

I WROTE IT LIKE THIS 'CAUSE
THAT'S JUST HOW HE SAID IT:
FINDING SPACE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH
IN A SIXTH GRADE CLASSROOM

by

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To my students:
Your names are omitted from this paper,
but are forever etched in my memory.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Said vat you got to said, and don't kick aftervard!
-Gust Runquist, at a church meeting, c. 1930

Growing up in northern Wisconsin, I loved hearing my mother tell stories of the immigrant characters who populated those rural woods years before my time. How we'd all laugh when the punch line, which everyone had heard a hundred times, finally came. There's the guy who's charged with setting up extra seating in church, so he's carrying a plank which he'll lay atop two chairs to form a bench. Someone walks behind him, gets hit with the plank, and makes a fuss. When repeated in a thick, Swede Finn¹ accent, his indignant response, "I don't got eyes in my rear!" brings howls of laughter. Then there's the guy who was chastised for not signaling as he prepared to turn from the highway into the little store owned by my grandparents. He made clear his justification: "Don't you know I *always* turn here?" By this time, we're usually laughing so hard we're crying. We tell the story of my grandmother, whose father brought his hard-nosed, "old country" ways with him to Wisconsin. Chasing the cows one cold winter night, she complained,

¹ Swede Finns are ethnic Swedes who resided in western Finland, which had been heavily settled by Swedes, the primary colonial power in the region. Those living there today refer to themselves as Finland Swedes.

“Nobody loves me, and my hands are cold.” Her father’s unsympathetic reply, “God loves you, and you can sit on your hands,” still serves my family as a “stop complaining” message in many situations. This didn’t end her complaining, however. Years later, as she became old and sick, she would often lament, “You don’t know what it’s like to be like this here.”

These stories themselves, of course, are not really that funny. If I took them to an open mike night at the local comedy club, I’d draw more puzzled looks than laughs. But to our family, they are priceless. These stories tell our history. They bind generation to generation, the “old country” to the new, giving us a feeling of solidarity and strength. The thick accent and verbatim immigrant grammar with which they are always repeated remind us that not so long ago, our family – our whole community – was just recently arrived off the boats, through Canada or Ellis Island, from Finland. They started a small church, built a school, opened a country store, worked the land, and two short generations later, sent their grandchildren, now full-fledged, English-speaking Americans, off to college.

The pride I have for my heritage is obvious. Any editor of this paper who would dare to suggest the correction “Say what you have to say and don’t kick afterward” would be met with solid refusal. The way these lines are delivered is as important, if not more so, than their content. They remind us where we came from, and how very far we have come. The accent and grammar don’t just help to tell the story, they are the story.

Another Story

Who are we looking for, who are we looking for?

It's Equiano we're looking for.

Has he gone to the stream? Let him come back.

Has he gone to the farm? Let him return.

It's Equiano we're looking for.

- Kwa chant about the disappearance of an African boy, Equiano

In 1619, the story of another group of people's arrival to America began. The first slave ship, carrying twenty or so West African slaves, arrived in Jamestown, Virginia. Unlike my grandparents, these immigrants did not come of their own free will, looking to make a better life for their families. They were kidnapped and stolen from their communities, brought to Europe, the Caribbean, and finally America, through the dreadful and often deadly Middle Passage. Like my grandparents, however, they brought their stories, their religion, their language, and the very human instinct to pass these down to their children. Through the dismantling of families, so much a part of the slave trade, their stories of the "old country" were mostly lost. Many African Americans today do not know their ancestors' country of origin. The Voodoo practiced in Africa still thrives

in Haiti and small parts of the southern United States, but most slaves eventually adopted Christianity as their religion. Vestiges of the language, however, at some of its deepest linguistic levels, have remained. Those of us who have the privilege of spending our days in classrooms with African American children are very accustomed to hearing phrases such as, “We tired” and “How long you been a teacher?” Yes, hearing these children speak is a privilege. They are giving us a glance back at the shores of West Africa where their ancestors were sold into slavery and a sense of the solidarity and strength they find in their families and culture today. They resist being told their language is wrong, just as I would resist any editing of my family’s stories.

For all our commonalities, this is where my story and that of my African American students begin to diverge. I can refuse to “correct” the ethnic-sounding voices of my past, and get away with it. I demonstrated that I understand these utterances are not “standard” by putting them in quotation marks and italics. I easily switch back and forth between the accented, immigrant language of my family stories and Standard American English (SAE) pronunciations and structures of educated Americans, knowing that I belong to both groups. I belong to a privileged, white class, and my history and culture is not threatened.

My students are not so fortunate. When they speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE),² the language of their history and their homes, they are judged to be uneducated, and even ignorant. They are discriminated against in housing and

² The language spoken by African Americans has been referred as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), African American English (AAE), Black English Vernacular (BEV), Black English (BE), Black Language, and Ebonics. For this study, I use AAVE, a term currently preferred by many linguists.

employment (Baugh, 2000). Well-meaning educators assume their language is a detriment to them, lacking in the vocabulary necessary for precise thinking and expression, and take it upon themselves to “fix” the problem (Turner, 1996). With the best of intentions, I once found myself in an editing conference with a student, saying, “‘We was leaving’ or ‘We were leaving....’ Which sounds *correct*?” Of course, both are correct, depending on the context, and by communicating otherwise, I have shown my own ignorance of language, not that of my students.

Over the years, linguists have formulated and discussed theories of the origins of African American Vernacular English. One is the creolist theory, which holds that African American Vernacular English has its roots in the languages of West Africa. Although this region is home to hundreds of languages, “constant and intimate interethnic contact over thousands of years has forged a profound typological unity among the languages of the area” (DeBose, 1993, p. 365). As slaves from different African countries were captured and confined together, as they spent time together in the cramped and horrid conditions of the ships of the Middle Passage, and as they lived and toiled together on the plantations of America, they began to create a pidgin, or a new language developed by speakers of different languages who need to communicate with each other. Because of the aforementioned relationship among their native languages, the pidgin which developed retained substrate structures and features common to them all. The pidgin spoken by the earliest slaves was then passed down to their children, for whom it became their native language. This process is called creolization. Analyzing AAVE as having developed from this West African substrate and subsequent pidgin and creole, as

opposed to being a variation of English, allows us to look at the language as a system, rather than as a list of ways it deviates from SAE (DeBose, 1993).

Other theories of the origins of AAVE include the Anglicist or dialectologist hypotheses, which view AAVE as a variety of English, rather than a language in its own right. These theories are explored in more detail in Chapter Two. Also in Chapter Two, I discuss many of the distinctions between AAVE and SAE, and show how they are manifested (and misinterpreted) in the speech and writing of African Americans.

Historically, education has not recognized AAVE as having a rule-governed grammar different from that of SAE. It has been viewed as “talking flat,” “sloven speech,” “corrupt speech,” “broken English,” and its speakers called “verbally destitute,” “linguistically handicapped,” and “linguistically deprived” (Smith, 2002, p. 17). This belief has resulted in African American children being referred to speech clinics and special education programs (Smith, 2002). Even when this drastic a measure is not taken, however, educators have seen the speech patterns of their African American students as something to fix, not as linguistically rich and grammatically correct AAVE. The results of this “fixing” have been the large and growing achievement gap between African American and white students.

The concept of AAVE as more than incorrect English is not new. African American academics such as Zora Neale Hurston, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Carter Woodson, and Lorenzo Turner all “wrote positively about...Black English” and it was “thoroughly analyzed” by Turner (Smitherman, 1981, p. 21). In the late 1960s, white researchers began to study AAVE. One of the first was William Labov, who

conducted extensive studies of AAVE in New York City. His studies show that the efforts of educators to correct and change the language of their students alienated them. The main cause of reading failure in African American boys, he found, was not dialect and grammar differences, but “a cultural conflict between the vernacular culture and the schoolroom” (Labov, 1970, p. 11). He found that the students who were most engaged in the street culture had the poorest results in reading performance. While their more culturally isolated peers remained one to two years below grade level throughout their academic careers, those who were full participating members of the “vernacular culture” attained, on average, a fifth grade reading level and never progressed further (Labov, 1970, p. 43).

There have been two landmark attempts to address discrimination against speakers of AAVE, and their resulting poor academic performance. In 1979, eleven students at the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, sued the school district for racial discrimination. They claimed they had been assigned to special education classes because the school did not accommodate the language they spoke. The students won, and the district was ordered to consider AAVE as a factor in educating students (Belts, 2004). But it wasn't until 1996, with the highly controversial Ebonics resolution in the Oakland, California schools, that the issues of AAVE and language discrimination came into the full public view. Ultimately dropped, the Ebonics debate provided us with a wealth of arguments and scholarship about the academic achievement of African American students, which is discussed in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two also provides greater detail into the debate over the origins of AAVE, its distinguishing features, and its cultural importance. I have also given an overview of research showing effective ways of supporting students' home language while helping them to acquire SAE. In Chapter Three, I describe the methodology I used to answer my research question. Students in my English Language Arts classes collected home language samples which we used to create comparative grammar books of home language and school language. They also were given the opportunity, through a memoir unit of study in writing, to use both varieties in a written narrative.

In Chapter Four, I share the results of my research, explaining the teaching that occurred and my reflections on it, as well as the work produced by my students in their narrative writing benchmark assessment, literacy skills tests, and collage essay memoirs. Chapter Five is a discussion of the results, and their usefulness to me and others who work with African American students. It also recommends future research I feel should be done in this area.

My own teaching experience suggests to me there is truth to William Labov's claim that cultural and linguistic identification are the driving forces behind our African American students' success or failure in school. In this paper, I have suggested a method of making students aware of the rich history, grammar, and discourse styles of AAVE as well as its role in African American culture today. My goal is for my students to approach a study of Standard American English with the absolute assurance that I offer it not as a replacement for their mother tongue, but as a tool for their future academic, social, and political success. I introduce the concept of using a different language variety

in different situations, as an empowering way of using SAE for their own advantage while retaining pride in, and connection to, the language of their ancestors.

Too many of our African American children are failing academically. I hope to show that by reconnecting them with school through a serious study of African American Vernacular English, we can empower them to learn and use Standard American English to their own advantage. Through my research, I hope to show that improving my own teaching methods to include AAVE in my curriculum will help my students be more proficient in SAE. I want to find out if, through action research, I can improve my teaching of African American students by engaging with them in a contrastive study of African American Vernacular English and Standard American English, resulting in their acquiring greater proficiency in SAE as well as the ability to choose appropriately between AAVE and SAE in their written narratives.

While it's true "I don't got eyes in my rear," I do enjoy trying to look into the future. There, I hope to see my African American students beginning to acquire a privilege I've enjoyed all my life: the permission to tell their own stories in their own way, holding onto their history, culture, and language as a source of pride and belonging, while still taking full advantage of the opportunities that education holds for their future.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic achievement gap between African American students and their white classmates is large and growing. One reason for this is the difference that exists between African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the mother tongue of most African American children, and Standard American English (SAE), the language of school. These differences exist on all linguistic levels. From pronunciation on the phonological level to verb conjugation on the morphosyntactic level, and from narrative structure on the discourse level to cultural identification on the sociolinguistic level, speakers of AAVE in our schools face the challenge of being discriminated against and therefore poorly educated each day of their academic lives. To address this disparity, my research question is: Can I, through action research, improve my teaching of African American students by engaging with them in a contrastive study of African American Vernacular English and Standard American English, resulting in their acquiring greater proficiency in SAE as well as the ability to choose appropriately between AAVE and SAE in their written narratives?

In this chapter, I have reviewed literature and research on the origins and structure of AAVE, its importance in the African American culture, and the degree to which the achievement gap between African American and white students can be attributed to language differences. I also discuss two important, albeit failed, attempts to recognize these language differences in the education of African American students: The Ann Arbor, Michigan *King* lawsuit of 1979, and the Ebonics controversy in Oakland, California, in 1996. Finally, I discuss the work currently being done in education to address the language issues raised, but ultimately not dealt with, by these attempts, and how it led to my own research.

Taken as a whole, this chapter highlights the unfortunate truth that although much research has been done to find ways to understand and overcome the language barrier faced by African American students, this research has not found its way into the mindset of their teachers or the classrooms they inhabit. My goal was to use this research to change at least my own mindset and classroom, and hopefully to provide a method others can use to change theirs as well. I wanted to develop a method for bringing AAVE into the classroom and contrasting it with SAE to help students improve their proficiency in SAE. Through my research, I hope to show that improving my own teaching methods to include AAVE in my curriculum will help my students be more proficient in SAE.

Development of African American Vernacular English

Understanding the role of AAVE in our students' lives and education begins with understanding the theories linguists currently hold, and have held in the past, about its

origins. Until the 1960s, linguists generally accepted the Anglicist hypothesis of the origins of African American Vernacular English, which holds that it “was derived directly from British-based dialects” and is comparable to Southern white speech (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002, p. 12). The hypothesis likens African slaves to any other immigrant group who has contact with and eventually learns a new language. While traces of their native language remain, by and large the language spoken after several generations reflects the dialect of the region in which they settled, thus the similarity of AAVE to Southern English (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002). Also referred to as the dialectologist hypothesis or the “settler principle,” this theory is described by Winford (1998) as cited in Green (2004) who claims that AAVE shares a common superstrate with Southern White Vernacular English (SWVA), and that English played a major role in its development. Wolfram (1991) points out that copula deletion, which is discussed in the next section, is a feature both of AAVE and of SWVA. Labov, in Gadsden (1995), quotes Kurath (1949) in this description of the variation theory: “Traditional dialectology held that the speech of blacks in the United States was no different from that of whites: that the blacks in the northern cities had simply carried with them the features of the Southern dialect in the areas that they had come from” (Kurath, 1949, p. 6).

In the 1960s and 1970s, according to Wolfram, the Anglicist hypothesis was replaced by the creolist hypothesis, which holds that “the roots of AAVE were embedded in an expansive creole found in the African diaspora, including the antebellum Plantation South” (2002, p. 13).

African slaves were first brought to the American colonies in the early 1600s. Coming from different countries of West Africa, they spoke many different languages. Linguistically, however, these languages were similar in structure, because of the intercultural exchange that had occurred for centuries in that part of the continent (Debose, 1993). In addition to language structure, they also shared drumming and music as ways of communication. So common were these ways of communication to West Africans from different countries, they were able to use them to organize and carry out shipboard rebellions on their Middle Passage voyage to the New World (Alleyne, 1993).

As they were captured and sold into slavery, their need to communicate with Africans from different language backgrounds continued. According to the creolist theory, pidgins, or common languages for communication, developed in the slave-trading ports of West Africa and throughout the Caribbean and the southern colonies of America. These pidgins were based on the common structural elements of their West African languages, such as the precedence of aspect and modality over tense (DeBose, 1992), but incorporated English vocabulary, as they also needed to communicate with their masters (Rickford, 1999). As children were born into slavery, and learned the pidgins as their native language, the pidgins became creoles (Rickford, 2000).

Although the creolization theory is widely held among linguists, there are some problems with it. According to Bickerton (1981) as cited in Rickford (1999), creole languages develop in areas where speakers of the substrate language constitute at least 80 percent of the population. Rickford considers that percentage to be high, but does

recognize the importance of “relative numbers” of blacks and whites in the development of creoles (1999, p. 234). In some Southern colonies, notably South Carolina and Georgia (by 1860), the black population was indeed near and even above the 80 percent mark, and there is ample evidence that creoles developed there (Rickford, 1999). The situation was different in the New England and Middle colonies. In New England, the overall black population was about three percent, rising in some areas to a high of 20 percent. The numbers in the Middle colonies were similar, ranging from 2.4 to 22 percent (Rickford, 1999). In these areas, pidgins and creoles would not have developed on their own, because of the amount of interaction with the white, English-speaking majority that would have had to have taken place. According to Rickford, it is likely that rather than developing in these areas, creoles were imported from the Caribbean. Many slaves who came to America did so by way of the Caribbean, and in many cases, they had spent some time there before being brought to America (Rickford, 1999). Caribbean countries such as Jamaica and Suriname had high percentages of blacks, 92 and 93 percent respectively, and the existence of creoles in these countries “has never been in doubt” (Rickford, 1999, p. 235). Caribbean slaves brought pidgins and creoles with them, which “could have had a significant impact on the English acquired and used by newly arrived Africans in America” (Rickford, 1999, p. 239).

While linguists continue to debate the origins of AAVE, and the extent to which it was influenced by West African languages, Caribbean creoles, or dialects of English, it remains clear that AAVE has linguistic features that distinguish it from SAE. In the next section, I examine several of those features and how they manifest themselves in the

speech of African Americans today. Familiarity with both the history and features of African American Vernacular English help us, as teachers and others who work with African American students, to be respectful of the language variety they speak and to use it as a starting point for instruction in SAE.

Features of African American Vernacular English

As noted earlier, many people who hear African American Vernacular English spoken assume it is “sloven speech,” or “broken English” (Smith, 2002, p. 17). Rather, AAVE is a rule-governed language which has a different grammar than SAE. While the grammar of AAVE is much more complex than I have described below, I have given some examples of AAVE forms that most people are accustomed to hearing, and a brief grammatical explanation of each. It’s worth noting, however, that it is not the presence or absence of these features that distinguish AAVE from SAE, but the frequency with which they occur, which varies with age, socio-economic class, and exposure to and familiarity with SAE (Charity, 2004; Rickford, 2000).

One common feature of African American Vernacular English is the null copula. Sentences such as “We Ø tired,” and “He Ø a teacher” are grammatically correct in AAVE. The use (or deletion) of the copula is a rule-governed feature in AAVE. While the above deletions of *are* and *is* are acceptable, it is not grammatically acceptable to delete past tense copulas *was* and *were*, giving the following correct sentence, “He been doin it since we *was* teenagers, and he Ø still doin it” (Rickford, 2000, p. 115). Negative

markers in AAVE also differ from SAE, particularly the acceptability of *ain't*. “Ain’t they at home?” and “I ain’t know about it” are acceptable forms in AAVE (DeBose, 1993, pp. 369 & 371). Double negatives such as “He ain’t got no money” are also allowed (Martin, 1992, p.32).

Labov (1970, p. 41) also notes there is no possessive –’s in sentences such as “This is John mother” (This is John’s mother). Note, however, this rule only applies to a noun in the attributive position, and the AAVE sentence “This is John” has a completely different meaning from the SAE sentence “This is John’s.”

The third person singular present tense conjugation in AAVE is treated in a systematic way that seems to regularize its irregular formation in SAE, which uses the bare verb for all other subjects: I go, you go, we go, they go, but he goes; I have, you have, we have, they have, but he has (Rickford, 2000). AAVE does away with the third person singular exception, making “he go” and “he have” acceptable conjugations.

In addition to grammatical differences, AAVE has phonological differences from SAE. One difference is the reduction of consonant clusters, in words such as *wasps*, *lists*, or *desks*. The consonant clusters of the singular forms are reduced to *wass*, *liss*, and *dess*, and regular pluralization of these words produces *wasses*, *lisses*, and *desses*. African American speakers also may not hear the difference between *i* and *e* before nasals, in words such as *pin* and *pen*, and *Jim* and *gem* (Labov, 1970, p. 26).

Time frame reference also differs between AAVE and SAE. A semantic feature that plays a role in the interpretation of time frame reference is the relationship between tense and aspect. In SAE, tense is more overtly marked than aspect. The simple past

(-ed) forms of verbs signal [+past] tense, and the simple present forms mark [-past] tense. The predicate head or proverb is always marked for one of these values (DeBose, 1993). Aspect, however, is less crucial, and not necessarily overtly marked, but rather is expressed in “mixed tense-aspect categories such as present perfect and past progressive” (DeBose, 1993, p. 379).

DeBose (1993) notes that in the languages of southern Nigeria, aspect and modality distinctions are more important than tense. This difference remains in AAVE. “He is going home” becomes “He Ø goin’ home” in AAVE, with the verb marking present or past tense having been omitted altogether (Labov, 1970).

Another way that aspect is indicated in AAVE is through the use of the verb *be*, which differs from SAE in that it has both a conjugated and an invariant form. The invariants *be*, *been*, and *BEEN* are used as follows: *Be* describes a habitual act, *been* is the rough equivalent to “has been” or “have been,” and *BEEN* (capital letters indicating word stress) “describes an action that took place or a state that came into being a long time ago” (Rickford 2000, p. 119). Rickford gives the following examples of what Toni Morrison has called the “five present tenses” in AAVE:

1. He Ø runnin. (He is running.)
2. He *be* runnin. (He is usually running, or He will/would be running.)
3. He *be steady* runnin. (He is usually running in an intensive, sustained manner, or He will/would be running in an intensive, sustained manner.)
4. He *been* runnin. (He has been running – at some earlier point, but probably not now.)

5. He *BEEN* runnin. (He has been running for a long time and still is.) (Rickford, 2000, p. 119).

So far, I have described features of AAVE on a phonological, syntactical and semantic level. When looking at narrative structures, it becomes apparent that there are also differences between AAVE and SAE on the discourse level. In research done in a first grade classroom, Sarah Michaels (1981) identified two ways the students participated in sharing time. White students shared using a “topic centered” discourse style, which “tended to be tightly organized, centering on a single, clearly identifiable topic” (p. 428). The African American students were more likely to use a “topic associating” style which consisted of “implicitly associated personal anecdotes” (p. 429). Michaels concludes that the mismatch between the teacher’s and African American children’s narrative schema, “over time, resulted in differential amounts of practice doing literate-style accounting for black children and for white children in the class” (p. 440).

Arneha Ball (1996), in her study of the expository writing styles of high school students, also found discourse styles and techniques specific to her African American students. “Within the African American tradition those techniques include such musical phenomena as the rhythmic use of language, patterns of repetition and variation, expressive sounds, and phenomena encouraging participative sense-making, like using dialogue, tropes, hyperbole, and call and response patterns within the text” (p. 30). She found her students displaying the qualities of performance in their writing, attempting to interact with the audience, as in this writing sample:

This concludes my composition and I hope you've enjoyed my explanation, analysis, evaluation, and my comparison to a historical figure. In short, Emerson was a great man also, with the ability to write and give words new meaning. I'm sure he was also a misunderstood individual. I will leave you with this little bit of information to conclude my report (p. 30).

Other traditionally African American discourse features apparent in the Ball study include repetition and the creation of formulaic patterns (1996). This feature is apparent in the following quote from *The New Slavery in the South – An Autobiography: A Georgia Negro Peon*, published in 1904:

I was a man nearly grown before I knew how to count from one to one hundred. I was a man nearly grown before I ever saw a colored school teacher. I never went to school a day in my life. Today I can't write my own name, tho (sic) I can read a little. I was a man nearly grown before I ever rode on a railroad train, and then I went on an excursion from Elberton to Athens. What was true of me was true of hundreds of other negroes around me- 'way off there in the country, fifteen or twenty miles from the nearest town (p. 409).

Looking at informal letter writing among African American high school students, Ball found tendencies toward dialogue and social group interaction, as well as the inclusion of narratives in their texts to enrich their writing. According to Smitherman (2000), these features can be traced back through the history of Africans in this country, and even back to the traditions and rituals of Africa. Until recently, African Americans depended on word-of-mouth to preserve their rituals and culture. "Through song, story,

folk sayings, and rich verbal interplay among everyday people, lessons and precepts about life and survival are handed down from generation to generation” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 199).

Smitherman (2000) claims that the contrast between the oral tradition that came out of Africa and the European written tradition, on which white culture is based, is the “crucial difference in America” between black and white culture (p. 203). She quotes black psychiatrist Franz Fanon as saying, “to ‘talk like a book’ is to ‘talk like a white man’” (p. 203). I see evidence of this attitude in the African American students I teach, as well. I hope to be able to show students that the two traditions can coexist, and that learning to use SAE does not mean having to give up AAVE.

African American Vernacular English and Cultural Identification

The goal of my research is to improve my own teaching of African American students, by engaging with them in a study of AAVE. It is impossible to study AAVE without looking at the cultural role it plays in the community. I’ve described the development of African American Vernacular English, particularly the creolization theory, as a practical response to the slaves’ need to communicate with each other in America. This is true, but only part of the story. Smitherman (2000) characterizes the development of AAVE as follows: “Using elements of the white man’s speech, in combination with their own linguistic patterns and practices, enslaved Africans developed an oppositional way of speaking, a kind of counterlanguage that allowed for the communication of simultaneous double meanings” (p. 19). They could

surreptitiously insult “ole Massa” who professed Christianity but owned slaves with the phrase, “Eve’body talkin bout Heaben ain goin dere” (p. 19). The need for an oppositional language and identity persisted through lynchings, segregation, poverty, and a denial of equal access to education and employment (Rickford, 2000). To the present, the use of AAVE is a symbol of identity. Ninety percent of the African American community uses at least some features of AAVE (Smitherman, 2000).

There are examples worldwide of “low-prestige” languages surviving in spite of domination from standard languages: Schwyzerdeutsch in Switzerland, Canadian French in Canada, Appalachian English in the United States, and Catalan in Spain are fiercely maintained as symbols of solidarity and identity (Rickford, 2000). Although Rickford used the term “low-prestige” without the quotation marks, I’ve chosen to add them, as “prestige” is a very relative term. A working-class teenager from California had this to say about African Americans who use SAE: “It pisses me when the Oreos [black on the outside, white on the inside] – they be trying to correct your language, and I be like, ‘Get away from me! Did I ask you to – correct me?! No! No! No, I didn’t! Nuh-uh!” (Rickford, 2000, p. 223). For this teenager, covert prestige is found in the use of AAVE, not SAE.

Shirley Brice Heath (1992) equates language learning with culture learning. Children don’t just learn their mother tongue as phonology, morphology, and syntax, they learn it within a social context that defines relationships, decision-making, and what is valued as good or bad, beautiful or ugly. They learn to use language to get their own needs met, and to form their own identity. Heath argues that schools expect students to

arrive with certain language skills, such as the ability to label and describe objects, recount past events, follow directions, maintain social relationships, obtain information and to create new information by linking events and ideas. These expectations arise from linguists' and educators' experience and research involving mainstream children whose experiences include involvement in groups such as Boy Scouts, Sunday school, camps, and nursery schools, children who are raised by school-oriented families and whose homes contain books and toys that support learning.

Mainstream teachers and researchers view these expectations as so “natural,” they don't even realize they have them (Heath, 1991, p. 15). She points out several differences in the cultural upbringing of students from different communities: Questions that require children to repeat information known to the asker is valued in some cultures, and ridiculed in others; in some cultures children learn more from each other than from adults, as older children more often are required to care for the younger ones; some communities highly value the intervention of adults in the upbringing of children, while others value “self-development” and believe children just “turn out to be” (Heath, 1991, p. 15).

As we saw earlier, in Sarah Michaels' (1981) research involving first graders during sharing time, when students don't arrive at school with mainstream language expectations in place they miss out on important educational opportunities. Heath (1992) explains why students who seemingly speak English, such as those in the Michaels study, may not come to school ready to meet the expectations they'll find there. Defining “genre” in speaking as a “type or kind of organizing unit into which smaller units of

language, such as conversations, sentences, lists, or directives may fit” (p. 119), she explains, “Each cultural groups has fundamental genres that occur in recurrent situations; and each genre is so patterned as a whole that listeners can anticipate by the prosody or opening formulas what is coming – a joke, a story, or a recounting of shared past experiences” (p. 119). This sheds light on the difficulty the teacher in Michaels’ study had in following her African American students’ sharing, and the frustrations expressed by the students. Although both participants felt they were taking part in the same genre, sharing, they had different patterns and formulas for the genre, and did not understand each other.

Students coming to school with genres that are patterned differently from academic expectations are misunderstood by teachers for different reasons. Some look at any deviation from school norms as attributable to “laziness, sloppiness, or the child’s natural disposition to be wrong” (Labov, 1972, p. 4). Other teachers understand that there is a connection between the poor achievement of some African American students and the “contradictions between the rules of language used by the child and the rules of language used by the teacher” (Labov, 1972, p. 5). These teachers just aren’t sure how to effectively resolve these contradictions. In an attempt to help this second group of teachers be more successful, Labov systematically described the language of African American (and Puerto Rican) students. In addition to an in-depth study of the phonology and syntax of AAVE, some of which I have described above, Labov also looked at the use of AAVE in a cultural identification context. According to Labov, dialect and grammar differences are not the main cause of reading failure in African American boys,

it's "a culture conflict between the vernacular culture and the schoolroom" (1970, p. 43). Popular opinion holds that students who are failing in school will seek acceptance in their peer groups. Labov found just the opposite to be true. Students who were not a part of the street culture did, in fact, do better in school. In general, those students followed a learning curve that averaged one to two years behind grade level in reading. Boys who were fully participating members of the vernacular street culture showed slow growth, reaching about the fifth grade reading level, and failing to advance further (Labov, 1970). After working with African American boys in street gangs in Harlem from 1965-1967, Labov concludes that rather than being the *result* of school failure, as was commonly believed, strong identification with the street culture is the *cause* of school failure (1972). He quotes Junior, a leader of the gang called the Jets, who gives this rationale: "Like I'ma tell you the truth. They jus' want everythin' taken away from us.... Who do we work for? Whities! Who do we go to school for? Whities! Who's our teachers? Whities!" (p. 250).

Michelle Fine (1996) also studied cultural identification and academic achievement in African American students. Her findings did not support Labov's theory that identification with the street culture was the cause, rather than the result, of academic achievement. Failing students pointed out the differences between being in school and being accepted and successful as a part of the street culture. Hector, a graffiti artist, and a group of other artists, got together to paint a memorial to a fellow artist who had been killed by the police. Why did they do it? "For Michael. We knew each other, you know an artist when you see him: It's a family. Belonging. They want me in, not out like at

school” (Fine, 1996, p. 251). Monique, who dropped out of school after becoming pregnant, put it like this: “I wasn’t never good at nothing. In school I felt stupid and older than the rest. But I’m a great mother to Chita” (Fine, 1996, p. 252). Academically successful African American students in her research were more conformist and less politically aware. They tended to repeat ideologies they had heard in school connecting hard work and success, turning their backs on the messages of their neighborhoods. They were also more likely to be depressed (Fine, 1996).

The connection between hard work and success is an important one for students to understand, and one that is repeated often in the school where I teach. While we do want them to turn their back on some of the more negative messages of their neighborhoods, they don’t have to choose between success and their ties to family and community. By engaging in the study of both AAVE and SAE in the classroom, used appropriately to the situation, I hope to help students to be academically successful without becoming conformist, politically unaware, and depressed.

Attempts to Improve Student Achievement through Recognition of African American Vernacular English

There is probably not a definitive answer to the cause and effect relationship between cultural identification and academic failure. What remains is the fact that many language minority students, such as the speakers of AAVE, are not succeeding in school. Through my research, I hope to show that improving my own teaching methods to include AAVE in my curriculum will help my students be more proficient in SAE.

Sadly, this is an idea that has been around for a long time, but which has not been embraced by the educational establishment. Below, I describe the work of three groups who have attempted to validate AAVE and its speakers.

Conference on College Composition and Communication

There have been attempts over the years to recognize and remove the barriers to achievement that AAVE speakers face. The National Conference of Teachers of English's (NCTE) Conference on College Composition and Communication passed a resolution in 1974 which states:

Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage and dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language (Turner, 1996, p. 255).

The Ann Arbor *King* Case

In 1979, eleven families brought a law suit against the Ann Arbor, Michigan, school board in the hope of claiming the right to their language affirmed by the NCTE. They claimed their children, students at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School,

had been placed in learning disability and speech pathology classrooms because AAVE was their native language. On August 24 of that year, the US District Court ruled that the Ann Arbor school board had not made appropriate accommodations for the barrier that language posed for the students' equal participation in instructional programs. Judge Charles W. Joiner ordered the school board to "take steps to help teachers to recognize home language of students and to use that knowledge in their attempts to teach reading skills and standard English" (Rickford, 1996 [course syllabus]). Those steps included understanding ways in which dialects of a language vary, appreciating that languages and dialects are rule-governed and systematic, and describing basic features of AAVE (Rickford, 1996).

These measures amounted to what Kenneth Lewis, a lawyer representing several of the students involved in the case, referred to as "no more than yet another shot in the arm of teacher inservice programs [which] only travels halfway to a full solution to overcome language barriers impeding learning" (Lewis, 1980, as cited in Smitherman, 2000, p. 144).

The Oakland Ebonics Resolution

In 1996, the school board of Oakland, California, attempted to find a way to overcome these language barriers more fully by bringing the study of AAVE (Ebonics) beyond teacher training and into the classroom:

WHEREAS, numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrate that African American students as part of their culture and history as African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as "Ebonics"

(literally Black sounds)...BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Education officially recognizes the existence, and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and each language as the predominantly primary language of African American students.... (Smitherman, 2000, p. xi).

This resolution brought the discussion of AAVE into the public view as it had never been before. Many linguists who had been studying AAVE for years supported it wholeheartedly (Baugh, 2000; Labov, 1997; Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2000). Their years of scholarship came into direct conflict with the popular media and culture, both African American and white, where Ebonics and the Oakland school board were attacked and ridiculed. Reactions ranged from “mean-spirited, overtly racist attacks” to “benign linguistic prejudice toward vernacular African American Vernacular English” (Baugh, 2000, p. 88). Within academia, critics such as Ward Connerly, the African American University of California regent, called the proposal “tragic,” arguing:

These are not kids who came from Africa last year.... These are kids that have had every opportunity to acclimate themselves to American society, and they have gotten themselves into this trip of speaking this language – this slang, really, that people can’t understand. Now we’re going to legitimize it (Rickford, 2000, p. 5).

African American leaders Jesse Jackson and NAACP president Kweisi Mfume spoke out against Ebonics, with Jackson calling it “an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace,” and Mfume denouncing it as “a cruel joke” (Rickford, 2000, p. 5).

High-profile African American entertainers such as Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey weighed in against the resolution. Calling it “Igno-Ebonics,” Bill Cosby

quipped the Oakland school board needed to consider all the ramifications of the resolution because, "...Ebonics be a complex issue" (Cosby, 1997, p. A 11, as cited in Baugh, 2000, p. 92). More recently, in his May 24, 2004 address at the NAACP's Gala to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, he said of those who speak AAVE, "Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with, 'Why you ain't...' You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth. There is no Bible that has that kind of language" (Cosby, 2004). Oprah Winfrey has referred to Ebonics as "the Ebonics plague," although one study has documented the frequency with which she uses features of AAVE in her own speech (Hay, 1999).

By the spring of 1997, Oakland gave up on its Ebonics resolution, and "quietly dropped all reference to Ebonics in their reformulated educational plans" (Baugh, 2000, p. 112). Smitherman (2000) notes that one of the reasons the debate became so politically charged was the Oakland school board's decision to call Ebonics a language rather than a dialect. The distinction between dialect and language is more political than linguistic. "The difference between a language and a dialect is whoever's got the army and the navy" (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p. 321). Politically, "dialect" is considered pejorative, but linguists do not consider it so. In the linguistic literature, AAVE is referred to as a language, a dialect, and a variation of English (Baugh, 2000; Labov, 1997; Smitherman; 2000). Weinreich (1953, as cited in Baugh, 2000) explains the linguist's point of view as follows:

[I]t is immaterial whether the two systems are “languages,” “dialects of the same language,” or “varieties of the same dialect.” The greater the difference between the systems, i.e., the more numerous the mutually exclusive forms and patterns in each, the greater is the learning problem and the potential area of interference (p. 47).

The terminology used in this discussion is politically charged and can be divisive. In the end, however, what matters more than the labels we use is the intention to give students the knowledge and the freedom to be literate in both AAVE and SAE, and the ability to choose between the two.

Educational Consequences for Speakers of African American Vernacular English

Whether African American Vernacular English is a language, a dialect, or a variation, the linguistic and cultural difference between school language and the home language of African Americans is a barrier to their academic achievement (Baugh, 2000; Delpit, 2002; Fordham, 1996; Labov, 1972). We consider cultural transmission to be a major function of education, and the culture being transmitted is the dominant one: white and middle class. African Americans and other nondominant groups are expected to embrace the dominant culture, too often at the exclusion of their own. This is a major factor in the underachievement of African Americans in our schools today (Fordham, 1996). As we saw in the Michaels’ (1981) study, students whose academic behavior, in this case their narrative strategies, did not coincide with the teacher’s were deprived of many of the rich academic experiences which should have been available to them.

Students whose language does not coincide with the teacher's are often deemed deficient in "intelligence, competence, potential, and even 'moral fiber'" (Delpit 2002, p. 38).

Stephen Krashen (1982), in his work on second language acquisition, found that students acquire language most effectively when they do so in a natural, unstressful way.

Barriers to natural learning, or what he called affective filters, hinder language acquisition. The filters operate "...when affective conditions are not optimal, when the student is not motivated, does not identify with the speakers of the second language, or is overanxious about his performance, ...[creating] a mental block...[which] will prevent the input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition" (Krashen, 1982, as cited in Delpit, 2002, p. 40). The conditions he describes as activating the affective filter, unfortunately, are the same as those found in many classrooms, when students are told their way of speaking, of expressing their culture, upbringing, and values, is wrong. The same "oppositional" stance which created African American Vernacular English as a survival tactic in slave times again becomes necessary as students are confronted with these threats to their identity. "Ironically, the more determined we are to rid the school of children's home language, the more determined they must become to preserve it" (Delpit, 2002, p. 47). As Labov (1970) said, it's not dialect and grammar differences that are the main cause of reading failure in African American boys, it's "a cultural conflict between the vernacular culture and the schoolroom" (p. 43). This conclusion underscores the need for teachers of African American students to increase their own knowledge and appreciation of AAVE, and then

use that knowledge to begin to remove the “cultural conflict” that Labov blames for their academic failure.

Attempts to Bring African American Vernacular English to the Classroom

Although the Oakland school board’s attempt to officially bring African American Vernacular English to the classroom failed, research has continued on ways to reach African American students through the use AAVE. Jessica Whitney (2005) provides a framework for the integration of AAVE into the classroom which consists of five components:

1. *Educating teachers about AAVE, specifically that it is a rule-governed language.* Ignorance of nonstandard vernaculars, not the vernaculars themselves, is the main obstacle to learning for their speakers (Labov, 1972).
2. *Creating multicultural classrooms.* Classrooms that incorporate multiple views are more relevant to students, and increase their motivation and achievement.
3. *Using rich oral language.* Speaking and listening are the foundations for other forms of literacy.
4. *Encouraging and teaching codeswitching.* Rather than correcting students who use AAVE, explicitly study and contrast features of AAVE and SAE. “When the teacher helped the students explicitly contrast the structure of AAVE and the Standard, their success in writing Standard English *improved* by 59%” (Wheeler, as quoted in Whitney, 2005, p. 67).

5. *Giving students authentic writing experiences.* As students learn to write for different audiences, they practice and learn the importance of codeswitching.

Sharroky Hollie (2001), describes the Language Affirmation Program (LAP), used on a limited basis in Los Angeles. Some of its components are similar to those recommended by Whitney, such as improving teachers' knowledge of attitude toward nonstandard languages, creating multicultural classrooms, and including knowledge of nonstandard languages in the curriculum. In addition, the LAP program uses second language acquisition methods to support students' learning of SAE, and advocates a balanced approach to literacy including phonics and language experience. Studies conducted by the Los Angeles school district in the 1997-1998 school year showed "the LAP students outperformed a control group on the [eighth grade Stanford 9] test" (Hollie, 2001, p. 57).

Shirley Brice Heath (1991) describes a model for the study of language in the classroom. Working with a group of adult English Language Learners (ELLs), Brice had her students collect samples of the language they heard in their communities, which were then analyzed in class. This helped students become aware of the different ways language was used in different situations, and to analyze the sentence structure of English. They also "became more attentive to their own uses of language and how they might use language more effectively to get things done" (p. 32).

Using Whitney's (2005) framework for integration of AAVE into the curriculum, and Heath's (1991) ethnographic methodology for analyzing language use, I present, in Chapter Three, a methodology for using the research presented in this chapter to help my

students become aware and appreciative of the differences between AAVE and SAE, and able to use both effectively. I have attempted to do at the classroom level what the Oakland board of education failed to do at the district level: change my own teaching to allow students to study and use their home language in school, and improve their ability to use SAE.

Conclusion

Many African American students come to school today speaking a language that their teachers do not understand or appreciate. It is the language of their homes and families, and they are not willing to give it up for the promised benefits of learning Standard American English. The educational establishment has studied the problem and identified causes. There have been failed attempts, such as Ann Arbor's and Oakland's, to bring knowledge of African American Vernacular English to teachers and to the classroom. Some research has been done to try to find how knowledge and appreciation of AAVE can help students accept and learn SAE (Ball, 1996; Heath, 1991; Hollie, 2001; Whitney, 2005). In the next chapter, I suggest a method of teaching sixth grade students about African American Vernacular English that draws on the work of these researchers and the study of linguistics: involving the students in collecting language samples to be analyzed phonetically, morphologically, syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically, and practicing writing in different styles. My question is whether, through action research, I can improve my teaching of African American students by engaging with them in a contrastive study of African American Vernacular English and Standard

American English, resulting in their acquiring greater proficiency in SAE as well as the ability to choose appropriately between AAVE and SAE in their written narratives.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

African American students in our schools are lagging behind in academic achievement, due, at least in part, to the language barrier they face. It causes interference on many levels, from syntactical and morphological differences to semantic and discourse style differences. The question I wanted to answer is this: Can I, through action research, improve my teaching of African American students by engaging with them in a contrastive study of African American Vernacular English and Standard American English, resulting in their acquiring greater proficiency in SAE as well as the ability to choose appropriately between AAVE and SAE in their written narratives?

Through an age-appropriate linguistic study of AAVE, which included gathering and analyzing speech samples, students compared and contrasted the two languages, and analyzed how to choose the one appropriate to a written genre. In addition to improving my own teaching, I hope this research will be useful to other teachers of linguistically

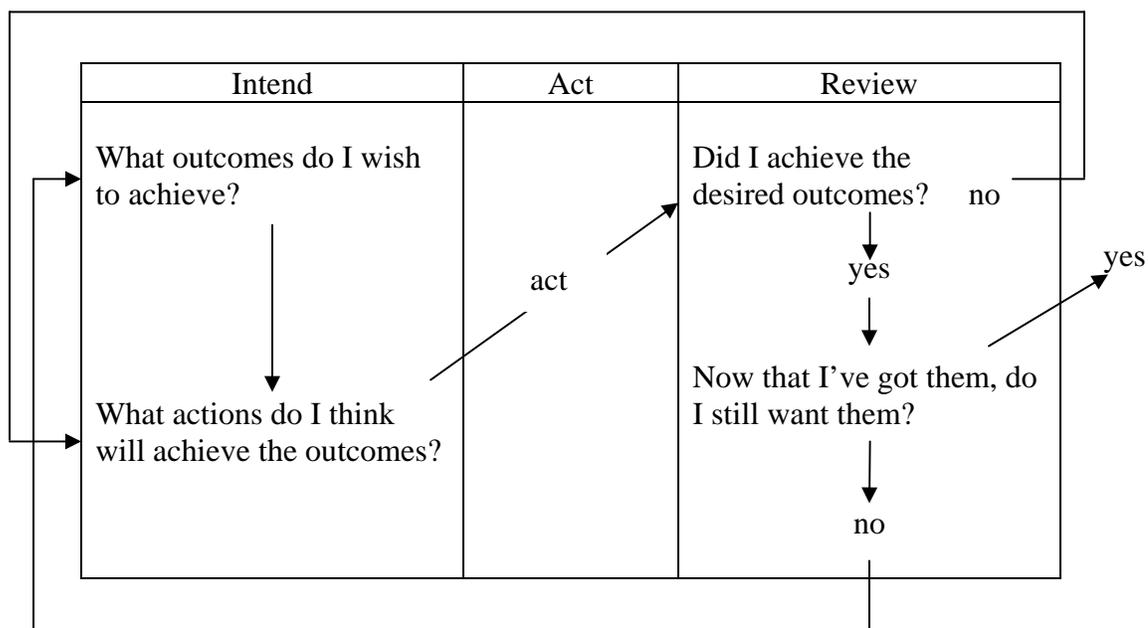
diverse students who strive to teach SAE without the implication that the students' home language is inferior.

Research Paradigm

Because of my desire for this project to improve my own teaching of African American students, I decided to conduct action research which would allow for some changes in strategies and lessons if I saw that my initial plan was not working.

According to Bob Dick (2001), action research is undertaken when the researcher wishes to develop understanding and bring about change. It is a cyclical process of intent, action, and review (Dick, 1993).

Table 3.1: Intend, Act, Review Spiral



Bob Dick (1993, p. 15)

When doing action research, Dick (1993) explains, it is important to be responsive to the results as they present themselves during the research. He recommends that the researcher always be on the lookout for “unmet expectations” (p. 14). Noticing and understanding them will lead to new actions, as shown in Table 3.1.

Nat Bartels (2005) describes methods of data collection teachers can use to evaluate their effectiveness in the classroom. He suggests that researchers choose multiple sources of data. This triangulation of data increases the research credibility. He groups the methods into four categories: observation, documentation, reports and introspection, and tasks. **Observations** can be conducted by another person or by the participant (teacher). **Documents** used for analysis of teaching include lesson plans, teaching materials, and student work. Data collection tools included in the **reports and introspection** category allow teachers to “report or attempt to verbalize what they do, why they do it, what they believe, what they are or were thinking, and other reports of their cognitive activity” (p. 5). This can include interviews, questionnaires, journals, metaphors, narrative and biographic methods, stimulated recall, think alouds, and repertory grids. **Tasks** include problem solving tasks, sorting tasks, and concept maps. During the course of my research, I used observation (watching a videotaped a lesson and recording day to day classroom anecdotes in my journal), documentation (lesson plans, teaching materials, and student work), and introspection (using my journal and stimulated

recall when watching videotaped lessons to analyze my cognitive activity during teaching).

Table 3.2 below shows the data collection methods described by Bartels (2005) and those which I used in my research:

Table 3.2: Methods of Data Collection

Methods of Data Collection Suggested by Bartels (2005)	Data Collection Methods I used
Observation <i>Can be observation by another person or the participant (teacher)</i>	Journal (observation of classroom activities and students' responses) Videotape of lesson (observation of my use of the research in my teaching practice)
Documentation <i>Can include lesson plans, teaching materials, and student work</i>	Lesson Plans: Writer's Workshop and Literacy Skills Teaching Materials: Comparative Grammar and Idiom Book Student Work: Literacy Skills Tests Analysis of Benchmark Narratives Collage Essay Samples
Reports and Introspection <i>Can include interviews, questionnaires, journals, metaphors, narrative and biographic methods, stimulated recall, think alouds, and repertory grids</i>	Journal Stimulated recall
Tasks <i>Can include problem solving tasks, sorting tasks, and concept maps</i>	

I videotaped one lesson during my research, and analyzed it in two different ways. Bartels notes that videotaping lessons is “good for looking at whether teachers really use the knowledge from applied linguistics courses in their teaching practice” (p. 2). I was looking for evidence I was using the knowledge I’d acquired about AAVE in my teaching practice. This is an **observational** protocol from data collection. I also used the tape for a stimulated recall (**introspection**) protocol. According to Bartels, the teacher watches a videotape of him or herself teaching immediately after the lesson, then stops the tape at a point that seems significant, and says what he or she was thinking about at that point. I did this immediately after the lesson, and recorded my responses in my journal.

The journal also served as an **introspective** protocol, as I recorded my thoughts on my teaching and my students’ reaction to it. During the course of the research, I kept a daily journal of classroom anecdotes, observations of student work (such as language samples collected, classroom participation in the analysis of the samples, and ability to complete the comparative grammar book), and critical reflections on the overall effectiveness of the lessons I had taught. This served as the basis for revisions to the initial plan.

I also collected **documentation** data throughout the study to judge its overall effectiveness in improving my students’ understanding of SAE and their ability to choose between AAVE and SAE in their writing. For this purpose, I collected the following data:

1. letters written by my students to fifth graders at the beginning of the study, which were subsequently not used, as they did not yield needed data,

2. benchmark assessments of the students' use of SAE and AAVE in narrative writing,
3. test data on subject-verb agreement and negative formation,
4. writing samples from the memoir (collage essay) unit of study in writing,
5. the comparative grammar books produced by the students, and
6. lesson plans in writer's workshop and literacy skills.

Setting and Participants

I teach sixth grade at an inner city school in the Upper Midwest. The population of my school is 49% African American, 22% Caucasian, 15% Hispanic, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Native American. Ninety-three percent of the students in the school meet the federal poverty requirements of qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. The student population is 310. The study was conducted in my two English Language Arts (ELA) classes, each consisting of an hour of reader's workshop and an hour of writer's workshop. In addition, I have a twenty minute literacy skills block with one class. The bulk of the work occurred during writer's workshop and literacy skills block.

Participants in the study were sixth graders in my ELA classes who were members of the class for the duration of the study, October through February. The class, like the school, has a diversity of backgrounds, and while all students participated in the lessons and activities that made up the study, I only analyzed the data produced by my African American students. The year started with thirty-eight students in the two classes,

with twenty-one of them being African American. Of the twenty-one, sixteen remained throughout the entire study, one of whom did not have permission to participate and is not included in the data.

Timeline

The initial benchmark letters were written and students began collecting home language samples during the third week of October. The writing of the comparative grammar books, as a “Language Use and Conventions” unit of study, began the following week and lasted for two weeks. Overlapping the completion of the grammar books, the collage essay unit of study began in the first week of November, and continued through publication in February. In December and January two literacy skills units were taught, one in subject-verb agreement and one in negative formation. The narrative benchmarks were written in November and February. The data were analyzed in March.

Actions Taken

Action research is a cycle of deciding on desired outcomes and the actions one thinks will achieve them, taking the action, and reviewing the data produced (Dick 1993). Below, I describe chronologically that process in my research. Table 4.2, in Chapter Four, gives a graphic overview of the process and results of the actions taken.

Initial Evaluation of Student Writing

The goal of my research was to improve my teaching, and one way to measure that was by my students’ increased proficiency in SAE. In order to show growth in their

proficiency in SAE, I planned for students to write letters at the beginning of the study and at the end. The initial letters were written to this year's fifth graders, to explain to them the open cycle publication we had just finished. I chose this form of writing because it demands the use of SAE but did not demand any additional research on the students' part, as they were describing experiences they had personally experienced. However, most students wrote their letter in a procedural genre, rather than past tense narrative, and I found the letters offered little useful data. They were written in the second person present tense, offering little opportunity for the grammatical usages (third person subject-verb agreement and past tense formations) I had hoped to analyze. I had originally planned for the students to again write to the fifth graders at the end of the unit, but did not have them do it, since the original data were not useful. Instead, I analyzed a benchmark writing piece produced in November, and a similar piece written in February. These pieces were both narratives, and offered more opportunities for students to use the negative formations, third person present tense, past tense, and other verb formations I was analyzing. In addition to looking for an increase in the students' proficiency in using SAE, I also wanted to help them become aware of circumstances where it is appropriate to use AAVE in their school writing. I used these narratives to obtain data on both of these goals. A comparison of the two benchmark narratives is found in Appendix G.

Gathering Language Samples

Jessica Whitney's (2005) recommendations for integrating AAVE into classrooms include creating multicultural classrooms and explicitly contrasting features of AAVE and SAE. I planned to accomplish both of these goals by engaging my students in an

ethnographic study of AAVE, sending them out into their communities to collect language samples to be analyzed. One of the beginning of the year activities that all students in grades two through six participate in is the introduction of the writer's notebook. The notebook is kept throughout the year, as a place for students to write ideas, observations, events, conversations, etc., that they find interesting and that may later become seeds for writing they'll do in school. One of the writer's notebook strategies I teach is recording "overheard conversations" (Fletcher, 1996, p. 55). Starting the fourth week of school, after basic routines and rituals had been established for the workshop and the students had practiced other notebook strategies such as observations and sketching, I taught the strategy of recording overheard conversations. I introduced the strategy by recording conversations verbatim from books I read aloud, and pointing out that these were examples of actual words spoken by the characters. I chose books that contained examples of AAVE (Appendix A). We practiced in school two ways before students tried recording overheard conversations at home. First, I played a video that contained conversations between high school students about issues such as a school dance and taking tests. The students recorded lines and phrases they found interesting. Then, I arranged for them to visit other classrooms as ethnographers, recording parts of conversations they heard between students. We shared the data collected from both of these experiences, to help everyone understand what to be listening for and recording. Students then were sent home with their writer's notebooks, to collect interesting lines and phrases from their homes and neighborhoods. We kept the data from the books, the

videos, the classroom visits, and the students' homes for the analysis phase of the project, to be sure everyone had a rich collection of language to analyze.

In her research with English Language Learners, Shirley Brice Heath (1991) attempted a similar methodology to bring analysis of language into the classroom. Although her work was done with second-year adult English Language Learners, the model she describes and ways of analyzing the language samples served as the basis for my students' ethnographic research. Heath's students began by recording informal conversations they heard in their homes, jobs, and streets. After the first week, they agreed that the process was overwhelming and frustrating, so they developed a simple observation instrument to help standardize the data collected and make collection easier. This allowed them to analyze and compare data from different students. Although I had expected my students to encounter similar frustrations, after the in-school practice and sharing we had done, they really did not seem frustrated with the task. I had modeled writing down short phrases they found interesting, as opposed to entire conversations, and they were able to do that. Students collected the samples in their writer's notebooks, then transcribed them into "Comparative Grammar and Phrase Books" I had constructed for them, with one side of the page having a place to record "Informal/Home Language" and the other side a place to translate it into "Formal/School Language." The book was later adapted to become the "Grammar and Idiom Book," shown in Appendix D with data from in-class readings and the language samples collected by students.

Analysis and Use of Language Samples

A teaching technique I consistently use in my writer's workshop is noticing and naming (Radley, 2004). When I introduce a new genre, the students are first immersed in it then have a chance to analyze it, notice what makes it unique, and give these features a name. This is the same technique I applied to the analysis of the language samples collected. After about a week of gathering language data, we discussed it, finding we had samples of grammatical differences and idiomatic expressions. To help students better understand their language samples, I decided to teach two grammar units during my literacy skills time. I used a direct instruction approach, giving specific grammatical labels to the kinds of structures we had been noticing and talking about, specifically subject-verb agreement and negative formation. Samples of these lesson plans are found in Appendix B, and the results of the tests given for both units are found in Appendices E and F and discussed in the next chapter.

Based on the language samples the students had collected, we wrote "Grammar and Idiom Books" (Appendix D) showing different ways of saying the same thing, both grammatically and idiomatically. The students discussed and decided when and where it might be appropriate to use the different kinds of language we had collected. They agreed on what would be acceptable school language for content writing, business letter, expository writing, test taking, etc. They also agreed on genres, such as narratives and personal letters, where the written use of a home language would be appropriate. This part of the project lasted for two weeks.

Rebecca Wheeler (as quoted in Whitney, 2005), showed in her research that when teachers "helped students explicitly contrast the structure of AAVE and the Standard,

their success in writing Standard English improved...” (p. 67). I was attempting, through the use of our comparative books, to help students make that comparison.

Application to Narrative Writing

Jessica Whitney (2005) recommends encouraging and teaching codeswitching, and giving students authentic writing experiences as effective ways of integrating AAVE into a classroom. I used my first major writing genre unit of study for the year, memoir, to try this. I decided to use a collage essay format for the memoir study. In this subgenre, students do several pieces of writing centered on one topic or theme. They write narratives, portraits, scenes, dialogues, and vignettes (Radley, 2004). The language samples and family stories, along with observations, sketches, and other noticings they had collected in their writer’s notebooks now became seed ideas for their memoirs. They reviewed their notebook entries, deciding on the topic or theme they would explore in their collage essay. In the writing of the different parts of the essay, I encouraged them to use both the “school language” and “home language” described in their comparative grammar and phrase books, as had been modeled in read alouds. This mixture could work in any of the pieces in the collage essay, with portraits, narratives, and dialogues being the most obvious choices. Sample lesson plans from this unit are included in Appendix B, and samples of student writing produced, which will be analyzed in the next chapter, are found in Appendix C.

Conclusion

Following the research paradigm described by Bob Dick (1993), I used action research to improve my teaching of African American students by engaging with them in a contrastive study of African American Vernacular English and Standard American English, with the goal of increasing their proficiency in SAE and their ability to choose appropriately between AAVE and SAE in their written narratives.

I designed lessons based on the work of Shirley Brice Heath (1991) and the recommendations of Jessica Whitney (2005) to:

1. engage with my students in a contrastive analysis of AAVE and SAE,
2. make the appropriate use of AAVE an acceptable choice in the classroom, and
3. give students the opportunity, through a memoir unit of study, to incorporate AAVE in their school writing.

I collected data in three ways – observation, introspection, and documentation – as described by Nat Bartels (2005), and reviewed it to determine if the actions I had engaged in had given me the desired outcomes. I reviewed that data throughout the study, and used it to adjust my teaching practices (Dick, 1993). I hoped to improve my practice by engaging with my students in a contrastive study of African American Vernacular English and Standard American English, resulting in their acquiring greater proficiency in SAE as well as the ability to choose appropriately between AAVE and SAE in their written narratives.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The methodology described in the previous chapter was designed to answer this question: Can I, through action research, improve my teaching of African American students by engaging with them in a contrastive study of African American Vernacular English and Standard American English, resulting in their acquiring greater proficiency in SAE as well as the ability to choose appropriately between AAVE and SAE in their written narratives?

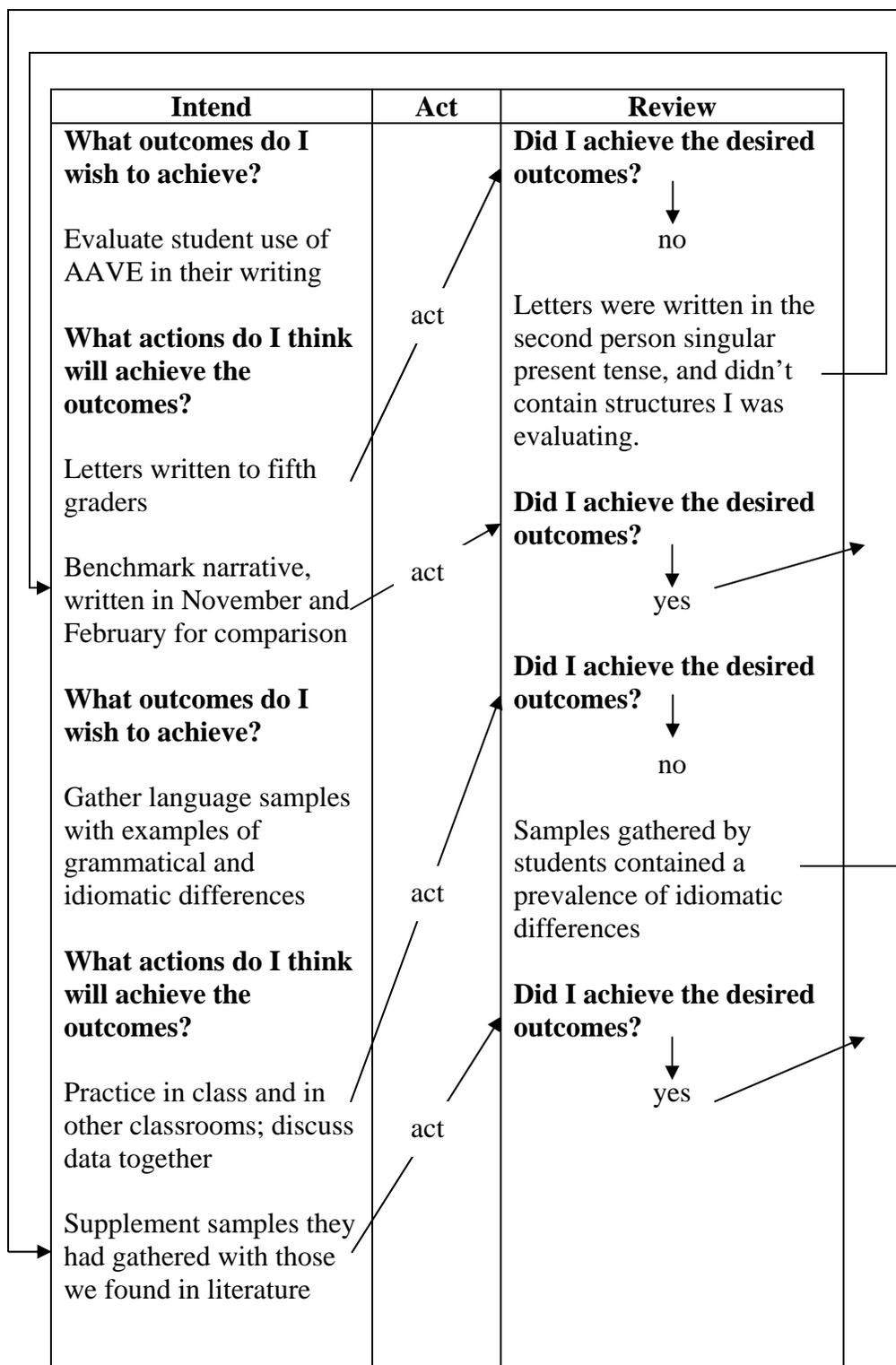
Nat Bartels (2005) describes four categories of data collection teachers can use to evaluate their effectiveness in the classroom. He suggests using multiple sources to triangulate the research and create increased credibility. In Table 4.1, I have summarized

the methods he described, and indicated how I used them to analyze my teaching practices and to answer my research question. I have also noted where the data included in this text can be found. The data described formed the basis for decisions I made during the course of the study, using Dick's (1993) intend, act, review cycle. Table 4.2 shows how the data gathered contributed to the changes I made in my teaching plans. Following Table 4.2 is a more detailed analysis of the data collected.

Table 4.1: My Data Collection

Methods of Data Collection Suggested by Bartels (2005)	Methods of Data Collection I Used
Observation <i>Can be observation by another person or the participant (teacher)</i>	Journal (observation of classroom activities and students' responses) Videotape of lesson (observation of my use of the research in my teaching practice)
Documentation <i>Can include lesson plans, teaching materials, and student work</i>	Lesson Plans: Literacy Skills and Writer's Workshop Lesson Plans (Appendix B) Teaching Materials: Comparative Grammar and Idiom Book (Appendix D) Student Work: Subject-Verb Agreement Test (Appendix E) Negative Formation Test (Appendix F) Analysis of Benchmark Narratives (Appendix G) Collage Essay Samples (Appendix C)
Reports and Introspection <i>Can include interviews, questionnaires, journals, metaphors, narrative and biographic methods, stimulated recall, think alouds, and repertory grids</i>	Journal Stimulated recall
Tasks <i>Can include problem solving tasks, sorting tasks, and concept maps</i>	

Table 4.2: Intend, Act, Review Spiral: My Action Research



Intend	Act	Review
<p>What outcomes do I wish to achieve?</p>		<p>Did I achieve the desired outcomes?</p>
<p>Improve students' proficiency in using SAE</p>		<p>↓ not initially, see below</p>
<p>What actions do I think will achieve the outcomes?</p>	<p>act</p>	<p>Students did not seem to understand the grammatical differences.</p>
<p>Contrast features of AAVE and SAE, based on our samples gathered</p>	<p>act</p>	<p>Did I achieve the desired outcomes?</p> <p>↓ no</p>
<p>Teach units on subject-verb agreement and negative formation</p>		<p>In the final analysis, despite my initial concerns, students showed improvement in past tense formations, an area not covered by the literacy skills units.</p>
<p>What outcomes do I wish to achieve?</p>		
<p>Students include AAVE appropriately with SAE in their collage essays, and feel AAVE is valued</p>		<p>Did I achieve the desired outcomes?</p> <p>↓ no</p>
<p>What actions do I think will achieve the outcomes?</p>	<p>act</p>	<p>Initially, students were very resistant to discussion of home language in school</p>
<p>Model for students, using examples from literature, use nonjudgmental language when conferring with them</p>	<p>act</p>	<p>Did I achieve the desired outcomes?</p> <p>↓ yes</p>
<p>Include other types of informal language (e.g. Irish brogue and Swede Finn examples)</p>		

Observational and Introspective Protocols

Since the videotape of my lesson and my reflective journal were both used for observation and introspection protocols, I will discuss them together.

Videotape

Jessica Whitney (2005), in her framework for the integration of AAVE into the classroom, indicates the need for creating multicultural classrooms, using rich oral language, and encouraging codeswitching. Bartels (2005) notes that videotaping lessons is “good for looking at whether teachers really use the knowledge from applied linguistics courses in their teaching practice” (p. 2). I viewed the videotape, looking for evidence that I was using the knowledge I’d acquired about AAVE and its effective integration into my teaching practice. This is an observation protocol for data collection. I also used the tape for a stimulated recall (introspection) protocol.

Overview of the lesson. The lesson I chose to videotape was a follow up to the first day students collected language samples at home. We had already practiced gathering samples in our classroom and in other classrooms, so they did quite well with gathering samples at home. The main teaching point of the lesson was the recording of their informal samples in a book I’d prepared for this purpose, and rewriting them into formal English. I had created a “Comparative Grammar and Phrase Book,” with facing pages containing space for “Informal/Home Language” and “Formal/School Language.” (The book was later refined, and can be found in Appendix D.) I began by recreating the book on a chart, and asking volunteers to share some of the samples they had collected at home. We then discussed how to rewrite them into formal English. During the work

time, students transcribed more samples into their books and rewrote them. We shared this work at the end of the period.

Table 4.3: Chart of language samples collected by students

Informal/Home Language	Formal/School Language
He really pack one in there.	He threw the ball hard.
Don't you gotta go to some Y Start field trip tomorrow?	Do you have to go to a Y Start field trip tomorrow?
Why you always gotta' have a attitude wit' 'cho self?	Why do you always have to have an attitude?
Oh, snaps!	Oh, no!
Eh, cuz, I like your shoes.	I like your shoes.
Yeah, Julie.	Hello, Julie.
What's crackin'?	Hello.
Yep, and what you gonna do about it?	What are you going to do about it?

Observational protocol. The first protocol I used with the videotape was to observe for evidence I was using the knowledge I'd acquired about AAVE in my teaching practice. According to Bartels, the teacher watches a videotape of him or herself teaching immediately after the lesson, then stops the tape at a point that seems significant, and says what he or she was thinking about at that point. I did this immediately after the lesson, and recorded my responses in my journal. I noticed:

1. By this point in my lessons I had finally become comfortable with using the language “formal” and “informal,” and was not slipping into “correct” and “incorrect.” I was pleased to see this.
2. The students were also using this language, and I think it was contributing to their comfort level in sharing samples they had brought in from home. There was no judgmental feeling to the conversations.

3. I was trying to focus on the grammatical structures (especially verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, and negative formation) in the discussion, as much as the samples students presented allowed.

Introspective protocol. In addition to the observational protocol, I also watched the recorded lesson and did a stimulated recall protocol. I watched the tape, stopping at points that seemed significant, to record what I was thinking. Data from this protocol are found in Table 4.4 below.

Table 4.4: Data from journal during stimulated recall with videotape

What was happening	What I was thinking
Most samples collected by the students at home were samples of idioms, not informal grammar constructions.	This was probably not surprising – most of the samples they had collected in their in-class practice had also been idioms. Most of the grammatical differences we had discussed had come from books we had read together. I was trying to balance the discussion between the two types of samples, not recording all of the idioms we discussed.
Students seemed to be enjoying the conversation.	This was probably a positive result of the prevalence of idioms in their samples, as most sixth graders would find it more enjoyable to teach their teacher the nuances of phrases such as “Oh, snaps!” and “What’s crackin?” than to discuss subject-verb agreement.
We did get into some grammatical discussions when using phrases from our books, such as “it ain’t no/bookstos/in de Berry/where I lives” (O’Meally, in Adoff, 1974, p. 22).	The students had some awareness of certain rules they had been taught, such as not using <i>ain’t</i> , which they corrected immediately (along with the spelling of <i>bookstores</i> to reflect standard spelling rather than informal pronunciation). It was a two step process to get to the formal form: a. it isn’t any bookstores b. there aren’t any bookstores Students also needed prompting to change “where I lives” to “where I live.” When asked, they immediately knew the formal structure. I noted that this often seemed to be the case – when asked, they could tell the differences, but unprompted, they slipped by unnoticed.
The assignment for the next day was to continue gathering samples.	I made a point of asking them to look for some of the grammatical structures we had discussed, hoping that if a few more were brought into the classroom it would increase understanding of them.

Reflective Journal

My journal was also used for two data collection protocols, observation and introspection. I will discuss them together, as the observations led to introspection and analysis which led to changes in my plan.

It became very obvious in the early part of the study that the attitudes both the students and I brought to the study would be important. My first journal entry contains this observation: “Off to a bad start. It’s so much harder talking to kids about home/school language than I thought. They’ve already become defensive.... One said it sounded like I was saying something bad about ‘black homes.’” I wondered if I’d get any cooperation. Overcoming this perception became a major goal of my next lessons, and I made a point of using language samples in Spanish and even an Irish folktale which included characters speaking in a thick Irish brogue. I used some of the Swede Finn phrases I’d heard as a child. Table 4.5 shows the language samples I presented during these lessons. Samples came from my own experience and from the literature listed in Appendix A. Within a few days, I was noticing they were “relaxed” about the discussion. They began using the word “slang” to describe informal language, but we talked about the negative connotations of that, and decided we wouldn’t use that descriptor. They were starting to feel more like partners in the process, rather than feeling “studied.”

Table 4.5: Language samples presented to broaden understanding of “informal” language

Informal/Home Language	Formal/School Language
Said vat you got to said and don't kick aftervard.	Say what you have to say, then don't complain.
I don't got eyes in my rear.	I can't see behind me.
Me back's as sore as can be.	My back is very sore.
No problema, home boy.	No problem, friend. That's okay.
I'm a cool, low-riding cat.	I'm on the wrong side of the law.
Sweet Clara, you aine gon' last in the fields.	Sweet Clara, you're not going to last in the field.
Tomorrow you comin' with me to the Big House.	Tomorrow you will come with me to the Big House.
Don't be no Mama's Boy.	Don't be a Mama's Boy.
Never seen nothing.	I have never seen anything.
Good mornin', ya'll.	Good morning, everyone.
Hey Dog. You want to hoop?	Hey friend, do you want to play basketball?

My perception early on was that the students were much more aware of (and interested in) idioms than the grammar and usage structures I wanted them to focus on. I decided because of this to create a new data recording tool for them. Originally, they had had a booklet with each page consisting of a place for “Informal/Home Language” and a place for the “Formal/School Language” counterpart. I refined this tool, breaking it into sections for grammatical structures (negatives, verb tenses, verb agreement) and idioms (Appendix D). This allowed them to record, analyze, and use the idioms they had collected, and to incorporate the grammatical structures I was introducing. I originally had not planned to use negative formations in the study, but so many of the samples we found in books contained examples of double negatives and the use of *ain't* that it seemed it needed to be included in the books. As they worked with these books, I observed that, indeed, the idioms were easier for them to recognize and to rewrite formally. I began to wonder if the exposure alone would be enough to make a difference

in their understanding of the grammatical structures. I observed that some students easily rewrote informal grammatical structures into formal ones, but seldom produced them formally, either in their speaking or their writing.

From the beginning of the school year, we had a literacy skills block as a part of our day. I had begun the year teaching about nouns and verbs, with the hope that this knowledge and vocabulary would help us with our discussion of formal and informal language. Based on the observations I had recorded in my journal about the students' understanding of the grammatical structures I wanted them to be aware of, I decided to further develop these lessons to include the discussion of subject-verb agreement and negative formation. (Appendix B). My observations at this point, however, suggested that the best I could hope for in the time available was the raising of the students' awareness of the structures, not anything approaching mastery of them.

The other major component of the study was the writing students did for their collage essay unit of study. The observations of students recorded in my journal during this phase were some of the most interesting and telling. The collage essay is a subgenre of memoir, and consists of five pieces of writing all relating to the same theme. They are: narrative, portrait, scene, vignette, and dialogue. These pieces allowed the students the opportunity to use both formal and informal language. Using examples of books in which the narration was written in formal language and the dialogue in informal language, I introduced the possibility of incorporating the informal language they heard at home into their school writing (Appendix A). The students were very interested in trying this, and very protective of the informal language once they had written it into their

pieces. Possibly thinking I might go back on my word, one student pointed out a section of his writing to me, stating, “I wrote it like this ‘cause that’s just how he said it.”

Samples of this use of language will be discussed in the documentation section of my results. This reaffirmed my earlier observation that the awareness of formal and informal language had been raised, and that while the students were embracing their own home language, they were not rejecting school language. Given the time frame of the study, I began to assure myself that this may be enough.

Documentation

The documentation data I’ll be presenting consists of lesson plans, classroom materials, and student work.

Lesson Plans

My original plan for this study included lessons in:

1. collecting samples of overheard conversations and ways of sorting and processing them, and
2. collage essay, particularly in the use of informal language in dialogue and the use of formal language in narration, and

As the study progressed, I found the need for additional lessons, in particular,

1. those addressing the negative attitude toward the discussion of formal and informal language displayed by some of my students, and
2. literacy skills lessons in subject-verb agreement and negative formation.

Samples of lesson plans can be found in Appendix B.

Classroom Materials

Students began collecting language samples in school in their writer's notebooks. They transferred these samples into a "Comparative Grammar and Phrase Book" I created for them. Facing pages in the book were labeled "Informal/Home Language" and "Formal/School Language." As I began to realize that they were having trouble distinguishing between grammatical and idiomatic differences in language, I gave them another booklet called "Grammar and Idiom Book" (See Appendix D). It was again divided into "Informal" and "Formal" columns, but contained examples of language I had collected from the students and from our in-class reading materials. It had the following categories: negatives, got/have, to be conjugations, done/did, idioms, and other languages. Although some students had difficulty categorizing the samples they had collected, it became a very useful tool for discussing exactly what they had collected samples of, and with help they were able to distinguish between the categories.

Assessments and Writing Samples

There were two types of student work collected: literacy skills tests in subject-verb agreement and negative formation, and writing samples.

Literacy skills tests. As mentioned earlier, I chose to include some of the grammatical features the students were collecting in their ethnographic study in my literacy skills lessons. My perception at the time was that the exposure to and discussion of them we were doing in class was not helping them to understand the formal usage. From the samples they collected, I chose to teach units in subject-verb agreement and negative formation. The tests were given at the end of each of these small units. The tests provide

the only data which could be analyzed quantitatively, showing the students' understanding and use of formal language after direct instruction.

The literacy skills block is taught in the students' homeroom, so while I planned the lessons for both groups of sixth graders, I only taught it to my own homeroom. Therefore, I'm only using literacy skills test data from the group of students I actually taught. This sample consists of eight students. While it is too small to be of any statistical significance, patterns in student understanding of subject-verb agreement can be discussed. The two areas tested were subject-verb agreement and negative formation.

Subject-verb agreement. The student responses to the subject-verb agreement test are in Appendix E. The test had two sections: the first (four questions) tested the students' understanding of present tense third person singular agreement and the second (six questions) tested agreement of the BE copula. The students had to choose if the sentence given was formal or informal, and, if they determined it was informal, to rewrite it formally. They had much more difficulty with the third person singular section of the test, and as a group, only scored 50% correct. One sentence: "When I'm feeling blue, my mom always make me happy" yielded a "Formal" response from seven out of the eight, while only one rewrote the sentence: "When I'm feeling blue, my mom always makes me happy." The sentence: "Every day she ask, 'Has the dog been let out?'" was determined to be formal usage by five out of the eight, with just two rewriting it: "Every day she asks, 'Has the dog been let out?'" They did better with "My mom shows how much she love her kids," with five of the eight correctly rewriting it "My mom shows how much

she loves her kids.” The one sentence that was already written formally, “She helps clean the house and cook,” was correctly identified as formal by all eight students.

The students did better on the BE copula section of the test, scoring 83.3% correct as a group. There was no evident pattern of types of sentences in this section that gave them more difficulty.

Negative formation. The student responses to the negative formation test can be found in Appendix F. Like the subject-verb agreement test, it had two parts. The first five items asked the student to change an affirmative statement to a negative one. As a group, the students scored 80% correct on this section. The most difficult item was the question “Are you coming over after school?” where four of the five incorrect responses turned it into a statement, such as “You aren’t coming over after school.” The second section consisted of another five items, this time written in negative in either formal or informal usage. The task was to decide if the sentence was formal or informal, and if it was informal to rewrite it in formal language. This was more difficult, and resulted in only 65% correct responses.

The data collected from these tests was just a snapshot in time, not a pre- and post test comparison. As such, it gives some indication of the current state of the students’ understanding of informal vs. formal usage, but does not indicate growth.

Writing Samples. Both on-demand writing samples and the collage essay samples were collected.

On-demand writing. My original intention when planning this study was to have students write two letters to the fifth graders, one telling about the open cycle publication

they had completed before beginning the collage essay unit of study, and one at the conclusion of the collage essay unit, explaining what it involved. From these samples, I hoped to be able to determine if the students showed an increase in the formal subject-verb agreements, verb tenses, and word choice. The students completed the first letter, and as I began to analyze it I realized most students had chosen to write the letter as a procedure, in the second person singular. They yielded no usable data for my research. For this reason, I chose not to have them write the unit-ending letter. Instead, I decided to look at the benchmark narratives they wrote in November for fall conference evaluation, and to compare them with benchmarks written in February. Appendix G contains a summary of the types of informal usages found in the two benchmarks. The one pattern that does emerge from the data is an increase in the use of formal past tense formations. Whereas the first benchmark contained an aggregate thirty-three informal usages, the second contained four. Even taking into account the missing data for student number nine, who had seven informal past tenses in the first benchmark, the difference is notable. There seems to be no discernable pattern of improvement between the two samples in the other language features. There are two other findings worth mentioning. First, neither set of benchmarks contained examples of what I would consider a conscious decision to use AAVE, either grammatical or idiomatic. For the students' sake, this is probably a good thing, as we equate benchmark narrative writing to the writing students do on their state writing test, and for those tests, unfortunately, students are usually better off staying with formal structures to the best of their ability. As their writing teacher, however, I have a strong interest in helping them to become invested in their writing

beyond being able to pass the state test, so these results reaffirmed my belief that explicitly allowing students to reflect their own homes and cultures in their writing through the use of AAVE was a worthwhile goal. The second finding I saw in the benchmarks told me that any improvement they showed in the use of SAE was not connected to the explicit grammar taught through the literacy skills lessons. I had taught subject-verb agreement and negative formation, and the only improvement in the students' writing was in past tense formations. Even taking into consideration that the data on past tense formations indicates a possible trend toward improvement rather than confirmation of it, a comparison of the November and February benchmark papers does prove that introducing informal usage in the classroom writing program does not worsen the students' performance in on-demand writing tasks such as benchmark assessments. This might allay misgivings some may have about using this approach to language instruction.

Collage Essays. By far the richest and most useful samples of student work came from the collage essays. It was through these pieces of writing that I truly began to glimpse the value of the freedom to speak from their own experiences that my students were beginning to feel. I had worked so hard at the beginning of the study to avoid language such as “fixing mistakes” and “the right way to say it,” but now I found I was celebrating passages such as:

“In school the class is medium, kind of big. Sometimes it’s noisy and sometimes quiet. People be whispering. I feel comfortable ‘cause I see Daziah³ and

³ All person and place names have been changed or omitted to protect the anonymity of the subject.

DeShay. The light, it's dim. It's comfortable in Mrs. Wurl's class. But it be cold, and I feel uncomfortable.”

Appendix C contains the entire text of eight pieces of student writing from the collage essay assignment. They were chosen for the following reasons: they exemplify varying levels of awareness of using both SAE and AAVE grammatical structures and idioms in the same piece of writing and the published form they're presented in reflects little, if any, editing input from others. It is, in other words, a true reflection of their understanding of the usage of the language. I'll discuss them briefly, pointing out what I consider to be important in each.

The first two paragraphs of “In My Own Little World” are written completely in SAE. The writer shows an understanding of formal copula, past tense, and subject-verb agreement. Because of this, it seems clear that her use of two AAVE phrases in paragraph three are intentional: “At first we thought it was the police, you know the way they be making a fuss at your door” (line 10), and “Dang, look how big you grown!” (line 12). In the first, the use of the habitual BE tells us, in a way inserting “always” might have, that this is not an uncommon occurrence. In the second, the aunt's personality and love for the student are evident in the words she chose. This piece was the vignette, or a small story telling one event, and one of the strategies we used for it was to include the characters' actions and dialogue. It provided a place for the writer to show us the relationship she had with her aunt.

One other interesting feature of this vignette is the way it started at the end, with the trip to the mall, and then proceeded to tell about anticipating the aunt's arrival and

then the moment she appears at the door. This is a common narrative discourse strategy in AAVE, as mentioned earlier in discussion of Sarah Michaels' (1981) study of discourse style.

It is from the second sample, "About My Friend," that the title for this paper came. I was conferring with the writer, and when we came to "Don't play 'wit me" (line 18), he volunteered before I could even ask, "I wrote it like this 'cause it's just the way he said it." I asked him if that was the case with the last two lines as well, and he said it was. This piece is an example of a dialogue, one of the parts of the collage essay, and the one that provided students with the greatest opportunity for using the language of their home in their school writing. It was described to the students as a way to tell a story by letting the characters use their own words.

"It's a Small World" contains examples of many of the kinds of oral language I hear my students produce daily. The idiom "there go" for the existential "there is" or "there are" appears in lines 26 and 29. The omission of plural or possessive markers on nouns appears in lines 31, 32, and 33. This is a direct reflection of their oral language, which often manifests itself in their writing.

The same student wrote "School Features," which includes two examples of the habitual BE, in lines 42 and 45. She differentiates between the habitual BE and standard usage of the copula with the sentence "Sometimes it's noisy and sometime quiet," a "sometimes" occurrence, and "People be whispering," a "habitual" occurrence (lines 41-42). These last two pieces were written by student number 12 in the Analysis of Student Work (Appendix G), who had lots of examples of informal usage in her benchmark

narrative. My best analysis of her control of formal language would be that she's aware of the differences, but that she will slip into informal usage that reflects her oral language more often than others in her class.

"Foul Trouble," is a dialogue. The writer produces five examples of informal usage (lines 58, 59, 61, 62, and 65), all but one of which (line 65, got for gotten) are in the quotations. Since there was very little narration with which to compare these quotations, I also included "The Journey to a New Me," a narrative by the same author. It contains no dialogue, and only one informal usage, "Our jersey colors was baby blue and white" (lines 73-74). There are examples of complex formal usages such as "I knew I could have done better" (line 77), which indicates a command of the language and causes a reader to assume that the informal usages in the earlier dialogue are conscious decisions made by the author. The comparison of these two pieces of writing indicates the author's understanding of the appropriate time to use informal language in written work.

The last author I'll discuss wrote the two pieces "Listening to Malcolm's Words" and "My Internal Thoughts on Malcolm." The first, a dialogue, has two examples of informal usage, "Ain't you tired of watching Malcolm X's movie?" (line 82) and "Isaiah, is I'm going to do a collage essay when I go to school?" (line 87). However, unlike the previous narrative "The Journey to a New Me," which contained only one informal usage and demonstrated a command of sentence structure, "My Internal Thoughts on Malcolm," a portrait, reveals a student who struggles more with written language. The sentence "Malcolm reminded me of Martin Luther King, Jr., because they both of them

was a great person” not only has the singular verb *was* for the plural subject, but also the redundant construction “they both of them” (line 90). Line 93 contains the illogical conjunction *but* in the final sentence of the piece. These examples, along with the noun phrase “him and Martin” (line 92), give the reader less assurance that the informal constructions used in the dialogue are truly conscious decisions on the part of the author.

The data I have presented provide glimpses into the thought processes of the students who produced them. While they offer no definitive evidence of the degree to which students are making conscious decisions about formal and informal usage, or even the extent to which they fully understand formal usage, they do suggest a change in the students’ attitude toward using informal language in their school writing. My own reflections indicate a change in my attitude toward the use of AAVE in school writing. I’ll explore these attitude changes and its possible implications in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

I began this study to determine if, through action research, I could improve my teaching of African American students by engaging with them in a contrastive study of African American Vernacular English and Standard American English, as evidenced by their acquiring greater proficiency in SAE as well as the ability to choose appropriately between AAVE and SAE in their written narratives. I was looking for evidence that my method of contrastive language study would bring about change in my students' use of written language, and in my own teaching practices. I will discuss the results through these two lenses.

Changes in Student Writing

The most notable change in the students' writing behavior was their newfound willingness and even enthusiasm to include the language of their homes in the work they did in school. Initially, they demonstrated a sense of protectiveness about this very personal part of their lives, one which had in the past been labeled "incorrect," and at the beginning of the study it appeared they would not let down that guard. As evidenced by the collage essay examples in Appendix C, many did let their guard down, and they

shared a part of themselves with me and their audience they had not previously been willing to expose.

Having shown a willingness to use informal language in their writing, the next step is to determine whether they had the ability to choose appropriately between formal and informal usage. As would be expected, those who had a better command of formal English were more successful in making conscious decisions about the inclusion of informal language in their writing. The study did not prove that the method it described actually increased the students' knowledge of and ability to use formal language. The comparison of the November and February benchmark writing showed small variations in the number and types of informal usages, with a trend toward improvement in past tense formations, an area I had not taught explicitly. This may be an indication that the discussions we had about the contrasts between AAVE and SAE were more effective than explicit grammar instruction. This will be discussed in more detail in the "Changes in My Teaching Practice" section below.

As Signithia Fordham (1996) has said, a major factor in the underachievement of African Americans in our schools today is that they are expected to embrace the dominant culture, too often at the exclusion of their own. To the degree that I was able to succeed in *not* excluding their culture from our classroom, I may also have contributed to their further academic achievement in the future. My hope is they will be more open to the formal grammar instruction they'll undoubtedly receive in junior high school, and be able to incorporate what they learn there into their new-found acceptance of their home

language. I hope they'll consciously choose to include AAVE in their writing when appropriate, as they continue to acquire a greater command of SAE.

Changes in my Teaching Practice

In Chapter Two I made this statement: Taken as a whole, this chapter highlights the unfortunate truth that although much research has been done to find ways to understand and overcome the language barrier faced by African American students, this research has not found its way into the mindset of their teachers or classrooms they inhabit. My goal was to use this research to change at least my own mindset and classroom, and hopefully to provide a method others can use to change theirs as well.

Regarding the goal of changing my own mindset and classroom, this project has been a success. I have grown, from having a general understanding of the origins and development of African American Vernacular English, to a research-based knowledge of its roots and workings, to a heartfelt appreciation of its richness and importance in my students' lives. I remember the first day I introduced the idea of home language and school language to the class, and the resistance I felt from some of the students. "It sounds like you're saying something bad about 'black homes.'" I don't think I was, but I also don't think I could at that point have appreciated the following paragraph the way I do now:

Just then, we heard the doorbell ring. *Ding ding dong. Ding a ding ding dong.*

First, we thought it was the police, you know, the way that they be making a fuss at your door. But when my mom opened the door, here came a dark-skinned lady

with dark brown hair running toward me, and starting giving me hugs and kisses, saying, “Dang, look how big you grown!”

This change in attitude resulted in an improvement in my teaching of African American students. I found I stopped using judgmental language such as “correct” and “incorrect” in my interactions with them, and that I was finally able to do more than give lip service to the need for the classroom to be inclusive of the culture and language of all its occupants. Through thoughtfully designed lessons and activities, and writing which valued the students’ language, the classroom environment came to be an authentic reflection of its students.

The results have also caused me to seriously consider the effectiveness of explicit grammar instruction, since the only feature that showed improvement was one I had not explicitly taught. Steven Krashen (1992) maintains that direct grammar instruction plays only a minor role in second language learning, serving only as a kind of self-editor, which can result in increased accuracy but reduced information sharing. He argues that students benefit more from increased comprehensible input, resulting in the acquisition, not learning, of language. Although the grammar lessons did provide us with a common language to use when discussing our samples, that is probably the best that can be said of them. A better use of time might have been more collecting, sorting, and discussing language samples.

Implications of the Research

The goal of my research question was to improve my own teaching of African American students, as reflected in data showing improvement in their proficiency in SAE. The benchmark narrative data showed a trend toward improvement in the formal use of the past tense, and no difference in the other features analyzed. The collage essays (documentary data) showed attempts by the students to appropriately use AAVE in their school writing. The observational and introspective data also showed an increasing willingness on the part of some students to attempt to use AAVE in school, as well as an increased level of understanding and acceptance of AAVE by me.

Even for students who didn't demonstrate through their writing that they were comfortable bringing their home language into their classroom work, their participation in the collection of language samples and in the discussions surrounding them did not indicate a defensive attitude. They may not have understood the possibilities for including informal structures in their pieces, they may have understood and still chosen not to do it, or, as is the case with one student, they may feel pressure from home not to use AAVE. This student confided in me, "My mom really doesn't talk like that," and in truth, her mother, an educator herself, demonstrates a strong command of SAE and has very high expectations of her daughter. I certainly would not pressure a student in this situation to include SSVE in her writing, because it appears not to be a significant feature of her home life.

The data are in agreement with Jessica Whitney's (2005) conclusion that explicit contrastive analysis of AAVE and SAE improves SAE proficiency and with Stephen

Krashen's (1992) assertion that explicit grammar instruction is not the most effective way to acquire language.

The data also suggest that including AAVE in the classroom had a positive effect on the students and on my teaching. Not measured, but mentioned in the research cited in Chapter Two, are the detrimental effects of excluding students' home language (Delpit, 2002; Fordham, 1996; Labov, 1979). I believe these factors, taken together, suggest that the method I have described is worth repeating and refining.

Plan for Communicating Results

Conducting this study has changed my own understanding of AAVE. It has also greatly increased my appreciation for the rich language my African American students bring to the classroom. Even though I am not currently in a position to conduct a large, long-term study to show the effects of my methods, I am in a position to share what I have learned with fellow teachers of African American students. During the course of my research, I have become keenly aware of the prejudice demonstrated toward African Americans based only on their speech patterns. As I talked to others about the work I was doing, I was struck with the negativity with which I was met. I heard comments such as, "...but they sound so uneducated..." and "...then they get that 'attitude' in their voices..." as well as others I won't repeat here, from educators and the general public alike. It saddened me greatly, and made me resolve to do something to share with my fellow teachers the value and beauty of the language our African American students speak. I want them to be able to celebrate what the students come with, understanding

that it's their responsibility not to correct it, but to add SAE to it. It's also important they know this is not just a "feel good" activity: my research suggested, and that of Rebecca Wheeler shows, students' success in writing SAE improves when they "explicitly contrast the structure of AAVE and the Standard" (as quoted in Whitney, 2005, p. 67).

I have prepared a handout which can be given to teachers as a supplement to a discussion about the value of AAVE in our students' lives and in our classrooms (Appendix H). I give an overview of the more common AAVE structures we hear, and a grammatical explanation for them. In addition, I have included the five classroom strategies presented by Jessica Whitney (2005). They provide at least a starting point for teachers who are interested in integrating AAVE into their classrooms.

Limitations of the Study

The goal of my study was to improve my own teaching of African American students. The data collected suggest that this goal was met. The time frame (four months) and the number of students involved (sixteen) are too small for one to assume that my results would be replicated by others. The best it can do is set the stage for my future growth as a teacher of African American students, give me an opportunity to share my work with colleagues, and suggest further research, as outlined below.

Recommendations for Future Study

As early as 1970, William Labov concluded that dialect and grammar differences are not the main cause of reading failure in African American boys, it's "a culture

conflict between the vernacular culture and the schoolroom” (p. 43). In 1974, the National Council of Teachers of English Conference on College Composition and Communication passed this resolution: “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language – the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style” (Turner, 1996, p. 255).

In 1996, we had the failure of the Oakland, California Ebonics Resolution. Lisa Delpit continued to write about the importance of accepting the language and culture of our students in 2002. The more things change, the more they stay the same. My small study suggested that it is possible to allow students to feel comfortable bringing their home language and culture into the classroom, but this is just a fraction of what needs to be done if our goal really is to improve their academic achievement. It is well past time for long-term study of large groups of students who, from their first entrance into the Kindergarten room until their graduation from high school, believe they are coming to school with a rich language background upon which the school is going to build. In that kind of a sustained atmosphere it would be possible to prove or disprove that the current lack of achievement shown by African American students is indeed the result of the vernacular “culture conflict” cited by Labov, and not of a lack of potential on the part of the students.

An interesting part of that research could include development of methods to allow African American students to acquire SAE naturally, which Stephen Krashen has suggested is much more effective than learning the rules (1992). The ethnographic study I borrowed from Shirley Brice Heath’s (1991) work with English Language Learners

showed promise; perhaps other methods usually associated with second language acquisition should also be tried.

Conclusion

We all suffer from our society's rejection of the rich heritage reflected in the language patterns of our African American learners. How ironic it is that we can celebrate the work of African American authors such as Tony Morrison and Alice Walker, Langston Hughes and Gordon Parks, and not realize that without their tenacity in holding onto and expressing their own culture, their stories could not have been so compellingly told. How ironic it is that we want to strip children of this rich language, learned at their mothers' knees, and then pretend we're doing it to serve their best interest. African Americans fall victim to the same "melting pot" theory of assimilation that plagues other immigrants to this country, the same force that drives "English Only" movements and defunds bilingual education programs. When my grandparents emigrated from Finland a century ago, they left willingly, and willingly gave up many of their ways, and their language, to become American, and still I cling fiercely to the fragments of my culture they did pass down to me. How much more fiercely my African American students and their families need to cling to theirs, both the cultural and linguistic traces of Africa that remain, and the history of slavery and discrimination experienced here.

As a final thought on my experiences during this study, I realize I've added a new phrase to the ethnic repertoire discussed in the introduction. I have now "said vat I got to

said,” but I’ve also acquired a new way of expressing what I have learned: Looking in the mirror, I see a light skinned lady, with blond hair, saying to herself, “Dang girl, look how much you grown!”

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APPENDIX A

BOOKLIST FOR FORMAL/INFORMAL LANGUAGE STUDY

BOOKLIST FOR FORMAL/INFORMAL LANGUAGE STUDY

- Adoff, A. (1974). *My Black me: A beginning book of Black poetry*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Bryan, A. (1992). *Sing to the sun*. Harper Collins Publishers.
- De Paola, T. (1992). *Jamie O'Rourke and the big potato: An Irish folktale*. New York: Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers.
- Grimes, N. (1999). *My man Blue*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Hopkinson, D. (1995). *Sweet Clara and the freedom quilt*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- Hurston, Z. (1935). *Mules and men*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Smith, C. R., Jr. (1999). *Rimshots: Basketball pix, rolls and rhythms*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Smith, C. R., Jr. (2001). *Short takes*. New York: Dutton Children's Books.
- Soto, G. (1995). *Chato's kitchen*. New York: Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers.
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APPENDIX B

Lesson Plans

Literacy Skills Lesson
Introducing Subject-Verb Agreement

Connect: You'll remember that near the beginning of the year we did a unit on nouns, studying how they can be singular or plural, possessive, common or proper. Then we learned about verbs, that there are main verbs, helping verbs, and linking verbs. We're going to start looking at them together now, because it happens that there's a special way they go together, and we say they have to "agree."

Teach: We found when we looked at nouns that there was usually more than one in a sentence. The sentence "Samantha gave the dog to her mother," for example, has three nouns: Samantha, dog, and mother. We're going to be interested in the subject of each sentence, and that's the noun that *is doing* something, or that *is* something. So, in our sentence "Samantha gave the dog to her mother," the noun that is doing something is Samantha – she is giving the dog. The dog isn't doing anything, and the mother isn't doing anything, it's just Samantha. She's the subject of the sentence.

Here's another example: John is tired of his brother. We have two nouns, John and his brother. John is the subject, because he is the one who *is* something. Now, John's brother may be just as tired of John as John is of him, but our sentence doesn't tell us that, only that John is tired of his brother.

We're going to look at some sentences on the overhead, and we'll try to figure out in each of them what the subject is. Now, if the subject is doing or being something, we need also to be able to find the verb. Remember, we had main verbs, helping verbs, and linking verbs, so we'll look for all three kinds.

I can always depend on my mom.

If *I am* down, *she can* fix it.

The *thing* that makes me proud *is* my friends.

My *grandma* makes me very proud.

My *mom* loves her family with all her heart.

I almost *cried*, but *I kept* it inside of me.

Go through the sentences, pointing out the subjects and the verbs, and the fact that a sentence can have more than one set.

Literacy Skills Lesson
Practicing Subject-Verb Agreement

Connect: Yesterday we learned that some nouns in a sentence are the ones that are doing or being something, and we call them the subject of the sentence.

Teach: Today, we're going to look at little bit at how the subjects and the verbs go together, how they agree. It's different in formal and informal language. We'll be looking at the rules for formal language. We'll start with the "to be" verb, which tells what something *is*. Take a look at these charts: (Show on overhead.)

verb *to be*: present tense

Person	singular	plural
1 st	I am	we are
2 nd	you are	you are
3 rd	he/she/it is	they are

verb *to be*: past tense

Person	singular	plural
1 st	I was	we were
2 nd	you were	you were
3 rd	he/she/it was	they were

Study these for a minute. What kinds of things do you notice? (Students will probably notice that the plural is the same all the way through each chart, and that it's the same as the second person singular.)

Give a brief explanation of "person."

First person: *includes* the speaker, either alone or with someone else.

Second person: the speaker is talking *to* a person or people who are there.

Third person: the speaker is talking *about* a person/thing or people/things.

Go through these sentences on the overhead, deciding person and number, and filling in the appropriate verb.

1. They _____ sick yesterday.
2. We _____ late last week.
3. He _____ the best friend I have.
4. You _____ always there for me. (present)

5. When I _____ feeling blue, my mom makes me happy.

Link: You'll be working in groups of three or four today. I'll give each group a piece of chart paper and some markers, and I want you to come up with five different sentences, each using the "to be" verb. They can be present or past tense. Underline the subject and the verb.

Work Time: Groups complete their charts.

Sharing: Sharing will take place tomorrow as each group presents its chart.

Writer's Workshop Lesson Plan
Overheard Conversations

Connect: “For the past couple of weeks, we’ve been learning about ways to have rich writer’s notebooks where we can record the things that are interesting to us, that we’re wondering or just thinking about, and sometimes just things we want to remember. We’ve learned strategies like musings, wonderings, writing from an image, and writing from a list.

Teach: “Today I’m going to show you a new notebook strategy: overheard conversations. Sometimes writers get the most interesting entries in our notebooks when we write down exactly what someone else has said. Let’s take a look again at *Rimshots*, by Charles R. Smith. In the piece ‘Excuses, Excuses,’ he has written down exactly what he’s heard basketball players say when they mess up. ‘My game is a little off because my shorts are too tight,’ or ‘I can’t guard him because he smells.’ This piece is so effective because he has used the exact words he’s heard others say. Nikki Grimes does the same thing in *My Man Blue*. In the piece “My Own Man,” he quotes the boys next door who say, ‘Don’t be no Mama’s boy,’ they say. It’s much more powerful and noticeable than if he’d just said, ‘They tell me not to be a Mama’s boy.’ Try to record what the person said exactly as he or she said it.” Record one of Smith’s lines and the Grimes line on chart paper.

Active Involvement: “I’d like you to take just a minute to think about something you heard someone say recently, that you can remember almost word for word. It could be the way your mom says goodbye to you in the morning, or what your friend said when you first saw each other this morning (I usually hear some ‘Wussups’ in the hall). Take your notebook, date a new page, and call it ‘Overheard conversations.’ Then jot down at least one thing you heard someone say recently.” Chart a few students’ lines.

Link: “When you go back to your tables, I’m going to put on a video clip for you to watch. As you’re watching, try to write down some of the things you hear word for word. Write them on the same ‘Overhear conversations’ page you already started. You won’t be able to write everything, so practice listening for something you hear that’s interesting, or a little different.”

Work Time: Play Unitedstreaming clips. Students record conversations.

Share: Three or four students share a line they heard and wrote down, which I’ll chart. Then begin a discussion of what made this difficult, and if there’s any way to make it easier. Chart suggestions to use tomorrow to begin a discussion of a format for recording conversations.

Writer's Workshop Lesson Plan
Introducing Dialogue (in Collage Essay)

Connect: “We have focused on two elements of a collage, scenes and portraits. We have learned that careful and accurate depictions of people and places require close observation and attention to detail. We also realize that the best writers layer in a combination of physical and sensory details that helps the reader to see and feel what’s happening or to know and understand the person.

Teach: “Today I want to talk about a third element that we will include in our collage – dialogue. Dialogue is often used to reveal character. It is also used to move the action along in a story or it’s a way to give the reader some important information. We are going to study some examples of dialogue to see what we can learn about the people speaking or about the topic they are talking about.

“I am going to reread ‘No Sole’ from *Rimshots*. On our chart, we have listed that it is a conversation among some old men after they hear a younger player complaining about his shoes hurting. We noted that they were involved in a verbal game of ‘one-up-manship’ – who had it worse back in their day.

“We can learn something about these men from what they say. Each man that spoke had it tougher than the one before him. (Give examples.) They can’t play ball anymore, but when they watch the younger players they now have a verbal competition with each other instead.

Active Involvement: “Turn to your partner and share something about the dialogue that you were noticing or thinking about as I read.” (Write some of the responses on the noticings chart.)

Link: “I have more examples of dialogue that I want you to study in small groups. Make note of what you learn about the characters or the situation from the conversation.”

Work Time: Analyze dialogue samples. Groups chart their analysis.

Share: Students share their charts. Highlight key ideas about the features of dialogue like the fact that the words are often interspersed with descriptions or the character’s internal thoughts.

Writer's Workshop Lesson Plan
Narratives (in Collage Essay)

Connect: “So far in your collage essays you’ve written dialogue, scenes, and vignettes. They are all about you, and things in your own life, family, and history. Today we’re going to start thinking about narratives, or stories, we can add to the collages.

Teach: “Just like we found out when we studied dialogue, stories are often best when they’re written in the actual words of the storyteller. Remember the storytellers we heard back in September? Their stories were so full of repetition, and African expressions, and songs – it would be boring to tell those stories without all those things.

“I’m going to read a piece from *Locomotion*. This is one where Lonnie is remembering his mother telling him about how he was born premature, and how small he was.” Read ‘Birth,’ page 74. “Notice how the author used Mama’s exact words to tell the story: ‘See this chicken I’m about to cut up and fry? You were even smaller than it. Doctors said there’s a little bit we can do but mostly you have to hope hard and pray.’

I still love to hear my mom tell stories about when I was a kid. She tells one when I was about five years old, and my friend David, the preacher’s son, and I went into the church to play. We weren’t supposed to do that. His mom came over to my house looking for us, and together they set out to find us. They ended up at the church, and found him up behind the pulpit preaching for all he was worth, and me playing the piano for all I was worth. They couldn’t keep from laughing, so they had to go outside and get it out of their systems so they could come back in and yell at us for playing in the church. Another time when we were missing, mom found us in the basement, painting tires. But that’s another story.....

Active Involvement: “Think about a story that someone at home has told about you. It might be about when you were born, or about something silly you did as a kid, or about something scary that happened to you. Tell your partner the story.

Link: When you go back to your tables, I want you to start a new list. This list will be stories that you’ve heard someone tell about you or someone else in your family.”

Work Time: Work on lists. When they have several ideas written down, pick one of them and write what they remember about the story.

Share: Several students share their lists to help others who had trouble with ideas.

Tonight, for homework, ask someone to tell you one of the stories, and try to record it as close as you can to the way it was told. These will serve as home language narratives students can include in their collage essays.

APPENDIX C

COLLAGE ESSAY SAMPLES

In My Own Little World

The first time that I ever went to the mall with my mom and auntie was October 14th. I remember it like it was the day before yesterday. It was the first day that my auntie came up here from _____.⁴

It was a hot 'n steaming day when my mom told me that my auntie was coming up here from _____, I started jumping up and down in joy and excitement. Just then, we heard the doorbell ring. *Ding ding dong. Ding a ding ding dong.* First, we thought it was the police, you know, the way that they be making a fuss at your door. But when my mom opened the door, here came a dark-skinned lady with dark brown hair running toward me, and starting giving me hugs and kisses, saying, 'Dang, look how big you grown!'

⁴ All person and place names have been changed or omitted to protect the anonymity of the subject.

About my Friend

John⁵ is a good friend. He can be helpful. He likes mechanics he wants to be an engineer. "What do you want to be when you get older?"

"Don't play wit' me."

"'Dat ain't even how you 'pos to say *with*."

"'Didn't nothing you say make sense."

⁵ All person and place names have been changed or omitted to protect the anonymity of the subject.

It's a Small World

When I went to Rainbow I saw Daziah.⁶ "Hey Hailey," Daziah said.

"Where are you going?"

"I came to get some Hot Cheetos," said Hailey.

"Me, too," said Daziah.

So we were walking down the aisle. "There go the Hot Cheetos. Can you get me the big bag, please?" said Daziah.

"Can I go to your house?" said Hailey.

"Yeah," said Daziah. So we were walking and talking. "There go a dollar in the middle of the street," said Daziah.

"Can I get 50 cent?"

"Yeah," Daziah said. So we are at Daziah house.

"Hi, Daziah mom."

"Hey," said Daziah's mom.

Well anyway, we decided to play her brother's video game. Daziah won the game. "You cheated," Hailey said. "Hey, Daziah I got to dip out."

"Ok. I'll see you in school."

"See you later," said Daziah.

⁶ All person and place names have been changed or omitted to protect the anonymity of the subject.

School Features

In school the class is medium, kind of big. Sometimes it's noisy and sometimes quiet. People be whispering. I feel comfortable 'cause I see Daziah⁷ and DeShay.

The light, it's kind of dim. It's comfortable in Mrs. Wurl's class. But it be cold, and I feel uncomfortable.

I see people doing their work. Me and Daziah working together in partners.

⁷ All person and place names have been changed or omitted to protect the anonymity of the subject.

Foul Trouble

"Dejon,⁸ get the rebound."

"Ok."

"How did you miss the ball? Hurry up, go down court."

Beeeeep. "Foul on number 20."

"What?"

"Two free throws."

"Barry, get in for Dejon."

"Ok."

"Coach, why you take me out?"

"I took you out because you got four fouls and you wasn't running the plays right."

"I was running the plays right."

"If you was you would still be in the game."

"All right."

I went to go sit down on the bench by my friend Jimmy. He wasn't playing because he had got in trouble in school. He said that I was dominating out there on the court.

Jimmy said, "You got like 22 points."

Then I asked my brother. I really had. I scored 16 points. My brother said, "That was the best game you ever played."

⁸ All person and place names have been changed or omitted to protect the anonymity of the subject.

The Journey to a New Me

When I was eight I started to play basketball. I didn't get on a team until I was 11 years old. My first team I ever played for was _____.⁹ Our jersey colors was baby blue and white. I was number 21, like Kevin Garnet and Tim Duncan.

I remember playing my first game. I only had four points. When the season was over I was mad at myself because I knew I could have done better.

That following summer I made sure that I got better, and I did. The next year, I signed up for the same team and became one of the best on the team.

⁹ All person and place names have been changed or omitted to protect the anonymity of the subject.

Listening to Malcolm's Words

As I sat in the living room, my mom came and said, "Ain't you tired of watching Malcolm X's movie?"

"No, I'm learning something, and plus I'm doing a collage essay on him."

"Well, it's better than watching BET all day, like you usually do."

"Yeah, I learned a whole lot of stuff I never knew about him."

"Isaiah¹⁰, is I'm going to do a collage essay when I go to school?" my little sister asked.

"Maybe when you get older," I replied.

¹⁰ All person and place names have been changed or omitted to protect the anonymity of the subject.

My Internal Thoughts on Malcolm

Malcolm X, an icon to the civil rights movement, knew you shouldn't judge people by the color of their skin. He was a legend to the Revolution. The things that Malcolm did helped us black people get to where we are today. Malcolm reminded me of Martin Luther King, Jr. because they both of them was a great person. At the time when Malcolm was a hustler, he believed in violence. At the end, him and Martin believed in stopping segregation the nonviolent way, but there will never be another Malcolm X.

APPENDIX D
GRAMMAR AND IDIOM BOOK

GRAMMAR AND IDIOM BOOK

Note: The samples to the left margin were in the book given to students. Those indented are examples of the language samples collected and analyzed by the students.

Informal	Formal
Negatives – “double negatives,” ain’t,	
<i>Don’t</i> be <i>no</i> Mama’s boy.	<i>Don’t</i> be a Mama’s boy.
I <i>ain’t</i> goin’ to <i>no</i> CARES Room. I <i>ain’t</i> goin’ to the CARES Room.	I’m <i>not</i> going to the CARES Room.
Sweet Clara, you <i>aine</i> gon’ last in the fields.	Sweet Clara, you <i>aren’t</i> going to last in the fields.
Student samples below:	
No, you <i>ain’t</i> playing.	You are not playing.
You <i>ain’t</i> talking to me.	You are not talking to me.
I <i>ain’t</i> cool with him.	I’m not friends with him.
That <i>ain’t</i> nice.	That’s not nice.
You <i>ain’t</i> ever heard....	Have you heard...
I <i>ain’t</i> goin’.	I am not going.
I <i>ain’t</i> got no money.	I do not have any money.
You <i>ain’t</i> getting’ nothing.	You <i>aren’t</i> getting anything.
Got, have	
I <i>got</i> it all worked out.	I <i>have</i> it all worked out.
I <i>got</i> (meaning “own”) a puppy.	I <i>have</i> a puppy. I <i>have got</i> a puppy. I’ve <i>got</i> a puppy.
I <i>got</i> (meaning “received”) a puppy.	I <i>got</i> a puppy.
Student samples below:	
We <i>got</i> two cats.	We <i>have</i> two cats.
I <i>got</i> no choice.	I <i>have</i> no choice.
I <i>got</i> no doubt.	I <i>have</i> no doubt.
You <i>gotta</i> go.	You <i>have to</i> go.
Don’t you <i>gotta</i> go to some field trip tomorrow?	Don’t you <i>have to</i> go on some field trip tomorrow?
is, are, be, was, were	
We <i>is</i> leaving now.	We <i>are</i> leaving now.
You <i>ready</i> to sew with me.	You <i>are</i> ready to sew with me.
They <i>was</i> talking ‘bout a map.	They <i>were</i> talking about a map.
When you <i>sewing</i> , no matter how careful you <i>be</i> , little scraps of cloth always <i>be</i> left after you cut out a dress or pillowcase.	When you <i>are</i> sewing, no matter how careful you <i>are</i> , little scraps of cloth always <i>are</i> left after you cut out a dress or pillowcase.
Student samples below:	

You one ugly thing.	You are not good looking.
Man, what ya'll doing?	What are you doing?
We was talking.	We were talking.
We be running.	We were running.
Yep, you gonna' get in trouble.	You are going to get in trouble.
Yep, and what you gonna' do about it?	Yeah, what are you going to do about it?
We was showing them.	We were showing them.
done, did	
We <i>done</i> it, girl!	We <i>did</i> it, Clara!
Student samples below:	
I done my homework.	I did my homework.
I done her hair.	I did her hair.

Others	
<i>Me</i> back's as sore as can be.	<i>My</i> back's very sore.
Student samples below:	
I'm gon' tell mom you ripped my stuff.	I'm going to tell mom you ripped my stuff.
That's how I do my name.	That's how I write my name.
Want 'cho chicken?	Do you want your chicken?
Dat's de first time.	That was the first time.
Idioms	
I'm a cool, low riding cat.	I on the wrong side of the law.
What's crackin'?	Hello.
There's no telling how soon old Death will be knockin' on my door.	I don't know how soon I'll die.
Student samples below:	
Check this out.	Come look at this.
Scat.	Get away.
Are you cool?	Are you alright?
Wuz up?	How are you doing?
I like dem shoes.	I like your shoes.
Eat my shorts!	Leave me alone.
Bite me.	I don't care.
Other Languages	
<i>El cielo es azul.</i>	The sky is blue.
<i>Uno, dos, tres...</i>	One, two, three...
Student samples below:	
<i>Julio</i>	July
<i>Mayo</i>	May

APPENDIX E
SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT TEST

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT TEST

Note: Student responses are in italics. Correct response is marked with an asterisk.

Read each sentence and decide if it is correct formal English, or if it is informal usage. Either write “formal” or rewrite it in formal English in the space below each sentence.

1. When I’m feeling blue, my mom always make me happy.

**When I’m feeling blue my mom always makes me happy. 1*
Formal: 7

2. My mom shows how much she love her kids.

**My mom shows how much she loves her kids. 5*
Formal: 3

3. Every day she ask, “Has the dog been let out?”

**Every day she asks, “Has the dog been let out?” 2*
Every day my sister asked, “Has the dog been let out yet?” 1
Formal: 5

4. She helps clean the house and cook.

**Formal: 8*

5. They wondered where we was.

**They wondered where we were. 6*
I wonder where they are. 1
Formal: 1

6. What you doing now?

**What are you doing now. 7*
Formal: 1

7. I’m busy reading right now.

**Formal: 8*

8. They was talking about a TV show.

**They were talking about a TV show. 5*
My sister was talking about a TV show. 1
Formal: 2

9. She's getting ready to leave.

**Formal: 8*

10. What was you doing?

**What were you doing? 6*
Formal: 2

APPENDIX F
NEGATIVE FORMATION TEST

NEGATIVE FORMATION TEST

Note: Student responses are in italics. Acceptable responses are marked with an asterisk.

Change the following sentences to negatives. (Example: I am going to school tomorrow.
 → I am not going to school tomorrow *or* I'm not going to school tomorrow.)

1. He is my best friend.

**He is not my best friend. 6*

**He isn't my best friend. 2*

2. Are you coming over after school?

**Are you not coming over after school? 2*

**Are you never coming over after school? 1*

You aren't coming over after school. 1

You are not coming over after school. 2

Don't come over after school. 1

Ain't you coming over after school? 1

3. Steven can play the piano very well.

**Steven cannot play the piano very well. 4*

**Steven can't play the piano very well. 4*

4. I really like having pizza for lunch.

**I really do not like having pizza for lunch. 3*

**I really don't like having pizza for lunch. 4*

I really can't like having pizza for lunch. 1

5. Baseball is my favorite sport.

**Baseball is not my favorite sport. 4*

**Baseball isn't my favorite sport. 2*

Baseball is my favorite sport. 2

Decide if the following sentences are formal or informal forms of the negative. If they are formal, write "formal." If they are informal, write the sentence over in a formal way.

1. He don't have no shoes.

**He doesn't have any shoes. 4*
**He does not have any shoes. 1*
**He has no shoes. 1*
He doesn't have no shoes. 1
Formal: 1

2. I don't like my new jeans.

**Formal: 5*
I do not like my blue jeans. 1
I like my new jeans. 2

3. My mom ain't going with us.

**My mom isn't going with us. 4*
**My mom is not going with us. 2*
My mom not going with us. 1
My mom is going with us. 1

4. Ain't you sick today?

**Aren't you sick today? 5*
Are you sick today? 2
Are you feeling better? 1

5. I'm not going to no meeting today.

**I am not going to a meeting today. 2*
**I'm not going to a meeting today. 2*
I'm not going to no meeting today. 1
I'm going to a meeting today. 2
Formal: 1

APPENDIX G

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT WORK: BENCHMARK NARRATIVES

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT WORK: BENCHMARK NARRATIVES

1 – November benchmark

2 – February benchmark

* - data not available

Student	Negatives		Past Tenses		Subject Verb Agreement		Null Copula		Possessives		Singular/ Plural Nouns or Pronouns	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
1			1									
2			8	1					1			
3		*		*		*		*	1	*		*
4					6		2			1		
5							1					
6												
7			1								2	
8			3			4		1			2	
9		*	7	*		*		*		*		*
10			2					1				1
11			2		1	2	4					
12			1									
13			2									2
14			4	3					1	1		1
15		*	2	*		*		*		*		*

APPENDIX H

FINDING SPACE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH
IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM:
A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

Finding Space for African American Vernacular English in the Elementary Classroom: A Guide for Teachers

There was a time when well-meaning teachers told English Language Learners and their families not to use their native language at home. We said they needed to practice their English. There was a time when well-meaning teachers didn't allow these same students to speak with each other in school in their native languages. We wanted them to practice their English. Since then, we have learned that students who have a strong grounding in their native language learn a second language better, and that students who are allowed to discuss and process concepts in their native language learn those concepts better. Fortunately, we have changed our practices. We still expect our ELLs to learn English, but we also understand the cultural and cognitive importance of maintaining their first language.

There is another group of students who come to us needing to learn language, our African American students. In their homes and neighborhoods, they speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a rule-governed language with its linguistic roots in the West African languages of their ancestors. The language they will need in order to be successful in school and the workplace is Standard American English (SAE). Just as we did earlier with ELLs, it is common for teachers to tell their students not to speak AAVE, because we have been taught that it is just “bad grammar.”

Grammar is a word the general public associates with the proper use of a language. There is “good” grammar and “bad” grammar. Linguists, however, use the word *grammar* to describe how a language is used, not to make judgments on it. AAVE has a grammar, and SAE has a grammar. In many ways they are the same, but in some ways they are different. Below is a little of the grammar of AAVE. You will probably notice these structures as ones produced consistently by your African American students. They are using the grammar of AAVE. There are structures that are and are not acceptable in AAVE.

Example	Grammatical Explanation
We Ø tired. He Ø a teacher	Null Copula: deletion of the “to be” verb in the present tense. This is not acceptable in the past tense (Rickford, 2000, p. 115).
Ain’t they at home? He ain’t got no money.	Negative Formation: the use of <i>ain’t</i> and double negatives are acceptable (DeBose, 1993; Martin, 1992).
This is John mother.	Possessives: deletion of the –‘s in sentences such as “This is John’s mother” (Labov, 1970, p. 41).
He go.... He have....	Third person singular present tense conjugation: regularized to use bare form of the verb (Rickford, 2000).
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. He Ø runnin. (He is running.) 2. He <i>be</i> runnin. (He is usually running, or He will/would be running.) 3. He <i>be steady</i> runnin. (He is usually running in an intensive, sustained manner, or He will/would be running in an intensive, sustained manner.) 4. He <i>been</i> runnin. (He has been running – at some earlier point, but probably not now.) 5. He <i>BEEN</i> runnin. (He has been running for a long time and still is.) (Rickford, 2000, p. 119). 	Invariant (not conjugated) form of <i>be</i>: <i>Be</i> describes a habitual act, <i>been</i> is the rough equivalent to “has been” or “have been,” and <i>BEEN</i> (capital letters indicating word stress) “describes an action that took place or a state that came into being a long time ago” (Rickford 2000, p. 119).

It has been suggested, by the linguists whose names you have just read, that we could better reach our African American students by recognizing that they come to us with a complete, correct, rule-governed language, AAVE. Our job, then, is not to “correct” it, but to teach them SAE as well.

Jessica Whitney (2005) provides a framework for the integration of AAVE into the classroom which consists of five components:

1. *Educating teachers about AAVE, specifically that it is a rule-governed language.* Ignorance of nonstandard vernaculars, not the vernaculars themselves, is the main obstacle to learning for their speakers (Labov, 1972).

2. *Creating multicultural classrooms.* Classrooms that incorporate multiple views are more relevant to students, and increase their motivation and achievement.
3. *Using rich oral language.* Speaking and listening are the foundations for other forms of literacy.
4. *Encouraging and teaching codeswitching.* Rather than correcting students who use AAVE, explicitly study and contrast features of AAVE and SAE. “When the teacher helped the students explicitly contrast the structure of AAVE and the Standard, their success in writing Standard English *improved* by 59%” (Wheeler, as quoted in Whitney, 67).
5. *Giving students authentic writing experiences.* As students learn to write for different audiences, they practice and learn the importance of codeswitching.

In 1974, the National Council of Teachers of English Conference on College Composition and Communication passed this resolution:

We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language – the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage and dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language (Turner, 1996, p. 255).

Closing the achievement gap between our African American students and their classmates is a difficult and complex task. There is no silver bullet, no specific program we can apply that will make it go away. We can, however, learn from decades of linguistic research that tells us our African American students are not “language deprived,” as many of us have been taught to believe, but are native speakers of African American Vernacular English, a rich, expressive, rule-governed language. We can then see our job as helping them to acquire the Standard American English they will need to be successful students, workers, and citizens.

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APPENDIX I

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Dear Parents,

As part of your child's writing instruction this year, I am conducting research on language use. I am asking for your permission to allow your child to participate in the research.

Through my research, which is a requirement for a Master of Arts degree I'm working toward at Hamline University, I'm hoping to improve my teaching of writing. We'll study formal school English, and compare it with the more informal home language. I will be comparing student writing samples at the beginning and end of the study, and using the memoirs students produce as a way of measuring language use. I will also be videotaping some lessons, but only as a way to analyze my own teaching. The tapes will not be shared with anyone else. The research is public scholarship which will be printed and shelved in Hamline's Bush Library. It may also be published or used in other scholarly ways.

This research will not take away from the writing instruction your child would normally receive. It is a part of three units of study we have in writer's workshop: writer's notebook development, language use and conventions (grammar), and memoir. Your child's confidentiality and anonymity will be respected in the gathering and reporting of data. Saint Paul Public Schools has agreed to cooperate in this research.

If you have any questions or would like more information before deciding whether or not to allow your student to participate, please feel free to contact me at (651) 793-7332, Mr. Feinberg at (651) 793-7300, or Ann Mabbott of Hamline University at (651) 523-2446.

Thank you,

Mary Wurl

_____ I give my permission for _____ to participate in this research.
Student's name

_____ I do not give my permission for _____ to participate in this
research. Student's name

I understand that I may withdraw my student from this research at any time, and that whether or not my child participates in this study neither my, nor my child's, relationship with Saint Paul Public Schools will be affected.

Parent or Guardian's Signature _____ Date _____

