Effective Writing Instruction
for African American
English
Speakers

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Public schools across America are failing to meet the literacy needs of students of color (Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, & Lovelace, 2009). Since 1971, African American, Latino/Latina, and Native American students have significantly underperformed Whites on national achievement tests of reading and writing (National Assessment of Education Progress, 2009). In 1998, White 8th grade students scored 26 points higher than Black 8th graders on national writing assessments. The point differential between the national writing scores of Black and White 8th graders remained unchanged at 26 points in 2011. For 12th grade students in America, the point differential in writing scores between Whites and Blacks has increased over time with Whites outscoring Blacks by 21 points in 1998 and 29 points in 2011. This chasm is widely referred to as the Black-White achievement gap (Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

Educational researchers have identified a multitude of factors that hinder the literacy achievement of students of color and reinforce the Black-White achievement gap. In a study of the relationship between dialect shifting and reading performance, Craig, Zhang, Hensel, & Quinn (2009) uncovered two factors that negatively influence the literacy achievement of students of color: home literacy practices and the nature of early reading instruction. While the home literacy practices of White, middle class children are closely aligned with the academic expectations of early literacy instruction in schools, Black children are far less likely to own their own books, be read to daily, or have exposure to a variety of print materials (Craig, Zhang, Hensel, & Quinn, 2009). These and other factors prevent Black students from achieving the same levels of academic success as their White, middle class peers.

Another factor that affects the literacy performance of African American students and inevitably contributes to the achievement disparity between Blacks and Whites is oral language. Many African American children adhere to a unique linguistic dialect that differs from the form of Standard American English (SAE) used in American schools. Educational scholars who have studied this dialect refer to it by a variety of interchangeable terms including Black English, Ebonics, African American

English, African American Language, and African American English (O'Grady et al., 2005). African American English (AAE) is a term widely used by scholars in the last two decades to describe the dialect spoken by some African Americans.

> **Teachers of AAE speakers often underestimate the extent of the linguistic abilities their students possess (Wheeler, 2008).**

Frequently spoken in large, urban areas, AAE is a systematic, rule-bound, syntactic speech system that promotes cultural unity among its speakers (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Speakers of AAE often use this unique dialect to express their most heartfelt emotions of joy, happiness, humor, anger, or frustration (Sealey-Ruiz, 2005). Despite its rich, cultural heritage, AAE is often associated with deficient or substandard forms of communication (Thompson, 2002). Teachers of AAE speakers often underestimate the extent of the linguistic abilities their students possess (Wheeler, 2008). These teachers are likely to require African American students to exclusively use SAE when engaged in reading, writing, and speaking activities and avert student attempts to speak or write in their native dialect. This type of instructional practice can send children the message that their way of speaking is unacceptable and incorrect. According to Godley et al. (2006), teachers' unwillingness to acknowledge alternative English dialects can lead to lowered teacher expectations as well as lowered literacy performance for non-standard English speakers. Dundes & Spence (2007) suggest that the "devaluation of a way of speaking is based on the power structure and not on the inherent value of a dialect [which] reveals how our social norms unfairly disadvantage an entire segment of the population" (p. 85). Thus, teachers of AAE speaking students have the responsibility of helping students succeed in tasks that require the use of SAE

without belittling or devaluing students' home language. However, research suggests that very few teachers are prepared to accomplish this task (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009).

Teacher preparation and professional development programs do little in preparing educators to meet the literacy needs of AAE speakers (Wheeler, 2009). Teachers lack knowledge of the oral and written features of AAE as well as its historical evolution and significance. Without this knowledge, teachers are likely to overlook the strong ties between students' home language and their cultural identity (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009).   The large number of AAE speakers in America's urban schools warrants the need for educational research in this area.   As the White-Black achievement gap in writing continues to prosper, literacy educators are obligated to seek avenues for minimizing the blaring differences in the achievement levels of Blacks and Whites. This paper will address the role of AAE in the academic performance of Black students. Specifically, it will answer the following questions:

1. What does research say about the impact of AAE on writing development?

2. How can we prepare urban teachers of writing to provide culturally relevant literacy instruction for speakers of AAE?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Historical Background

African American English is a pidgin-Creole whose origins have been linked to many West African Languages as well as the early English creoles that evolved in Africa and the African Diaspora (Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Stockman, 2010; Taylor, 1972). During the late 19th century, Southern White American slave owners' attempt to deny slaves the right to oral and

written communication resulted in hybrid versions of speech comprised of Hausa, Mandingo, Vai, Wolof, and Southern White English (SWE) (Coleman & Daniel, 2000). Fear of slave solidarity and rebellion eventually provoked the creation of laws making it illegal to teach slaves to read and write (Coleman & Daniel, 2000). South Carolina became the first state to pass legislation which prohibited slaves from learning to read or write in 1740 (South Carolina Slave Code, article 45).

> Whereas, the having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money.

Furthermore, slaves were physically separated from other members of society and forbidden to attend schools. Desperate to form communal ties with other natives of their continent, African slaves brought to America adopted clever means of communication that combined both verbal and nonverbal communicative tools from English and their native languages (Coleman & Daniel, 2000). Thus, African American English evolved as a culturally unifying means of communication for Blacks in the United States (Stockman, 2010).

Features

While African American English has been regarded as illogical and flawed, it is in fact a sophisticated linguistic system comprised of logical features and rules. Educational researchers have documented syntactic, phonological, semantic, and stylistic characteristics of AAE (Baxter & Holland,

2007; Dyson & Smitheran, 2009; Fogel & Ehri, 2010; Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004). Space and time constraints prevent the inclusion of a comprehensive description of the features of AAE. Thus, this section will include a brief overview of the key features of AAE in the categories of grammar, pronunciation, verbal traditions and semantics.

> **" Thus, African American English evolved as a culturally unifying means of communication for Blacks in the United States (Stockman, 2010).**

One prominent grammatical feature of AAE involves the use of the word *be* before another verb. For example, in the sentence "She be ridin' her bike to school", *be* is used to suggest the habitual nature of the girl's tendency to ride her bike. In other words, the speaker is suggesting that the girl always rides her bike to school. In this case, "be" does not refer to the tense of the verb, but rather the frequency of the action. This grammatical feature is commonly used among AAE speakers (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Smitherman,1998). The absence of the verb "be" (in any form), known as "zero copula",   is used to describe events that are currently taking place. In the sentence, She ridin' her bike to school, the speaker is indicating that the girl is riding her bike to school right now. The use of zero copula can be traced to West African languages such as Twi and Yoruba in which copulative verbs are rarely, if ever, used (Smitherman, 1998).

AAE also contains distinctive features in pronunciation. Speakers of AAE use variations of SAE that characterize their speech and language patterns. One example of this phenomenon is what linguistics refer to as post voliac R deletion (Smitherman, 1998). This occurs when speakers of AAE drop or omit the R sound at the end of words. Therefore, one would say "mo" or "po" rather than the SAE versions of the words "more" and "poor". Another pronunciation feature of AAE involves the digraph "th". Speakers of

AAE pronounce words ending with th using the sound made by the letter f. In AAE, mouth is pronounced as *mouf*, death becomes *def*. Researchers have linked this nuance to languages of West Africa that have no sound for the *th* combination. It is believed that slaves from West Africa began using the most similar sound in their language to the *th* sound in SAE, which resulted in this tendency (Smitherman, 1998).

Verbal traditions are another common feature of AAE. Speakers of AAE engage in dramatic dialogues that emphasize the use of entertainment and humor. A prominent verbal tradition in AAE speaking communities is the verbal game known as playing the dozens. In this linguistic battle, players create spontaneous jokes about the physical, mental, economic, etc. status of the opponent's mother. The jokes, usually performed in front of a group of onlookers, are intended to be harmless. Players attempt to "one up" each other and win the favor of the crowd. The dozens originated from the selling of slaves in America (Sealy-Ruiz, 2005). African slaves in good physical shape were sold for the highest prices, while slaves in poor shape or those with disabilities were combined into groups of twelve and sold at a discounted rate (Sealy-Ruiz, 2005). These groups became known as "Dozens" and members were subjected to even more deplorable conditions than slaves who garnered a high sales tag (Sealy-Ruiz, 2005). The depressing conditions often pushed slaves to their limits and invoked turmoil among the group. To avoid punishment for physical attacks against one another, members of the dozens resorted to linguistic challenges to demonstrate their prowess (Sealy-Ruiz, 2005).

Another similar verbal tradition among AAE speakers is the use of braggadocio. Smitherman (1998) defines braggadocio as "high talk". Using this form of self-promotion AAE speakers tout their beauty, strength, possessions, intelligence, etc. A popular version of braggadocio can be found in rap music. In the lyrics of rap songs, rap artists are notorious for citing the superiority of their rhymes in comparison to other rap artists. They boast of their extravagant wealth, lifestyle, and material possessions. Braggadacio is commonly found in AAE speaking communities as men, women, and children interact in their daily lives.

Semantics also play a significant role in the oral production of AAE. Historically linked phrases such as "forty acres and a mule" or "the three-fifths rule" have cultural relevance and importance to AAE speakers. The term "forty acres and a mule" refers to the United States government's failure to follow through on its promise to compensate slaves by providing them with reparations in the form of forty acres and one mule. When AAE speakers use this term, they are highlighting the longstanding ill-treatment of Blacks in America. Smitherman (1998) portrays the semantics of AAE as, "enduring words and phrases, widespread words and phrases that go across generations, go across classes, that have been around for a long time and that in fact reflect the reality of the African American experience" (p. 23).

> **Speakers of AAE engage in dramatic dialogues that emphasize the use of entertainment and humor.**

Another semantic feature of AAE has its roots in the traditions of many West African languages. The idea of taking a word or phrase and assigning the opposite meaning to it is common in West African languages. AAE speakers have adopted this practice and use it on words such as "bad" meaning something is really good and "sick" referring to something that was performed extremely well. Interestingly, many of these words have crossed over into the mainstream public and are used by speakers of SAE. In these cases, the words or phrases become acceptable and are no longer attributed to AAE but are rendered acceptable by the general public. Smitherman (1998) describes this concept using the

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high five. She suggests that this Americanized tradition originated from a West African practice which calls for a person that is in total agreement with something another has said to put his or hand in the other person's hand as an indication that they in fact support the speaker's thoughts.

Communicative Disconnects Between Teachers and Students

Speakers of AAE are mistakenly viewed as cognitively deficient. According to a study conducted by Bowie & Bond (1994), a majority of elementary school teachers equate AAE with the use of faulty, illogical grammar, and view AAE speakers as being "lazy and sloppy" in their speech. This deficient view of AAE and its speakers is prevalent among a large majority of SAE speakers. Teachers' perceptions of AAE create covert biases in the classroom and negatively influence the instruction that African American children receive. Many White middle class teachers view SAE as correct while other English dialects are seen as subpar. As a result, teachers engage in a corrective approach with AAE speakers. Many teachers employ corrective methods when teaching reading and writing to children that speak AAE. When well-meaning educators correct students' use of AAE without acknowledging the documented features of AAE that represent Sociocultural ties to a student's home, family, and community (Wheeler & Swords, 2006), students receive the message that their way of speaking is wrong and should be converted to SAE without regard to the context in which it is used. Furthermore, speakers of AAE are led to believe that they are the only population that speaks a dialect which deviates from SAE (Wolfram, 1999). These unharmonious relationships lead to communicative disconnects between teachers and students.

In their study of the role of AAE discourse in writing classrooms, Dyson & Smitherman (2009) explore the relationship between an AAE speaking emergent writer Tionna, and her SAE speaking classroom teacher. Tionna, an energetic, boisterous 6 year old enjoys writing and talking. Her writing reflects the AAE she uses when speaking. Tionna's teacher, hoping to improve Tionna's writing, makes suggestions that disregard Tionna's clever use of AAE and transforms Tionna's writing from AAE into SAE, citing the AAE version as wrong and not, "sounding right". At times, Tionna is confused and silent when asked to correct her writing to make it sound better. The teacher, not recognizing Tionna's use of AAE, simply sees Tionna's writing as an incorrect version of SAE. Like Tionna, children that speak AAE imitate the voices of the people in their families and communities. For these children the AAE they speak is a direct reflection of the language they hear spoken by their parents, grandparents, community members, friends, preachers, radio hosts, favorite musical artists, and so on. To be told that the way they speak or write, "doesn't sound right" communicates to AAE speakers that everything they know and understand to be true and acceptable about the way they speak is wrong.

In 2012, Johnson and VanBrackle studied the responses of test evaluators to AAE, ESL, and SAE errors on a state mandated writing exam. Using actual essays from a previous state writing exam, the authors intentionally inserted errors reflective of AAE, ESL, and SAE into nine writing samples for raters to evaluate. There were three samples, a low, intermediate, and high, for each of the linguistic dialects (SAE, AAE, and ESL). Eight errors were inserted into each of the nine writing samples. Despite, the equal number of errors present in each sample, the authors found that raters demonstrated a bias toward errors that were written in AAE. Specifically, the researchers found that a low essay written in AAE is 4.2 times more likely to receive a failing score than a low essay written using errors typical of ESL students. In contrast, a low ESL essay was only 0.3 times more likely to fail than an intermediate AAE essay. Across the board, AAE writers appeared to be at a disadvantage when compared to other writers at the same level.

Intermediate essays written in AAE were 7.6 times as likely to fail as intermediate essays written in SAE. High AAE essays were 9.1 times as likely to fail as a high SAE essay. The authors concluded that discrimination against the written features, often considered errors, or AAE could at least in part account for the discrepancies in the scores of AAE and SAE speakers on standardized tests. Biased views of AAE and speakers of AAE can place these students at an academic disadvantage.

> **Bidialectal students, or students that are able to code switch from AAE to SAE, outperform their peers that exclusively speak AAE on both reading and writing assessments (Craig & Washington, 2004).**

National attention was given to the growing communicative disconnects between SAE teachers and AAE speaking students in 1979 when seven parents sued the Ann Arbor school district claiming their children's reading failures were the result of ineffective teaching practices that did not take into account their children's home language. The parents felt that the school district did not adequately prepare teachers to assist the literacy development of children whose home language differed from SAE. The court required the school district to implement programs that would educate teachers about the features and characteristics of AAE. Seventeen years later, the Ebonics debate was initiated in Oakland when the school district there passed a similar mandate. Despite attempts to legitimize AAE as a systematic linguistic system, most people continued to view AAE as a substandard version of SAE. Even prominent African American leaders such as the reverend Jesse Jackson spoke out against the mandate saying, "I understand the attempt to reach out to these children, but this is an unacceptable surrender, border lining on disgrace" (Lewis, 1996, p. B-9). Jackson later retracted his statement after delving deeper into the

mandate by stating, "They're not trying to teach Black English as a standard language. They're looking for tools to teach children standard English so they might be competitive" (Davidson, 1996, p. A-5).

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING WRITING TO AAE SPEAKERS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Students that speak AAE perform less well than their SAE speaking counterparts on national assessments of writing. Bidialectal students, or students that are able to code switch from AAE to SAE, outperform their peers that exclusively speak AAE on both reading and writing assessments (Craig & Washington, 2004). Teachers that are uninformed about the features of AAE are unable to determine when errors in students' writing are related to their dialect. Fogel & Ehri (2010) described the following example of a how a teacher's lack of knowledge about AAE may cause him or her to misdiagnose a students' correct response as wrong:

> When teaching various word families such as the fan/ran/man set, AAE Speaking students may offer dialect appropriate instances such as han' (hand) or san' (sand). Teacher rejection and repeated correction of such instances without some acknowledgement of their source are likely to result in students' feeling linguistically inadequate, insecure, and confused (Baratz, 1969; Delpit, 1998; Smitherman, 2000). (p. 466)

Examples such as the one given above indicate the need for teachers of AAE speakers to have some knowledge of the characteristics of AAE. In 1971, Haynes and Taylor found that educational programs on dialects were necessary for teachers and other school personnel involved in the literacy instruction provided to AAE speakers. Still K-12 schools continue to offer little if any professional development for teachers related to the type of instruction required for AAE speakers. Educational

researchers have recommended the inclusion of culturally relevant teaching practices in teacher preparation programs for preservice teachers (Delpit, 1998; Fogel & Ehri, 2006; Gay, 2002). Likewise, researchers support the education of teachers through linguistic and cultural awareness programs (Wolfram, 2000). As teachers gain knowledge of teaching strategies and practices that support the writing development of AAE speakers, AAE speaking students are likely to see gains in their performance on standardized tests of writing.

Contrastive Analysis

A well-documented strategy for assisting AAE speakers with their writing is called contrastive analysis (Fogel & Ehri, 2006). In this instructional approach, the grammatical features of one dialect are highlighted and compared to the features of another dialect. Using the contrastive analysis approach, students are able to gain specific knowledge about their own language system and compare those features with SAE (Fogel & Ehri, 2006). There are many advantages to using the contrastive analysis approach. First, the approach supports the acquisition of SAE without belittling the students' use of AAE. Second, the contrastive analysis approach is derived from the teaching-English-as-a-second-language (TESL). It has been successfully used to provide SAE instruction to foreign students attempting to learn SAE.

In their 2006 study on language and culture in the classroom, Wheeler and Swords cite the benefits of using a contrastive analysis approach to teaching literacy to AAE speakers. While demonstrating concepts regarding the variety in languages and the ways in which people vary their speech depending on the situation, Wheeler taught her third grade students to compare various features of their home language to aspects of SAE. After studying the way some authors use varied language in children's books, students used a contrastive approach to produce their own

pieces of writing. One student in the class wrote a book which featured a main character who used non standard versions of English. The student included an author's note which let readers know that his use of varied language with the main character was done intentionally and that he was aware of the more widely-accepted standard version of speech.

Communicative Flexibility

Dyson and Smitherman (2009) support the use of a strategy they call flexible communication to assist young AAE speakers with writing. Communicative flexibility draws on student's home language and the talk they use during dramatic play. As part of this strategy, children are exposed to diverse literature; instructed on language through dramatic play; and taught to stay attuned to the diverse voices in their homes, schools, and communities (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009). Children focus less on "sounding right", and learn to recognize and appreciate when certain forms of English are most appropriate.

Dyson (2004) suggests that having students "divide" their speech into categories of home and school language is an unrealistic task given the complex nature of children's lives. The author insists that children's ability to use language flexibly is disregarded when they are asked to simply make a choice between the way they speak at home and school. Children need guidance and flexibility in the varied ways that language can be used, adapted, and modified in their writing.

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Code Switching

Another strategy that has proven useful in improving the writing of AAE speaking students is code-switching. Code-switching pedagogies encourage the use of students' home language to situate and dissect relevant contexts for the use of SAE (Bakhtin, 1986; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, Wheeler & Swords, 2006). "Rather than regard [AAE] features as incorrect, code-switching pedagogies require that teachers make a transition from the paradigm of correction to helping students use language patterns for appropriate settings. " (Hill, 2009, p. 12). By allowing students to choose the most appropriate language for a given situation or purpose, teachers demonstrate respect for diversity and an appreciation for linguistic and cultural differences (Wheeler& Swords, 2006). Thus, teachers must be versed in the comparative characteristics of both SAE and AAE in order to assist learners in making connections between the two.

> **By allowing students to choose the most appropriate language for a given situation or purpose, teachers demonstrate respect for diversity and an appreciation for linguistic and cultural differences (Wheeler& Swords, 2006).**

Hill (2009) cited an example of an effective use of code-switching as instructional tool as outlined by Wheeler and Swords (2006). It refers to the feature of AAE in which an owner + the object owned= possession:

> The [AAE] feature *friend house*… corresponds with the [SAE] feature *friend's house*. Rather than assume that students do not understand possession, teachers must juxtapose grammatical differences side by side

and help students determine the appropriate context for use (Wheeler & Swords, 2006) When writing a non standard narrative, for example, *friend house* would be appropriate. *Friend's house* would be appropriate for a formal essay or standardized test. (Hill, 2009, p.12).

Creating Curricular Bookends

Dyson (2004) highlights the importance of beginning and ending writing endeavors with a public forum in which students give and receive feedback; report on the status of their work; and share their final publications with a group of their peers. The author points to the success of Rita, a classroom teacher in her yearlong ethnographic study of first grade students, in using a bookend approach to support and develop her students' writing in the classroom. The students in Rita's classroom "had decisions to make about what and with whom to write; they had to consider varied strategies for participating in writing events, be those strategies about encoding words or collaborating with others" (Dyson, 2004,p. 188).

Dyson insists that a bookend approach to writing with AAE writers helps teachers "access children's sociocultural resources" (2004, p.188). Having open-ended periods of writing allowed both Rita and her students to communicate, collaborate, and learn from one another. The type of instructional learning that takes place during a bookend approach offers opportunities that are not readily available in more traditional approach to writing instruction. Using a bookend approach provides opportunities for AAE speakers to converse in their native dialect as they use feedback from peers to produce writing that most clearly expresses their intended meaning.

CONCLUSION

Despite abundant educational research citing AAE as a rich linguistic system, children that speak

AAE are at a disadvantage in America's public schools (Baratz, 1969; Delpit, 1998; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2000; Wheeler & Swords, 2006). Teachers lack the knowledge of nonstandard dialects that children from diverse backgrounds bring to the classroom. By engaging in strategies such as contrastive analysis, flexible communication, and code switching, classroom teachers can help speakers of AAE become more proficient writers. The strategies cited in this article will help teachers recognize and appreciate the cultural richness that is present in the linguistic features of AAE. Likewise, the use of such strategies will help teachers acknowledge the strengths that speakers of AAE bring to the classroom.

The false assumption that these students are unintelligent and lack sophisticated use of language serves to further marginalize them and stunt their opportunities for academic achievement. Teachers of AAE speaking students require professional development in the areas of nonstandard English dialect speaking students if we are to improve literacy instruction and achievement of African American students in urban schools and take steps towards bridging the linguistic divide between SAE speaking Whites and AAE speaking Blacks in America.

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