testimonies stated.

...When we moved to Chicago on the Southside everything seemed so different. I didn’t know how to get around even though there were plenty of buses and the el. I didn’t even know how to go downtown until my new friends took me. I had to get used to seeing and dealing with all different kinds of people. There were so many things to do in the city that were going on all the time.

...Life in Altgeld Gardens produced a very limited view of the world and ignorance of what a big city like Chicago had to offer. The sameness of everything and everybody stunts your growth. You never get to interact with non-blacks in an informal setting. All the buildings and landscapes are the same. The limitation of movement caused by the
surrounding barriers; the highway, railroad tracks, and factories kept everyone contained in one small space. The regulations restricted you to what CHA told you could do or not do discouraged individual expression and creativity. We lived in an artificial world created as a social and political experiment.

There was an interesting example given to illustrate how the local culture and Chicago Housing Authority did not encourage a world view that regarded Altgeld Gardens as part of Chicago. This custom of not using street addresses began when Altgeld Gardens opened in 1945 and still exists.

Recitation of your address and phone number is one of things tested in the kindergarten social studies curriculum. The lesson is introduced with exploration of their idea of their place in the world. When asked where they lived, most respond ‘Altgeld Gardens’ or ‘the Gardens’. The majority respond with their block number. This is the common identifier used by CHA employees and the adult residents. A few knew their street address.

Recognizing the importance of exposing students to a more diverse African American culture, several teachers took the initiative to take children to a different setting on weekend outings.

I knew of teachers in every school year that would take one or two children home with them for the weekend. The teacher would take them for a special event like a ball game, movie, etc. and they would spend the
night. The next school year I selected some children I wanted to give this opportunity. The parents were in agreement, so I would let them know during the week and they would come to school on Friday with their things and go home with me for the weekend. Sometimes, we did something special, but most of the time they were just there as part of our family, doing the things we normally do.

Another issue discussed relates to the isolation of this community. It was reported that shared relationships existed and were attributable, in part, to this isolation. Several testimonies commented on the issue of step-sisters and brothers in the community and school. The school has a policy of placing them in different classrooms. Long term school staff is aware of many of these relationships and can facilitate the process of assigning them to separate classes. A community of this size and circumstances are also aware and generally accept it as a cultural norm. These children know each other evidenced by their greetings in the school and socializing in the neighborhood. They live in a relatively small area and are within walking distance of each other. This testimony was given by a teacher who taught at Carver in the 1980’s.

Being out here so far away from the city things happen that wouldn’t seem so acceptable in the city. The people here are so far from the city they seem to make up their own rules. I taught first and second grades at Carver. There were always more female parents than men. Lots of single moms moved in when the married families started moving out. These young women were soon lonely for adult company, so they
hung out with men who most of them knew were involved with other women out here. Sometimes children were born from these associations. These children knew who they were related to; you know their half-sisters and brothers. In the halls at school they say hello and tell everybody that’s their sister or brother. They look out for each other in school and outside.

...The parents can be a different story. Some are resentful of the other relationship. This is a small place. Things could be tense or a small exchange of words could occur, if they both turned up at dismissal time or at an assembly. Others just ignore each other and make the best of it. I remember one event that involved one man reported to have children by several different women out here. I was at the kindergarten graduation. This man attended because he had two children in the program. After the program, they all walked down the street with a woman on each arm. The two children knew each other and got along well. I don’t know if this is the way they conducted themselves before they got to the Gardens or if it was more related to the unusual circumstances. I wonder if they left here and went to another city or back to a bigger Chicago neighborhood would they continue this business of sharing boyfriends.

In the later decades, a serious concern of parents was the level of neighborhood crime and gang violence. They and the teachers expressed how they responded to the situation and the behavioral effect this environment had on both the students and parents.
As stated earlier, residents reported locking their doors and restricting social encounters with non-family neighbors as tactics to protect their personal safety, a practice that began in the 1970’s. Their children also took these precautions. One girl told her teacher that when the shooting started, they hid in the bathtub. Both teachers and parents confirmed that children seldom played outdoors in order to lessen their contacts with children in the neighborhood or be at risk if any fights or shootings occurred. Students often talked about their access to electronic games and movie videos. They appeared to use them at home to help pass the time indoors. This comment is from a teacher who taught there in the 1990’s.

*When I taught at the primary school my students would tell me about all the videos and movies and electronic games, like Play Station and Xbox, they had. My first reaction was to question how did people partially or fully supported by government funding could afford to buy these things….I mentioned this to another teacher and she said it was explained to her by parents that this occurred because parents (since 1980’s) kept their children in the house and needed to occupy them. They were reluctant to allow their children to play outdoors.*

The following testimony illustrates the type of event parents feared might happen to their own children. This event occurred in 1997.

*One year in my first grade class I received a report that one of my students had been shot. Most of the class knew by the time we assembled the next day and many of them thought he was dead. I was a bit surprised*
at the effect this news produced. At this young age, many of them have a family member or know of someone who had been shot or killed, so this news seemed to be taken in stride. As it turned out, the child had been shot in the jaw by a stray bullet while walking with his father. That evening I went to the hospital to visit him. The boy was about to go into surgery, so the visit was brief. I gave him our get well cards and took his picture, wrapped in bandages and smiling. I took the picture to class the next day as proof he was not dead. Within a few weeks, he returned to class fully recovered. It was still swollen and he only had a small scar on his jaw. We all took turns looking at it and asking if it hurts. He just shook his head and smiled, enjoying all the attention. He was one of the lucky ones.

The next observation was offered by an administrator in 1998, who taught at Carver for over 20 years.

The national cause of death of African American males, ages 15-21, is homicide. Add to that the high drop out rates and the number of them in prison. To me those are statistics, but to others it’s reality. One year, out of 25 students, my class had 18 boys. The total male student enrollment was high that year. Someone said maybe they are large in number to replace the many lost. I remember reading somewhere that long ago in Europe children were dressed and treated like miniature adults. Probably the high rate of infant mortality accounted for some of
that practice. But, in a sense, isn’t that what some segments of the African American community are doing? The parents demand a full graduation ceremony for kindergarten with caps, gowns, diplomas, and photos in their caps and gowns. After the program, many girls are given flower bouquets. The local middle school graduation may well be the last one they will have. Every accomplishment is precious and celebrated. One’s past experiences are often used as predictors of the future. Looking at it from the other side, it could also be an indication that parents have lowered their academic expectations of what their child can accomplish.

The Local School Council (LSC) has some input regarding school activities and as long as the majority of the members are parents, graduations will continue. Also, the LSC votes on whether the principal’s contract is renewed.

**Influence of Local African-American Culture on Education in Altgeld Gardens**

The kindergarten and first grade teachers at Carver Primary School repeatedly expressed their awareness of the students’ unique challenges created by life in an isolated community. The teachers acknowledged the role school played to provide experiences that could broaden their world views, as well as facilitate a personal connection with situations and learning materials that were new to them.

The one dissenting teacher interviewed addressed the school having the responsibility to enrich and enhance the students’ awareness of a society beyond Altgeld Gardens in which they were born or spent the majority of their lives. The interview was
terminated at the teacher’s request. This action precluded additional in-depth questions or observations.

*I don’t credit isolation as a cultural factor. These families have ready access to all of Chicago. They use their cars to shop and do other things. They can take their children to Chicago parks, museums and the waterfront. They have television to learn about local and world events and see daily life. Physical location is only a factor if you allow it to be. Parents have a responsibility to provide opportunities for children to have experiences outside of the Gardens. Laziness and personal inability to take your children outside of this project are the reasons they know so little or nothing about the bigger world.*

From the majority of teachers’ perspectives the cultural factor of isolation is acknowledged as being important and its influence on how they teach and select instructional materials and activities.

A consensus of all the other teachers’ and school administrators’ responses revealed these two issues are of greatest importance in terms of improving academic performance and advancing students’ personal growth and development. One goal is to expand their life experiences and world view (grounded almost exclusively in the local African American culture) to include a greater exposure to main stream social customs practiced in a larger, racially diversified environment. This expansion of their knowledge and experience base is of importance because both textbooks and other educational materials designers use the Euro-centric, white middle class model, that for African
Americans is not culturally relevant. Secondly, they experienced the necessity of developing culturally sensitive teaching strategies and materials that facilitate bridging or creating a connection between texts in books and other materials as published and the students’ home culture and prior knowledge base. As one teacher aptly stated, “We have to teach them in a way they can understand.”

Teachers repeatedly spoke of incidents where they sought to remediate perceived difficulties in students’ ability to connect with vocabulary and social customs due to a narrow knowledge of a broader and more diverse society outside of Altgeld Gardens. A society they had few opportunities to explore. As a group they identified problems in comprehension of situations and social norms that differed from theirs. This was noted in both standardized tests and assigned textbooks. Teachers sought remedies drawing on their collective professional experiences. There are supporting testimonies for the impression the school’s principal had some awareness of lesson modifications. This practice was not discouraged, but not formally acknowledged or supported by in-service discussion or training.

Field trips were reported as the most common method used to expand students’ awareness and hands-on experiences. These trips served to enrich their life experiences as well as help them realize all that Chicago has to offer and their entitlement of access to them. Teachers used these trips to help dispel prior notions and beliefs regarding things seen in the media, for example, the kindergarten student’s question about whether the lions seen at the zoo were real.
We have to include African American aspects in the lesson materials and teaching strategies. They enjoy it and it seems to help with retention. However, we should also teach them something about the world outside of the Gardens. As usual, it falls on the school to do it. Some would never get outside of here if we didn’t take them.

One of my best field trips was Christmas time in the Loop. First, we had breakfast in the Walnut Room in Marshall Field. Linen tablecloths and napkins, china plates, silverware, and crystal water goblets were laid on the tables. The waitresses were very friendly and helpful in seating our group of 75 kindergarteners. They were served food that was not familiar, but they tried to eat it. The huge Christmas tree was loaded with ornaments and a live chamber group was playing. The children were well behaved which surprised some of the other diners. I can imagine what they thought when this group of over 100 black children and adults descended on that dining room. Carver is known for orderly field trips. I think the experience overwhelmed the children. They were in shock. The parents who went were also impressed. After eating, we walked around the stores outside to look at the window displays. It was fun. I hadn’t done that since my children were small. Then we walked to Carson Pirie Scott to visit the store Santa. After we got back to school, we discussed what we had seen and done. This experience was so big and full of new things that it needed further processing. What a day.
Descriptions of the following experiences were reported by several teachers who taught at Carver in the 1980’s and 90’s.

*Because Carver is so far removed from Chicago, teachers make a special effort to plan field trips that relate to the lesson plans and also give them experiences they might not have otherwise. We went to a rodeo, circus, pumpkin and apple farms. Riding the bus down the Outer Drive, we pointed out Soldier Field where the Chicago Bears played when you saw them on TV. We identified Lake Michigan where the water we drink and use in our houses comes from.*

The level of their commitment to exploring a larger world is evidenced by their initiative and disregard for rules. For instance, disregard for inconveniencing other visitors in public buildings while monopolizing elevators and escalators for students to have several trips. Also, using small segments of instructional time to take advantage of experiencing unusual weather conditions outdoors or observing how heavy construction equipment works was reported.

*When I taught kindergarten, I got a kick out of their faces when they rode an elevator or escalator for the first time. We would ride up and down four or five times. Others that wanted to ride weren’t too happy, but we didn’t care. Our children don’t get to do this everyday.*

...*We go to the Field Museum and the Museum of Science and Industry. We also go to the washrooms where they wash their hands, as usual, but get to use a hot air hand dryer. Another amazing first.*
museum lunchroom they get to see and hear children different from themselves laugh, eat and talk just like them. To me field trips mean learning extended to outside the classroom. If you can see it and touch it, how can you doubt that it’s real?

During a science lesson on weather, we talked about fog. I could tell they didn’t understand what I was talking about. One day a year when it was very foggy in the morning, they would be told to keep their coats on when they arrived and we would go outside to see the fog. A few of them would walk far enough away until we couldn’t see them anymore. We would stand and wait while the group slowly walked back towards us. We would clap and say “fog, fog” when we were able to see them again. This only works when you have an assistant to be with the other group. The whole process took only ten minutes out of our day and I think it was worth it. My room was at the end of the hall next to a rear exit. We would sneak out to look at the fog, see heavy machinery work when the school yard was being dug up. The principal was always in our building. I wonder if she knew what we were doing outside. She never said anything, so I guess it was OK.

Over the years, teachers noted the differences in the behavior and literacy preparedness of students when entering kindergarten or first grade. Teachers with the longest period of service (15 years or more) noticed the increased efforts needed to meet the challenges of reducing conflicts between classmates, keeping changes in the school
climate to the changing community demographics most noticeable in the late 1970’s. This coincides with the same time period that the majority of the original two parent working class families were replaced by younger single parent families largely support by government funding. The following are examples of several teachers’ observations of changes in behavior of first time students at Carver. They taught at Carver for several years in the 1990’s.

*These children come in acting so wild it takes several weeks before they settle down in the classroom and when we have to walk down the hall. In spite of the smallness of Altgeld Gardens, a lot of these kids don’t know each other before they get here. If you don’t live on their block, it’s likely they have never met. Then the challenges begin. Even as young as they are, they feel the need to act tough and get upset for the slightest things. We have to build trust and talk about school being a friendly place. We talk to the parents and they tell us the kids are doing what they were told to do at home. You have to know how to take care of yourself.*

*I was here in the old days when children came in ready to learn. They knew the alphabet, colors, and could count. They were respectful and told at home to listen to the teacher. The parents respected teachers and the importance of education. The parents were involved with them at home and they took the time to teach them things. Today’s parents don’t take time with their children; just put them in front of the TV. Some of them set bad examples by coming up to school and act out. The job isn’t*
the same as it used to be. The technology is different, too. We are competing with TV, movies and video games. We have to make things exciting to get their attention.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The common threads that connected these testimonies were the goals of facilitating students’ personal connection with the whole school experience, especially improving academic outcomes, enhancing their life experiences and expanding their world views to encompass city center Chicago and beyond. The common element in both goals was appreciating the value of students’ home culture and incorporating this culture into the schooling. In a variety of ways teachers recognized the need for providing visible evidence that Carver Primary is a school dedicated to African American students and teachers committed to teaching from a culturally sensitive perspective. Teachers spent a large portion of their supply allowance and their personal funds on room posters, children’s literature, music and supplemental instructional workbooks that feature African American characters, stories, and pictures. Each classroom had a library with fiction and non-fiction books supplied by the school. Students had lending library privileges. These visual offerings are a constant reminder in the classroom that the African American culture is acknowledged and valued.

When I travel outside of the United States I try to visit the local primary schools. Without exception, I always see signs of the local culture being incorporated into the classes. It may be pictures on the wall, songs, games, or lessons being taught in the local dialects. The children may
wear uniforms, but the teachers wear articles of clothing that reflect their culture. These representations of the students’ cultures should be a required practice in our schools. With the little ones, it’s like a welcome home sign. They see some of themselves in the classroom and school. It’s an immediate connection. How would an all white school feel about all African American pictures on the walls and African music on the PA system? Better yet, what would the parents say?

The next testimony was given by a teacher currently employed at Carver Primary.

A couple of years ago the principal started to renovate the school’s décor in the hallways. A large Afrocentric mural was painted on the building’s entry wall. She also had large displays of African statues and artifacts on shelves high up on the walls. It must have been expensive to do, but it looked very nice. The children liked it, too. The teachers decided they wanted to contribute something too, so they organized a bake sale to buy and stock a 50-gallon fish tank for the main corridor. Each February we have a black history room display. We take a few minutes to visit a different room each day after lunch to look at other’s exhibits. We close the month with an assembly program that features African themed music, clothing and recitations. On a smaller scale, this kind of things go on all year long. The children seem interested and enjoy doing it.

Modifications of instruction as described by the teachers were deemed to be necessary. They noted the students’ level of comprehension and application abilities
were less than expected and not considered acceptable when some new skills or concepts were introduced using only the materials and teaching techniques in the teachers’ guides. Teachers noted their students did not have the prior knowledge and experiential foundation the lesson designers assumed were in place. This situation created a disconnect that further complicated the student’s ability to internalize new information, thereby, strengthen and expand their prior knowledge foundation on which future information will be built. Teachers’ reflections identify the sign of possible causes and the remediation strategies they used to address these causes. This observation is a good example of “teaching in a way the children understand”.

You have to love this school and these children or you wouldn’t continue to teach here. Children enter school for the first time with different levels of preparedness. Sometimes they don’t have the foundation or the vocabulary the textbooks assumes they have. When introducing a new unit or concept, we have to find ways and activities they can relate to their own lives and prior knowledge. I usually try to use something they have in common in their homes. For example, in kindergarten and first grade, language arts and math concepts of ‘order of events’ or ordinal numbers are taught. I would introduce it with how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a bologna and cheese sandwich. We would build a sandwich by them telling me what’s the first thing you do, what’s next and finally last. Or we use ordinal numbers to identify the steps, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. We would also use the morning routine
for getting ready for school. 1st we get up, 2nd go to the bathroom, you know how it goes. You only have to do this once for math or language arts which ever comes first in the curriculum plan. When we had a follow-up lesson or during the unit test and someone got stuck in the process, they would be asked, “how did we make that peanut butter sandwich?” It helped them to remember and get back on track. Once learned, they can transfer this information from one content area to the other.

A teacher that currently teaches at Carver relates this teaching activity.

I use a method that comes from the West African culture. They have a call and response thing they do to communicate songs or stories. I use it to make boring rote learning more fun. The teacher starts by saying a phrase. If it rhymes it’s all the better. The student repeats it twice. Then they move on to the next phrase and do the same thing. It works good on the alphabet and the corresponding phonetic sound, counting, simple addition and subtraction facts, learning spelling words. You can use it at any time, but it’s good for reinforcement when you only have a few minutes at the end of the day waiting for the dismissal bell or when we are in line at lunchtime. Once we learned left and right by dancing to the Electric Slide. You learn all this by listening to what they do at home and in the neighborhood and what songs they like to sing. You just pick and choose what works and what is appropriate for school.
The teachers were also mindful of the time consumed by implementing modifications which necessitated making value judgments as to the overall efficacy of the modifications under consideration. This teacher reports an activity that was developed at a grade level meeting.

*We have a limited amount of time to spend on each unit, I found it valuable to do this pre-unit prep because it saves time later repeating lessons they couldn’t complete or understand the first time presented.*

*Thank goodness it wasn’t necessary for all the units in the various content areas, but you have to use your judgment to determine when the concept or skill was important enough to do it. Why penalize them for book publishers’ assumptions and biases?*

In addition to meeting the academic challenges of formal schooling, these young students must develop social skills that enable them to effectively communicate and interact with their peers and adults in school. For some, this is more difficult. Teachers described the clash of home cultural norms and the school’s code of acceptable behavior and their attempts to remediate the conflicts in the classroom.

*You first see in first grade a behavior that almost doesn’t exist in kindergarten. The boys in the class are combative and get upset over the smallest things, like stepping on someone’s foot or being pushed in line. This is probably an outgrowth of their home training to appear tough and not show any fear. In this community a perceived affront can’t be ignored. Lack of a response is taken as weakness. In my class I teach*
them school is a ‘no fight’ zone. Here we are all friends. Here they are safe. We are here to learn and have fun.... A teaching strategy is to organize cooperative learning groups which necessitate getting along to be successful. Hopefully, as they get to know each better, a measure of mutual trust and respect can develop.

In addition to the two most frequently mentioned areas of concern, teachers regard critical thinking and problem-solving skills were not fairly assessed. Carver’s students’ scores could reflect, in part, their lack of familiarity with the language and social customs contained in the questions. The teachers did not imply these students were bereft of skills, only the skill sets they have are merely different and do not match the model used to construct the tests or lesson designs. Their frames of reference are based primarily on their African American home culture. The testimonies offered examples of demonstrated critical thinking and problem solving skills, as well as differences in vocabularies.

When this unit (home addresses) was being taught, one of the children had a ‘light bulb moment’. As part of discussing addresses, I decided to insert a moment on homeless people and their lack of housing. One student looked very intent and said, “His address must be zero.”

Who says our students don’t think?

These children have everyday problems they solve themselves. Everyday some have to work out a route to get to and from school without being bothered by other kids. A lot of them have older brother and sisters
who walk them and others are picked up by a parent, but some have to come and go alone. Others are the youngest in a large household and have to work out how to hang on their own few possessions or get their fair share of what’s available.

One year I taught first grade. During an assembly the principal reminded the students to wear uniforms everyday. Some didn’t wear white shirts because they didn’t have a clean one. The next day one of my boys came to class all excited and proud because he had washed his own shirt last night. It was clean and full of wrinkles. The whole class clapped for him.

They say our children don’t have good problem skills. I don’t think that’s true. The standardized tests don’t present problems in a context they understand or can relate to. They don’t have the kinds of experiences the test developers use. We are not a white, middle-class school. You have to teach them in a way they can understand.

I noticed when teaching at Carver students in kindergarten and first grade they have words in their vocabulary that reflect their home culture and are probably not in general use in other communities. This is not surprising because at their age, entry is school is usually the first environment they encounter on a regular basis outside of their homes. Until I gave that test, I never realized that knowledge or recognition of ‘setting the table’ was worthy of inclusion on a national standardized test.
Yes, it’s only one out of maybe a hundred questions, but what is the rationale for including it? What does the student’s answer tell you that is significant? I may be accused of teaching to the test, but I made a point of putting this activity into snack time. ...Some of them still got the question wrong on the test. Than wasn’t upsetting to me. This exercise contributed to their general knowledge and enhanced their awareness of social customs outside the Gardens.

Starting early in the school year I make time to have informal conversations with the students. I can informally assess their oral language skills and get to find out something about how they think. Each time I find out how different some of the names they give to certain things are. They call lawnmowers a ‘grass sweeper’. They are not familiar with ‘lawn’ or ‘garden’. They say ‘yard’ to cover any grassy area. Once we had a laugh about pancakes. Some of them called them ‘penny cakes’. When I mentioned that some people call them ‘flapjacks’ or ‘griddle cakes’, they thought that was the funniest thing they ever heard. During the Plants unit they would say the name of all garden tools except ‘hoe’. This word would cause giggles, but no one would repeat it because in this place hoe has an entirely different meaning. In five years, I could not get anyone to say it out loud.

The testimonies gathered provide insightful data relative to the formation and evolution of Altgeld Gardens public housing project and Carver Primary, the school
dedicated to servicing the children of the community over a 40-year period (1950’s to 1990’s). The teachers and school administrator provided more detailed and extensive data than originally anticipated. This additional information allowed the study to extend the exploration of this public housing development’s unique geographical isolation and its influence on both the community and the school. The additional interview questions listed earlier regarding this study reflect the additional lines of inquiry we explored. In response to the students’ significant needs, teachers instituted instructional modifications grounded in culturally sensitive supplemental materials and strategies.

Chapter V details what reasonable conclusions may be drawn based on analysis of the data and the findings of prior studies. This chapter will conclude with recommendations for future studies.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The process of learning early literacy and math skill sets generally has a common core that is present in public schools across the country. Local schools in each district have mandated academic goals for the school year. Teachers take these objectives and determine, within the context of their environment and school climate, how they will teach all that is required while improving student academic achievement. In the case of Altgeld Gardens and Carver Primary School, the usual challenges exist compounded by atypical factors of a geographically isolated location that influences both the local African American culture and the education dedicated to the children of this public housing project. The following discussion examines interview responses and what conclusions may be drawn relative to the study’s purposes. The findings lead to the recommendations for future research.

In 1945 Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) selected a 157 acre site for the construction of Altgeld Gardens public housing project located on the far Southeast edge of Chicago’s city limits. The site was designed to be self-contained providing many of the services and goods available in a residential neighborhood. This was especially important in Altgeld Gardens because their geographical isolation from city center and limited access to any other residential or commercial areas restricted their interactions with others. The resulting local African American culture represented the world view,
values, and social norms of the residents in this community. Before 1970 residents established and maintained one dominate culture which reflected their two-parent, working class demographic and conservative life style. In the 1970’s a significant cultural evolution became evident in Altgeld Gardens due to the influence of political and social changes on a national level in the 1960’s.

Following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November, 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson continued the spirit of President Kennedy’s War on Poverty initiative. In 1964, President Johnson signed both the Civil Rights Bill, intended to create a level playing field for minorities, and his Economic Opportunity Act designed to attack the roots of American poverty as part of his Great Society movement. Within this same decade feminist groups, inspired by the Civil Rights Act, became the voice for women’s rights and empowerment. This was also an era of younger people getting involved. They questioned authority and the wisdom of following the established leadership regarding social issues, political conventions, and our involvement in the Viet Nam conflict. Locally, key CHA administrators, including Evelyn Wood, were replaced with others who were less concerned with the micro-management of housing projects. They were less attentive to facility upkeep, tenants’ concerns, and relaxed the stringent tenant selection process. CHA claimed a major decrease in their rental revenue base occurred when the employed tenants moved out. Therefore, they had substantially fewer funds for maintenance.

Tenants who replaced the residents of an earlier era were products of a more liberal society and acted more as individuals. The local African American culture in
Altgeld Gardens evolved to become a heterogeneous culture that represented several different groups of tenants; each with its own goals, life styles and social norms. As a result, the one dominate culture model no longer existed replaced by co-existing smaller groups. Quint (2004) defined peer pressure as the power of many over one. The environmental conditions needed to make peer pressure still viable no longer existed. Data disclosed that later tenants had more options when selecting a group with which they could align or exercise their option not to develop relationships with any. Family ties and loyalties were closely held and distrust of other neighbors increased. The cultural custom of trusting and supporting family members is not remarkable in itself; however the discontinuance of treating trusted neighbors as an extended family is a symptom of shifting cultural norms and values.

Not socializing with neighbors with different life experiences and values is secondary to tenants’ fear for their personal safety, as well as, the safety of their children. Unfortunately, all too often violence and crime is higher in low-income areas and in public housing. One could easily become a victim merely due to random timing; in the wrong place at the wrong time. The previously described accidental shooting of a first grader in Altgeld Gardens is a prime example of what parents fear the most. This same fear for one’s safety is also evident in parents’ practice of keeping their children in the home instead of playing outdoors. They purchase expensive electronic games and movies to help keep them occupied.

Several studies indicate the level of violence in public housing is not restricted to Chicago. These studies collected data from African American women from two different
perspectives. In the first instance, danger management strategies were developed by single women who live in public housing area with ‘chronic’ violence (Jarrett, 2004). These non-confrontational and family focused tactics were based on the type of violence, physical location, likely times of events, and types of perpetrators. The tactics were found to be effectively keeping them safe, but did not reduce the prevalence of violence. Conditions identified as ‘chronic’ indicates how deeply it is embedded in the local African American culture; a problem without an immediate or sustainable solution. It will continue as long as the conditions that breed violence exist. These women are searching for avoidance and survival strategies.

The objective of the Howard (2003) study was to assist the parents of adolescents known to participate in violence. Parents enumerated cues that signaled neighborhood danger and symptoms that suggested youth distress. As a result, parents used a variety of coping strategies, such as family strengths and community agencies in an attempt to decrease youth exposure to and involvement in violence. Parents involved in this program are driven by a desire (common among most parents) to see their children grow up and not be another death or incarceration statistic. These recurring themes of fear for children’s safety and early fatality rates drive the use of avoidance strategies and elaborate celebrations of all accomplishments, such as kindergarten and middle-school graduations.

In both cases, the participants take ownership and responsibility for their local problems with crime and violence. Often programs of this sort are born out of desperation. These persistent problems have not been eradicated by police or social
services. The community’s main objectives appear to be survival, coping skills, and recognition of unavoidable co-existence.

The other side of relationships in Altgeld Gardens is repeated examples of close family bonds being extended to step-siblings. Altgeld Gardens’ version of blended families consisted of a male having two or more families who lived in different apartments within the community. Testimonies offered the observation that practice was more a product of their isolation than a permanent life style. A study by Rohlfing (2003) describes this as ‘situatedness’ behavioral patterns produced by the confluence of the situation and its cultural environment context. In this case, the situation is single women in Altgeld Gardens having a relationship with a man currently involved with other women within an isolated cultural environment. While that position is more reflective of an assumed need females had for male companionship, a different perspective taken from the male point of view is advanced by Thompson (1988) who reports that most of the black men interviewed apparently wanted their wives or mistresses to have babies. Some obviously wanted children as validation of their manhood. The interview results of the Altgeld Gardens study did not provide any first hand observations of anyone involved in this type of relationship. Results of a study by Brower (2003) suggest new social norms are equated with peer expectations regarding acceptable behavior. In this context the major shift in the local cultural values followed by social and political events on a national level beginning in the mid-1960’s set the environment for the events that followed.
One of the early residency interviewees said, ‘Life in Altgeld Gardens is both a blessing and a curse.’ Her subsequent comments focused on the geographical isolation aspect of life in Altgeld Gardens. The more prominent positive attributes were relocating to a better neighborhood, the newness of the facility, and being the first people to occupy the units. Living and thriving in a racially and culturally homogeneous community that was supported and encouraged by CHA to have a vested interest in the formation and maintenance of a community that protected and nurtured children to grow academically and develop good character traits were very appealing. Having left friends and families in their old neighborhoods, adults formed new relationships based on shared life experiences and expectations for the future. The physical barriers between them and the crime ridden, over crowded, and substandard housing they left were considered more protective than punitive; a constant reminder they were no longer part of that world. Both the residents and CHA management maintain the practice of identifying units by ‘block’ numbers that correlate to the location in the architectural design. When families go outside of the project to shop, they call it ‘going to the city’, even though it is only a few miles away. This outlook was largely supported by earlier interviews of Altgeld Gardens residents done by Fuerst (2003, pp. 114, 116) and Altgeld-Carver Alumni (1993, p. 10).

As the years passed, newer tenants had fewer positive comments on their stay in Altgeld Gardens. Also, upon reflection, the earlier tenants became aware they and their children had paid a price for their isolation. Those who commented on their experiences when seeking employment, making the transition from living in that community to city
center, or relocating to another state implied the change was more difficult or was not successful because they felt ill prepared for the challenge. Lack of prior exposure to a new environment or not having any knowledgeable people to assist them was listed as the most frequently stated cause of their difficulties. Their lack of familiarity with the city’s transportation systems, location of well known landmarks used to establish an orientation to the city’s layout, and having few, if any, acquaintances in the city center tested their belief that success in exploring new places or a new life style was possible. They also expressed being overwhelmed by attempts to effectively communicate and interact within a highly diverse society in order to gain access to employment, training and housing. Several, as young adults, were curious about the city and sought a larger and more diverse social setting to visit. In most cases their failures produced feelings of regret, helplessness, and defeat.

Their experiences were only partly due to geographical isolation. Altgeld Gardens’ residents were challenged by social isolation; a condition that is more attributable to their poverty and a deficit in residents’ knowledge than physical location whether isolated or in city center. Generally, researchers agree that social isolation is a key element in the reduction of life chances of the inner-city poor (Wilson, 1996). Disadvantaged both by the individual experience of poverty and by residency in poor neighborhoods, ghetto residents are thought to be isolated from valuable social resources (Rankin, 2000, p. 180). The most frequently mentioned differences in the research were between a lack of social-network resources and the level of participation and residents’ efforts to seek out resources through family and friends both inside and outside the
community. Several researchers posit the strongest support for the link between neighborhood poverty and social isolation comes from the analysis of social-network composition. Rankin’s early work revealed that residents of poorer neighborhoods had fewer friends who were stably employed or college educated and more who were on public assistance. Wilson (1996) contends that residents of high-poverty neighborhoods are deprived of conventional role models and important social-network resources, particularly access to informal job networks. This theory appears to support the Altgeld Gardens resident who felt a deprivation of social-networks and resources were intentional and served to hinder his ability to improve the quality of his life by creating an awareness of and access to opportunities for growth outside of Altgeld Gardens.

The earliest residents of Altgeld Gardens did not have the attributes researchers usually associated with residents of poverty-ridden neighborhoods. The most common poverty traits mentioned are unemployment, supported by government funding programs, community void of employed role models or lacking institutionalized social-networks that can fill that role. During the first two decades of Altgeld Gardens’ existence, applicants were required to be married, employed families. In addition, the selection process was skewed to favor the applicants with similar life experiences and values (Fuerst, 2003, pp. 4, 69, 75-77, 126). Steady employment demonstrated their familiarity with social-networks was sufficiently developed for them to acquire and retain gainful employment before moving to the project. As a cohesive community they acted as an extended family and supported each other. Acting as a community resource and role models they shared this knowledge with others which in turn enabled them to gain some
measure of social capital which could facilitate earlier success in functioning in a broader, more multi-cultural society.

As the years passed tenant demographics shifted from employed, two parent families to unemployed, single parents largely supported by government funding. The resulting average household income was reduced to poverty level. Rankin’s later research (2002) posits the link between availability of social network resources and the extent of poverty-level residents’ participation and adoption of a proactive role to seek out resources that reflect grassroots efforts to deal with neighborhood disadvantages. Previously mentioned research results of Jarrett (2004) and Howard (2003) are examples of public housing mothers’ who participated and utilized resources with remedies for their adolescent children’s involvement in community violence and parents who sought coping and non-confrontational strategies to protect themselves and their children from personal assault and violence. Early research by Janowitz (1962) discussed the notion of the ‘community of limited liability’ wherein community involvement is generally limited but can be activated by a perceived threat. In Altgeld Gardens, examples of violence and individual efforts to cope or avoidance were reported. These examples include the first grader who was accidentally shot and the practice of keeping young children indoors for their safety. However, there were no reports given of any organized community effort to address these issues. Regardless of theoretical differences, researchers generally agree social-networks exist and are necessary to provide the means for poverty-stricken residents to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to facilitate social mobility in American society.
Their experiences describe what can occur where limited social capital or currency exists. Social isolation is a major factor in creating a lack of social currency. For the purposes of this study, Rankin (2000) defines social capital as social-network resources that support individuals in their efforts to realize their goals (p. 142). Without the benefit of resources that can create this currency, a disconnect exists. The clash of two cultures cannot be resolved or made manageable without intervention. These resources may be organized institutional social groups or the shared life experiences of knowledgeable family and friends or community role models. These resources enable others to successfully make housing and employment transitions that now empower them toward their goals. The earliest employed tenants came to Altgeld Gardens with the demonstrated ability to seek out and acquire steady employment in a large culturally diverse city. They located potential employers using their communication and social skills to make their needs known. This is the social capital they brought to Altgeld Gardens and considering neighbors to be an extended family shared this knowledge with others. They, in turn, earn social capital through this personal development experience. The practice of passing down their knowledge and experiences is the bridge or connecting factor that facilitates the linking of two very different cultures.

Wilson’s (1987) definition of social isolation is the lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstreams society (p. 60). In conjunction with social isolation, Rankin (2000) states “(urban poor are) wrapped in economically devastated neighborhoods where few employed adults or stable families remain. Individual and families often lack contact with persons with the knowledge,
experience, and more important, the valuable social connections to aid them in their
efforts to improve their life circumstances” (p. 14). In the post 1960’s era, Altgeld
Gardens underwent a drastic cultural evolution in which demographic changes ended the
former custom of considering neighbors as an extended family. Differences in social
norms and an increase in local crime were probably the two main causes. Distrust and
fear of victimization leads residents of socially disorganized neighborhoods to avoid
social contact outside their own kin and close friends (Furstenberg, 1993; Rainwater,
1970; Stack, 1974). Rankin (2000) adds, with low levels of trust and expectation of
reciprocity, residents of poor neighborhoods are less likely to come to the aid of their
neighbors and consequently have fewer people they can turn to for social support,
especially in times of crisis and financial need (p. 143). This observation is on point for
Altgeld Gardens. In addition to geographical and social isolation, the entire project
contends with the local cultural shift that splintered them into smaller non-cohesive
groups without strong social ties which adds another layer of social isolation to the
barriers between Altgeld Gardens’ residents and opportunities to create meaningful
social-network resources that can produce valuable and much needed social currency.

One particularly intense interviewee suggests that the lack of access to this social
capital was intentional. Upon reflection as an adult, the former Altgeld Gardens resident
re-examined his formative years spent in this community. Adherence to CHA’s rules and
regimentation was equated to stifling individuality and creativity. The intentional
selection of a remote site was an experiment in separation of African Americans from
mainstream society customarily practiced in a socially segregated system. They were
provided with essential needs and some entertaining distractions without a path or program for enhancing the quality of their lives in the future. Without ready access to social service resources or successful role models in the community, a better life was not envisioned. He stated further an intentional disconnect was established. The interviewee characterized Altgeld Gardens’ project as a social and political experiment. CHA’s ten year report (1947) confirms their intention to design and operate a model self-contained housing specifically for African American war workers (p. 13). It appears they sought a large tract of vacant land located in an area that did not disrupt the established racial boundaries of residential communities in Chicago. The report states, “One of the reasons for the housing plight of the Negroes is restrictive covenants which block the production of new houses for them on vacant land in anything like the number required. These restrictions almost completely prohibit the use by Negroes of vacancies in the existing homes outside of their ‘ghettoes’ and the only area where Negro housing construction can take place are those already occupied by Negroes” (p. 14). The selected site was in the midst of established heavy industry, toxic waste facility, railroad tracks, and a forest preserve. Keeping in mind Altgeld Gardens was conceived and constructed in the mid-1940’s, this appears to be one solution to the problem of local growth of the African American population, migrations from Southern states, as well as, the return of World War II veterans seeking housing. The rapidly expanding African American population could no longer be contained within the traditional boundaries of racially segregated housing in Chicago. The white population was also increasing and a shortage of affordable housing existed in their neighborhoods, also. However, not being affected by
racial restrictions and the ability to move to suburban areas, their problems were not as severe. The planned replacement of slums with new low-income housing could not keep pace with the need (Fuerst, 2005; Hirsch, 1983); so the existence of Altgeld Gardens came about.

An alternative definition and functional source of social currency is its association with literacy. The more traditional perspective is a functionalistic definition espoused by the political and business sectors of society and is based on the assumption that there are jobs for the poor once they have attained a certain level of reading and writing proficiency (Hornbeck & Salomen, 1991). However, U.S. economy does not produce enough jobs that pay sufficiently for these people to work their way out of poverty. This is especially true of African American and Hispanics who disproportionately occupy low paying service jobs than whites and who are more vulnerable at times of cut backs and layoffs of labor forces. Literacy encompasses more than reading and writing proficiencies. Corey (2003) states literacy is also social practices or social currency (p. 2). Learning the hidden rules and cultural codes of the dominate culture facilitates upward mobility. To be successful in accessing educational and employment opportunities, members of minority groups must be bicultural; i.e., they must be able to function both in the culture of their identity group and the dominant group. Delpit (1986) who is a strong advocate of African American students being taught from a culturally relevant instructional perspective also speaks of the necessity of African American students having a dual identity. In addition to a strong African American identity development, it is essential students have a working knowledge of mainstream
communication skills, culture, social norms and educational expectations, also know how they function in order to experience academic success and improve their chances for upward mobility.

This perspective does not represent new thought regarding African American education and the students’ place in America. At the turn of the 20th century, W.E.B. DuBois wrote about the importance of African Americans maintaining a dual identity, a double self. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) expresses his views on the social and spiritual condition of Negroes following slavery. It states in part,

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,--This longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spat upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face (DuBois, 1986, p. 365).

Within the context of their history, significant changes occurred in Altgeld Gardens. As the culture evolved, so the local primary school’s instructional practices changed accordingly. The teachers responded to the students’ needs while in the midst of shifting cultural norms and practices, as well as addressing the constant factor of
geographical isolation which also influenced schooling. Using a variety of instructional strategies Carver Primary School’s teachers assumed the roles of social-network resources and role models that provided students with links to mainstream society’s cultural practices and norms. In addition, they incorporated culturally relevant materials and activities to supplement the mandated pedagogy driven by mainstream culture and life experiences. The modified instructional practices serve as a bridge connecting students’ valuable culture and life experiences to the standard traditional schooling. Both practices served to enrich and expand students’ narrow world-view and their place in that world. These practices addressed the teachers’ goals to combat the detrimental effects of both geographical and social isolation, a disconnect from the school’s academic goals, and started the process of both adults and children acquiring social capital or currency.

The balance of this discussion chapter is comprised of teacher/student interactions and alterations of lessons necessitated by the influence of the local African American culture on schooling in Carver Primary School. Also, the issue of efficacy of culturally relevant instruction and student-centered pedagogy will be examined within the context of this culture and school environment. The scope and detailed nature of the teachers’ interview responses provided unanticipated data from which new areas of inquiry arose. These interviews revealed a group of teachers who recognized and desired to address how generic and inappropriate lessons would be received by students if materials and strategies used were limited to those in the teachers’ guides. These teachers described in detail how and why they altered the mainstream-oriented pedagogy prevalent in the textbooks and other materials generated by book manufacturers. Their ultimate goal or
rationale for lesson modifications was evident in one teacher’s statement, “Teach them in a way they can understand.”

**Culturally Relevant Instruction in Altgeld Gardens**

Cultural relevant teaching has been defined as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture, they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 17-18). Under this comprehensive umbrella of culturally relevant teaching each aspect of students’ growth and development is addressed. The burden of teachers’ adapting the curriculum and strategies to intentionally include all these elements through direct instruction is possible or expected. However, the ultimate goal is valid and achievable over time as these skills and knowledge will be retained and recalled throughout students’ schooling, form the foundation for future learning and create life-long learners. Culturally relevant pedagogy is just one of the factors that significantly effect improvement of students’ academic performance. Other issues teachers cannot control or implement is teachers’ qualifications in poverty level schools, shortages of minority teachers, operating budget, in-service training and mentoring, as well as, district and school level administrative support are some of these important issues. Keeping in mind students’ needs are immediate, teachers cannot delay incorporating culturally relevant instruction until all these issues are addressed or resolved. Students need and deserve the teachers’ best efforts each day using all their skills, knowledge and experience accumulated over their
teaching careers. Time spent in this ‘deferral mode’ is lost time and lost opportunities that cannot be recovered. Adequately prepared or not students progress to the next grade level. Johnson (2003) states that culturally relevant pedagogy is consistent with the very nature of good teaching (p. 81). It assumes that teachers will address the needs of each student in the classroom—and use the knowledge base about culture and learning to support this effort. Advocates of cultural congruence (the use of culturally sensitive instruction) assert that to wait until all these broader issues are addressed will ensure failure for many students.

Advocates of culturally sensitive instruction agree it is a readily accessible and immediate source of improving achievement (Johnson, 2003, pp. 81-82). This notion of immediate accessibility is evidenced in Altgeld Gardens by newer teachers seeking the advice and guidance of teachers in the school with more experience and success with incorporating the African American culture into classroom activities and lessons. An inexperienced teacher can effectively adapt lessons as simply as reading an appropriate children’s book with major African American characters who demonstrate African American cultural norms and life experiences. A real aloud story or independent activity may be followed by individual picture or written journals and shared with the class for display or discussion. The interviewed teachers at Altgeld Gardens reported the variety of ways culturally sensitive lessons or activities served to create cultural connections with academic concepts as well as providing a means to broaden their world views and access to mainstream cultural norms and values in response to their geographical and social isolation.
In response to their awareness of the academically limiting effects of isolation in Altgeld Gardens, teachers reported one of the most frequently used modes of increasing students’ general knowledge and life experiences are incorporated into filed trips that met two goals, enhancing academic learning and world-view broadening opportunities. They also offered essential exposure to mainstream culture. Teachers stated that first time experiences such as, the use of hot air hand dryers, rides on escalators and elevators, or confirm that animals exhibited at the zoo are really alive serve to affirm or dispel prior beliefs based on television or books. The bus rides to Chicago’s Loop and neighborhoods outside their community were examples of accessibility both students and parent chaperones had to a larger more diverse society. They saw a variety of architectural styles and the diverse racial and cultural demographic that exist in a large city. In addition, on these trips students observed and interacted with a wide variety of other students who may display behaviors and speech patterns different from their own and that of their community. Several teachers described the annual Christmas trip to the Loop to see the decorated department store windows on State Street and eat at the Oak Room in Marshall Fields enjoying a meal served by a wait staff on linen covered tables, eating unfamiliar foods while listening to a live chamber quartet perform. Other field trip experiences aimed at broadening their life experiences were visits to pumpkin farms, a horse ranch and petting zoos to learn how food is grown and interact with live animals. One teacher described how the horse ranch field trip was followed up in the classroom by building dioramas, drew picture stories or made writing journal entries about this first time experience. When they had a nutrition program, teachers and students used apple
picking trips to make apple sauce or pies in the classroom. Each experience represents valuable additions to their knowledge base that facilitate personal connections with new concepts in future. Delpit (1988), a strong advocate of teaching children about their own culture, nevertheless stresses the obligation of the school to teach mainstream skills. She states, “To imply to children that it doesn’t matter how you talk or how you write is to ensure their ultimate failure.” As stated earlier, teachers and residents repeatedly identified geographical isolation as the main cause of students’ limited life experiences and narrow world view. This is not unexpected because their isolation is the most unusual and constant attribute of the community. However, in all fairness, the behaviors and observations they describe are not uncommon to many poor populations with limited funds and social currency. The teachers’ testimonies repeatedly state the field trips and bringing elements of the mainstream culture into classroom activities are necessitated by the nature of their remote location. I can possible argued that this is a reasonable conclusion for them to draw because their daily presence in this remote location within view of an interstate highway, forest preserve, and railroad tracks are constant reminders. Also, this perpetuated belief that isolation is the main challenge is accepted as fact over the years and was not questioned or investigated. This study did not result in supportive evidence that Carver’ challenges were identifiably linked to their remote location rather than their socio-economic status which usually encompasses more limited life experiences and a narrow world view than students without a mainstream background. Without comparative data, it is difficult to attribute Carver students’ lack of broader life
experiences are more severe or detrimental to their schooling success that those with a similar socio-economic status in inner-city project locations.

Several African American teachers reported a long standing practice of taking children home with them for the weekend or treating them to movies, sporting events or just spend the day in their homes. These practices are supported by Ladson-Billings (1994) who states that teachers who practice culturally relevant methods can be identified by the way they see themselves and others (p. 25). They see themselves as part of the community and they see teaching as giving back to the community. Their relationships with students are fluid and equitable and extend beyond the classroom.

Of all the testimonies given, only one teacher was opposed to this practice. This teacher agreed Altgeld Gardens was isolated from city center and its diversity, but took the position that providing field trips and broadening experiences were parental responsibilities. She maintained that parents who demonstrated the ability and desire to travel outside the community should extend that same opportunity to their children. Also, she mentioned time spent outside the classroom reduced the finite instructional hours available each school year. This teacher did not indicate whether or not she valued the students’ home culture or practiced culturally relevant instructional strategies. This teacher abruptly terminated the interview and left before any additional or clarifying discussion could be had. Testimony of this sort could be attributable to a teacher with an assimilationist teaching philosophy. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), assimilationist teaching styles operate without regard for the students’ particular cultural characteristics (pp. 22-23). According to their perspective, the teacher’s role is to ensure that students fit
into society’s lower rungs. Ladson-Billings further states assimilationists assume the role of custodian who merely maintain the status quo based on their own low expectations and negative beliefs about African American students abilities and academic potential (p. 23). They may also share or shift responsibility to other school personnel by sending students to the school psychologist or the special education teacher. Should this be correct that this teacher does not acknowledge the value of students finding relevant connections between their experiences and the instructional subject matter is the source of the potential harm of a disconnect between the student and school. Jordan (1984) summarizes the process of culture conflict, “By the time children come to school, they have already learned very complex materials as part of being socialized into their own culture. This means that in minority schooling, we are dealing with a situation involving two cultures—the culture of the school and the culture of the child. When the two are not compatible, the school fails to teach and the child fails to learn” (p. 61).

Expressions of culturally sensitive schooling begin before lessons are taught. The school environment and teachers’ demeanors are also very important. Young children entering school for the first time are not “empty vessels”. With them come their home culture and life experiences, their identity. One observation made by a teacher who visits primary schools in foreign countries noted the prevalence of the native home culture in the schools, whether it is depicted in music, pictures, language, attire, etc. She states students entering their school for the first time “feel they are at home”. There is a connection between home and school cultures. These comments suggest that without this connection, students “have nowhere to plant their feet”. Should a disconnect exist
because both home and school cultures are not represented in the school environment and instructional strategies, there is no recognition or value given to the home culture on which prior knowledge is based and function as the foundation on which future learning is built.

In spite of Altgeld Gardens being a relatively small community, the children there may not know each other due to the community practice (began about 1970) of restricting relationships with non-family members. Also, most children of this age do not go farther than the closest neighbors to visit or play. The immediate shared characteristics they recognize are age, gender, and race. As time passes and the socialization process begins, they will recognize shared cultural behavior patterns and social norms. In addition to adjusting to an unfamiliar school environment and a timed activity routine, children are expected to learn how to effectively communicate with the teacher and classmates in order to perform tasks and communicate their needs. It is incumbent on the teacher to facilitate student achieving this goal. A teacher’s personal connection with their students is as important as establishing a connection between the children and the instructional activities. Lacking this teacher/student connection incongruency of the home and school cultures will exist. Several of the teachers described students behavior early in the school year that may be mistaken as the students’ inability to perform or being uncooperative. They mentioned examples of students’ slow responses to teachers’ questions or oral instructions, difficulty staying on task, as well as, minimal participation. These observations are consistent with Fierro’s (1997) statements that cultural groups often share common values. Experiences of children growing up with those values are
reflected in classroom behavior. Studies reveal that teachers who were more effective in communicating with the students used an interactional style that the authors termed “culturally congruent”. This notion of cultural congruence is meant to signify the ways in which the teachers altered their speech patterns, communication styles, and participation structures to resemble more closely those of the students’ own culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 16). Other researchers also acknowledge the significance of effective communication as part of the learning process. Language (and more broadly communication) is more than just the content of spoken messages; it includes changes in voice pitch, rhythm, and the use of the body and social space as additional sources of information (Bowers & Flinders, 1991, p. 6).

In addition to concerns about adapting their personal interaction style and creating a culturally sensitive learning environment in the classroom, teachers of African American children who practice culturally relevant pedagogy must frequently assess the efficacy of the materials and strategies used to create or strengthen cultural connections. Researchers and current literature often state the importance of the reflective thinking process as part of student and pedagogy assessments. An experienced teacher who taught African American students for the first time reported her constant reflection facilitated her thinking as she considered instructional materials, activities, and the lessons she prepared and assigned. Moreover, grounded in her own reflection are her students’ experiences as cultural beings and how these experiences influence what they do in the classroom (Sharp, 2003, p. 243). Researchers cite the benefits associated with the reflective thinking process. First, it provides teachers with a tool for making changes in
the instructional environment. Second, reflective practice can be a method for evaluating the purpose and effectiveness of teachers’ instruction. Third, it is a process for thinking about how to apply content and past classroom experiences to make effective changes in instruction. Lastly, reflection is a process for systematically evaluating challenges in the teacher-learning process to introduce positive solutions (Dieker & Monda-Amaya, 1995).

In Altgeld Gardens, the process for new teachers may start in the grade-level meetings where culturally responsive materials and instruction are shared and evaluated. These teachers reported the weekly grade-level meetings as being the most frequently used venue for shared information and support. Furthermore, some form of the reflective thinking process possibly enabled earlier Altgeld Gardens’ teachers determine the mainstream Eurocentric based pedagogy was not beneficial to their African American students and as a result devised culturally sensitive adaptations.

To this point in the chapter the positive influence of culturally responsive school and classroom environments, adaptation of teachers’ communication and interactive behavior patterns, and teachers’ use of reflective thinking process are examined. Each have been discussed, as well as, how they relate to culturally relevant pedagogy and their contributions to African American students’ connection to modified instructional materials and activities which translate to improved chances for academic success and development of their African American identity.

The teachers reflected on the necessity of modifying lessons for two main reasons. The first reason was they adapted the textbook teachers guide recommended starting points for introducing a new skill set or concept based on the dominant culture’s
norms. Where the text’s language and usage of subject-related terms were not familiar to
students, teachers introduced the lesson with a culturally relevant alternative activity. It
was often mentioned in the testimonies that teachers, aware of the value of these
modifications, were also faced with the challenge of meeting the systemic demands to
complete a school district mandated curriculum within the school year. Value judgments
were made to determine when and where time consuming modifications were made and
the level of need. The mainstream school and instructional materials are often structured
to reflect and operate according to middle-class European-American cultural standards.
Culturally sensitive instruction aims to facilitate the acquisition of skills that schools
provide as a common core of learning in society and works to ensure that all students
have the chance to learn those skills in the way best suited to their individual needs.
Culturally sensitive instruction might therefore be viewed as a technique used to ensure,
not undermine, equity for students (Johnson, 2003, pp. 8, 32). At Carver Primary School
the teachers described using students’ life experiences as bridges to link the home culture
to the instructional materials. Teachers stated they used students’ life experiences for
learning sequence of events or ordinal numbers. It would be introduced by a class
activity focused on students describing, in order, how to make a peanut butter sandwich
or list what they do to get ready for school in the morning. Teachers also reported
culturally sensitive activities they used to practice rote learning in math and language
arts. One technique that proved to be popular and effective is call and response for
learning time tables, number facts, spelling word drills, and recognition of letters and
their associated phonetic sounds. The call and response method is grounded in West
African practices of orally passing down tribal lore, recounting historical events, and celebrations. Smitherman (1977) defines call and response as spontaneous verbal or non-verbal interaction between speaker and listeners in which all of the statements (calls) are punctuated by expressions (responses) from the listeners (p. 104). Literature describes in detail the use of call and response where the teacher helps middle school students connect familiar linguistic patterns to new ones by using familiar intonations patterns and varying them. These approaches require minimal preparation, no additional cost and were readily available, the factors Johnson noted as plus factors of easy accessibility. They also found that drawing upon the home culture experiences keep students’ attentive and on task longer, as well as increasing their retention and recall. Johnson (2003) maintains that advocates of culturally sensitive instruction as a readily accessible and immediate source for improving achievement (pp. 81-82). This notion of immediate accessibility is evidenced in Altgeld Gardens by newer teachers seeking the advice and guidance of teachers in the school with more experience and success with incorporating the African American culture into classroom activities and lessons designed for immediate use with minimal preparation. The weekly grade level meetings were the most common venue for teachers to meet and discuss successes, failures, and recommend instructional materials and presentation technique modifications that were effective for them. This practice of mutual support and professional development increases the likelihood of earlier improvement of students' academic success and reduces new teacher attrition rate from the school or the profession.
The second most important rationale for modification was the lack of a meaningful presence of African American in pictures, their life experiences and stories included in the textbooks and basal readers. Teachers felt compelled to address this void by providing supplemental instructional materials. In addition to modification of direct instruction practices, each classroom had a school provided library stocked with both literature and non-fiction books. Students had week-long take home lending privileges. The majority of these books and those selected for read-aloud story time were selected for their African American orientation. These books, written and illustrated by African Americans, featured African American characters with storylines and text that reflect the language, environments and life experiences of their students. They were also models students could use as a source when composing their own stories. Johnson (2003) supports this practice (p. 52). He maintains that in addition to the use of culturally sensitive instructional materials to improve academic achievement, a personal connection with books and graphic materials ensures the students’ personal growth, development, and self-esteem. Johnson adds that teachers must do more than be ‘aware’ or ‘tolerant’ of cultural and linguistic differences. They must do something about their teaching processes. That something should involve using student’s culture, experiences, and orientations as instructional tools for increasing student achievement.

Analysis of the teachers’ testimonies disclosed an interesting point. None of the teachers indicated that the decision to incorporate culturally relevant materials and instructional techniques were ordered or monitored by the local school administration nor were they the subject of seminars or professional development agendas. From all sources
available it appears this was a grassroots movement initiated by the teachers who took a proactive position in determining how the student’s academic progress could benefit from the adapted culturally relevant pedagogy; probably initiated in the grade level meetings and individual exchanges. Their awareness of student academic achievement, being less than expected and possibly through trial and error, found this approach to making schooling more meaningful and productive. Testimonies report the efficacy of inclusion of culturally relevant elements in instruction were modeled by more experienced teachers and disseminated to others. Teachers, mindful of time constraints, used their judgment and knowledge of their students’ strengths, weaknesses, and the local culture to determine when and to what extent this instructional technique was necessary.

In summary, as the years passed Altgeld Gardens’ public housing project has experienced significant cultural and educational evolutions prompted by the influence of social and geographical isolation and social and political events on a local and national scale. In response to significant changes in the community, the local primary school dedicated to the education of children in the community, devised modified instructional practices to improve students’ academic achievement and personal development. The important insights taken from teachers’ testimonies and the research-based literature generated by practitioners strongly suggest the home culture and environment represent the students’ earliest learning experiences and represent the prism through which future learning in school is filtered to help them interpret the meaning and value of these experiences, also to make a determination whether this new information or experience relates to them and how. Teachers must be cognizant of how the home culture effects
students’ learning styles, language skills, school behavior, communication skills, and their perception of the world and their place in that world. A culturally relevant pedagogy was developed by the teachers to better serve the needs of this community’s children. The home culture, when effectively and appropriately utilized, can create a bridge or connection to the school culture and create or strengthen the building blocks used as a foundation toward higher levels of knowledge, thereby ensuring better academic outcomes. It is incumbent on the teacher to understand and value students’ culture and take a pro-active role in modifying instructional practices to include and connect home and school cultures and avoid potentially detrimental effects on the students’ academic progress by not doing so. In addition to the attention given to academic achievement, culturally relevant instruction uses student’s African American culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. For example, these negative effects could be brought about by not seeing one’s history or culture represented in the textbooks or curriculum or by seeing that history distorted. Minority students whose education is limited to the dominant culture’s worldview, experiences, and values have directly or subliminally been taught their home culture based on ethnicity or race has no value to society or himself and as such, should be ignored. Based on that premise, their academic success and future upward mobility would be determined by their identification and compliance with the dominant culture alone, yet not achieving full acceptance as a member of that dominant group. Equitable educational opportunities acknowledge that differences in cultures and learning styles are just differences that should be addressed in instructional practices, but should not be
considered deficits based on the dominant culture’s norms. Finally, the primary aim of culturally relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a ‘relevant black personality’ that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture (King, 1991, p. 245).

**Future Research Recommendations**

The causes of African American students’ less than acceptable academic performance outcomes are many and complex. The main focus of this study is Altgeld Gardens’ evolving culture and its effect on schooling in this community over time. However, analysis of the oral testimonies revealed teachers also adapted lesson materials and strategies to create culturally relevant connections between the home and school cultures. Based on this study’s findings and other relevant studies and literature, the following recommendations for future research are made.

1. An Altgeld Gardens follow-up quantitative study designed to measure and compare academic performances of classes taught with culturally relevant pedagogy and those not using culturally relevant adaptations of instructional materials and activities. Inclusion of a teacher interview component would give voice to teachers acting as change agents, but not empowered as policy makers or as participants in the process.

2. Design a culturally relevant instructional framework for the entire school; a unified system that provides continuity of instructional practices across all the content areas and is consistent with state mandated academic goals and standards. This school-wide system would be the school’s primary source of
culturally relevant pedagogy. As well as providing guidelines it would reduce teachers’ burden of individually developing unit and lesson plans. Recently, such an instructional design system has been created specifically for African American students that take into account culture, identity and learning. The designer states, “Instructional designers must be able to explore culture and identity in order to create effective and appropriate designs for learning. We first explore culture, then identity, and then the interaction between culture and identity (Thomas & Columbus, 2010, pp. 75-92). Understanding the confluence of cultural identification and academic identity informs designers about how an appropriate design should be structured.

3. Restructure pre-service teacher training institutions’ degree required core curriculum to include culturally relevant instruction theory and practices appropriately designed for all groups of minority students. The significance of this recommendation is the current demographic trends of both teachers and students. The teacher population remains predominately white, female, and middle-class individuals. However, the student population is rapidly growing in the direction of multi-ethnicity with white students showing the least amount of growth in numbers.

It is requested that this study be accepted as a contribution to the current body of information about African American students and culture as an exploration of a specific group of African American students living and educated in a unique isolated environment and how the culture and schooling interacted. Also, to reveal a different perspective of
African American life experiences and the instructional practices used in response to evolving cultural conditions. The goal here is to illustrate the diversity within the African American culture and help dispel notions of a monolithic African American culture and the stereotypical African American child.

**Epilogue**

*Cultural Changes*

The impetus for Altgeld Gardens’ next cultural evolution is their participation in CHA’s Plan for Transformation initiated in 2000. This massive renovation and new building plan was approved by Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The Plan for Transformation will renovate all low-level housing projects, raze high-rises and build new mixed income projects. This is a three pronged design that will affect all properties CHA manages. The three components are: (1) Reform CHA administration. It will resume its original role of asset manager. (2) Renew the physical structure of CHA properties. (3) Promote self-sufficiency for residents. As a landmark model public housing project, Altgeld Gardens is involved in this program. The renovation of interiors and exteriors of all units and grounds has begun. To meet their target for completion by 2013, empty units were left vacant for renovations. A relocation division assists tenants who have the option of returning at a later date or move permanently. Section eight vouchers are offered which pays all or a portion of the new housing monthly rent in a privately owned property. New applications for Altgeld Gardens are not being accepted at this time. Those who choose to return must comply with the occupancy rules which include drug tests, credit checks...
and obtain employment. Education, job training and placement, day care, and substance abuse treatment will be offered by cooperating city of Chicago departments and non-profit organizations. Mixed- income housing will be designed and located in established residential neighborhoods in order to “break down the social barriers that formerly segregated public housing residents from the larger city of Chicago.” Unfortunately, Altgeld Gardens is categorized as family housing and would not participate in this attempt to merge public housing with privately owned properties in the same neighborhood. Therefore, Altgeld Gardens will continue as a geographically isolated project.

Altgeld Gardens’ participation in HUD’s Moving to Work Agreement and other listed programs suggests the negative effects of isolation should be lessened. The occupancy rules require lease-holders to learn work-skills, so their participation is not voluntary. CHA’s goal of “creating a new culture of success and hope” translates into social capital for the residents and improves their chances for upward mobility. Easily accessible preparation and support of social services will now be accessible which can empower them and increase chances of residents reaching their goals. To what extent demographic changes of employed, better educated population will alter the local culture cannot be determined, but these factors could possibly bring about a change for the better. Compliance with the occupancy rules is managed by local management boards. It can be argued that the original Altgeld Gardens culture of the 1940’s and 50’s have come full circle and may be restored to some extent within the context of a more modern world.
Educational Changes

As in the past, this potential evolution of Altgeld Gardens’ culture has influenced Carver Primary School’s mode of operation. During the transitional period of 13 years (2000-2013) the number of families will be reduced, which in turn, reduces student enrollment. The school’s Federal funding based on student enrollment is reduced proportionately which affects instructional programs, staffing, and facility maintenance. For example, in the past, teachers had assistants in their classrooms. Currently, assistants are only assigned to students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that requires a dedicated helper. The number of children in the pre-school, age cycles three and four have decreased. Children of working parents were withdrawn because they needed full-time care and the program was changed to offer only two half-day sessions.

In addition to changes related to The Plan for Transformation, the instructional scope has been revised. Within the past school year, Carver Primary has been expanded to include fourth grade which was formerly part of the Carver Middle School. At first thought, it could be assumed this addition grade could help offset some funding lost from reduction of student enrollment, but the expense of operating fourth grade classrooms may nullify any gains in funding. It would amount to new fourth grade students transferring to Carver Primary bringing their funding with them.

Other significant changes within the same period are the school has a new principal and the school year has been extended to 12 months. As a year-round school, Christmas and summer breaks are shorter with several two week breaks are scheduled at other times in the year. Two teachers currently in this 12 month program find it to be
more manageable and have not yet noted any negative academic performance effects with
the students. To date, the principal is cautiously optimistic about the operational and
instructional efficacy of the revised school year. No comment was offered regarding the
existing or continuation of culturally relevant instructional practices. Due to attrition and
teacher transfers, it cannot be determined, at this time, how many of the teachers who
participated in this study remain at the school or if any replacements practice culturally
relevant instructional methods.

As with any sizeable change in a culture or environment, only time can determine
if fundamental differences are evident and are sustained over a sufficient time period to
be embedded in the culture. Should that occur, these changes create new cultural norms,
values, and behaviors; thereby qualifying as an evolution.

*Off-site Cultural Conflicts*

On September 24, 2009 a Fenger High School student, Derrion Albert, was killed,
a victim of Fenger High School students’ violence. He was beaten to death with wooden
planks, fists and feet. The fight was not an unusual event for Fenger, but it was the first
death for that school. There were three video sources that filmed his death that were
reported on television news programs for days on end. This fight involving 50 students
brought to the forefront the reality of teen violence that exists on the national, state, and
local levels. Derrion Albert was an Altgeld Gardens resident who attended Fenger
located in Roseland five miles from home on the other side of the geographical barriers
that isolate Altgeld Gardens. Ever since Carver High School, located adjacent to Altgeld
Gardens, was restructured as a military academy in 2006, Altgeld Gardens’ teens have
been attending Fenger. This half-square mile neighborhood is known as the “Ville”.

Fenger is located within this small area. The student body segmented themselves based on the students’ home neighborhood, either Altgeld Gardens or the Ville. The violent nature of their rivalry frequently results in fights in the school or surrounding area.

Student interviews revealed the general response to Albert’s death was remorse and sadness. This death was neither planned nor wanted. The brother of one student facing criminal charges and a participant stated, “I apologize that something bad happened. But I might (never) see out of my left eye or see my brother again.”

This discussion of the beating death of Albert is largely based on *Chicago Tribune* articles printed over a period of several months which center on the death, brief general history of violence in schools, and interviews with parents and students of Fenger and other Chicago high schools. Also, the event will be viewed from the perspective of cultural influences. Observations made by school and police officials agree that violent conflicts in schools may be an outgrowth of racial, gang, or drug rivalries, but in the instance of Fenger they agree it is due to territory or neighborhood control. The comparison of both neighborhoods’ cultures reveals they have more characteristics in common than differences. Both neighborhoods are described as being African American, poor and crime ridden. As revealed in the interviews, they derive their identity from their neighborhood values and customs. They are loyal to their community and willing to resort to violence to defend it against others. Each time they engage in one of these violent confrontations, their actions serve to reaffirm and validate their identities as members of the community they represent. As one Ville student stated, “It’s the
neighborhood we’re from, who we are, how we act, what we do.” It’s interesting to note this student’s words closely parallel the generally accepted definition of ‘culture’; ways of being, knowing and doing. Another student said, “I’m not gonna run from it. Why should I have to run from where I live? If I have to run from where I live, where else do I go?” This student appears to be willing to fight to preserve his personal and community identity. Should those identities be denied him, there is no acceptable alternative available to him. Both Altgeld Gardens and Ville students reported that in their neighborhood (culture) fighting when challenged was expected of them, hence the importance of maintaining a ‘hard’ exterior and not appearing frightened or weak. The Altgeld Gardens students are fighting for equal respect and to find their place in the school culture. Unfortunately, they must first defend themselves, with equal violence, against an established culture that resents them being there. The ever present violence has taken its toll on how teens view themselves and their futures. Some simply don’t believe they have one. “I don’t think a new day is promised to nobody. Anything could happen at any time.” Imagine walking or riding a bus alone without any visible support, if not with a sibling. Each one is trying to maintain a fearless demeanor while being vigilant. This occurs twice daily; mentally and physically preparing before and after school, hoping they have achieved a ‘safe passage’ while walking the ‘gauntlet’ from the street to the school’s doors. One interview revealed that fighting is not the first choice of some participants, “How may times you want me to walk away? We’ve been running for so long and I’m tired of running. Running only leads to more running.” It was interesting to note that neither group could define what originally brought about this
rivalry. Older Ville residents claim this has been going on since the 1970’s. Others claim it has been only several years, which seems more plausible because Carver High School became a military academy in 2006. Students have no clear understanding other than it has been embedded in their cultural beliefs that Altgeld Gardens is their rival. One Ville student stated, “As far as I know, they don’t like us, and the way I feel, we don’t like them.” Some Ville parents are in agreement, “Ain’t there a high school out there? Why would you put them here?” On the surface it appears these are two rival groups should get along because of similarities. However, Ville has so few resources and livable space and are reluctant to share any of it. They deny Altgeld Gardens’ easy access and Altgeld Gardens is willing to fight for what is being withheld from them, attendance at Fenger High School without confrontations. Neither side has accepted the label of aggressor. The two groups also share positive characteristics of being honor roll students, working part-time after school jobs, aspirations for attending college and upward mobility.

Students and parents in Altgeld Gardens have taken a pro-active role in the interest of the students’ safety in the Ville and in school. Following Albert’s death, 10 parents sued the Chicago Public School because they felt the school was not safe. In a closed federal court hearing, they were given the option of attending Morgan Park High School, Julian High School, Lincoln Park Academy or Carver Military Academy. Parents also requested that a charter school be constructed in Altgeld Gardens as opposed to busing to more distant schools. It was reported that the school board stated plans for a charter school in Altgeld Gardens scheduled for opening next school year. The general
thinking of both groups appears to be restoring their separation, rather than long term commitment to finding a means of them co-existing.

In response to the need for student safety and wide-spread publicity, school police and community organizations developed strategies and meetings intended to resolve conflicts and provide safety. Fenger started the ‘safe passage’ program that provides students with yellow school buses for transportation from Altgeld Gardens to and from Fenger. The antiviolence group, CeaseFire, held meetings on conflict resolution and offered to mediate meetings between the two groups. President Obama sent two cabinet members to look into solutions for national school violence incidents. These special interest groups’ interest was limited to special funding or the eruption of larger, newer problems in other schools. Elizabeth Dozier, Fenger’s principal, sought long term solutions. One Chicago Tribune article reported the principal’s main goals were to provide a safe and structured school environment. Community members and students attested to a marked improvement in the school climate over the last seven months of the school term.

To gain a better understanding of what Chicago’s teens must endure in order to attend high school, Chicago Tribune reporters talked with and shadowed teens across the city. The students described the personal safety issues they faced, as well, as their perspective on the school violence problems. One male honor roll student attends an all-boys’ school in Englewood. He describes how he navigates two worlds. He stated “Violence is nothing a teenager should ever get used to.” At school he is considered to be an exceptional, strong, beautiful black man. In his neighborhood he does his best to
blend in. To survive, he has to switch up his behavior. He acknowledges his dual-identity functions as a social tool, letting the situation determine which identity is appropriate. Delpit (1988), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Johnson (2003) speak of the value of a dual-identity to preserve and honor an African American home-cultural identity while developing knowledge and skills needed to improve academic performance using materials imbedded in mainstream white middle-class life experiences and values.

This student speaks of a dual identity skill set used for a different purpose. He has developed strategies that enable him to function well in school while the other identity provides personal survival skills in his neighborhood. A female student at Steinmetz has been practicing survival tactics, “One wrong word is all it takes to get a bullet in the head.” She warns against wearing a hooded sweat shirt to school with gang colors, “unless you’re in a gang or angling for trouble.” Another female student stated she has been observing and learning survival tactics since the third grade. She must walk a mile home from Little Village’s Lawndale High School. On the way, she’ll often stop to talk to young men she knows to be in gangs. “I know what I’m doing. They’re not going to shoot girls.”

In summary, political and societal changes initiated by CHA, if achieved as planned and are sustainable, will bring about an evolution of Altgeld Gardens’ culture. Knowledgeable, easily accessible resources can provide support, role models, social and job related skill-sets through education and job training vital for offsetting deficits created by the social and geographical isolation. These skills can increase residents’ social currency or capital. Preparedness linked to opportunities to utilize these assets in
mainstream society increases the odds of achieving their life goals in a modern, complex society. As in the past, the local school’s cultural climate is also in transition poised to provide schooling required to serve the needs of a community that is programmed to evolve from a low-income, unemployed community members with a renewed vision of a better life for themselves and their children.

To keep pace with CHA’s monetary investment and new social concerns for revitalizing Altgeld Gardens’ residents, Chicago Public Schools would do well to be involved in and finance Carver Primary’s redefined educational focus, facility maintenance and improvements, as well as promote professional development and training for teachers. In addition to new developments initiated by CHA, the school now has a 12-month school year, a new principal, and expansion of grades to include fourth grade.

Frustrations of both Altgeld Gardens and Ville groups related primarily to confrontations and violence caused by neighborhood rivalry is expressed in anger and violence, behaviors consistent with both their home cultures. Sources indicate most behavior modifications are strategies used to safely travel to and from school while maintaining their home culture identities. Rankin states (2000) weakly organized neighborhoods often suffer from a deficit of effective community norms, such that residents are exposed to cultural socialization and role modeling that reinforces non-normative attitudes and behaviors (p. 142). In this climate, not only are youth and adults alike less likely to internalize conventional attitudes toward education, steady employment and family stability, but a lack of normative reinforcement. Should a
sufficient number of Altgeld Gardens’ students remain at Fenger by not taking advantage of the school transfers offered they could benefit from developing coping strategies via a dual identity plan? Possibly these groups are not aware of or have the knowledge or social skills that enable them to develop an alternative identity and attending behavior useful for better conforming to the school culture. The focus appears to center on the rival groups toward each other instead. Literature and the testimony of an Englewood student attests to the necessity of using different behavior patterns depending on the situation while not assuming these alternative mindset and actions betray or replace the value of life experiences embedded in the home culture. The concept and value of developing dual identities appears to be foreign to them.

The concept of neighborhood schools, usually relate to elementary schools within walking distance of home. Your classmates are usually your neighbors. These schools usually reflect home culture values and need of the students they serve. Children growing up in the same neighbors usually share values, customs, and world views which they bring to school as their home culture. High school is usually more remotely located and the student body is multi-cultural. In the case of the Ville, Fenger, like their elementary school, is within their neighborhood boundaries and before Altgeld Gardens arrived; their home culture provided viable, uncontested behavior patterns. In 2006, when Altgeld Gardens began attending Fenger, they were identified as ‘outsiders’ without local community support and consistent with a similar home culture responded to a lack of acceptance with fighting. It was interesting to note the weapons of choice were fists and wooden planks, but did not include knives and guns which are readily accessible
in both neighborhoods which lead to support students’ comments that Albert’s death was neither planned nor intentional. By refocusing both groups’ attention to developing or strengthening school culture skills and indirectly mainstream coping skills, they will have evened the playing field and each group will have an opportunity to be successful.
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VITA

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