

“Tell It Right”: Bidialectal Practices in the Secondary English Classroom

by

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ABSTRACT

Due to the limits of Arizona's secondary education system, English teachers often have to teach Standard English without regard for students' dialects and home languages. This can contribute to a lack of academic success for students who speak nonstandard and stigmatized language varieties. During the discussions that appear in this thesis, I examine pedagogical practices, particularly bidialectalism, that can be used to better teach these students. While these practices can apply to students of all languages and dialects, I focus on their effects on speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). I also present some ways that educators can be better prepared to teach such students. I conclude with some practical applications, lessons, and activities that teachers in similar contexts can use and modify.

DEDICATION

A long time ago, I was a little girl who did not want to learn to read; now, I do not want to stop. To my mother, who still encourages me to find my own path. To my gentle father, who is proud of everything that I do.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Research Questions.....	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem.....	2
2 BACKGROUND LITERATURE.....	5
2.1 Difference, Not Deficit	5
2.2 Why Learn Standard English?	6
3 PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES	9
3.1. The Eradicationist Approach	9
3.2. The Bidialectal Approach	12
3.3 Start with Respect	13
3.4 How to Respect and Celebrate Language Varieties in the Classroom.....	15
3.4.1. Strategies for Celebrating AAVE in the Classroom	16
3.4.2. The Effects of Celebrating Language Varieties in the Classroom..	20
3.5 Becoming a Better Teacher.....	23
4 USING LANGUAGE VARIATION AS A TOOL	25
4.1 Practical Application.....	25
4.2 My Context and Experience.....	26
4.3 Lessons and Activities	34

CHAPTER	Page
5 CONCLUSION.....	37
5.2 Take Action: Steps for Immediate Implementation.....	39
REFERENCES	40

1 INTRODUCTION

“Raise your hand if you can tell me the story of Little Red Riding Hood in your own words.” I am teaching a unit on rhetoric in my 9th grade English class. Several students raise their hands, and I call on Kayla.

Kayla begins, “Well, see, Little Red Riding Hood, she be walking to her grandma’s house, and—“

One of Kayla’s friends, Eden, cuts her off: “Pshhh, Kayla, tell it right!”

Sabrina, another friend, pipes up, “Yeah, that’s ghetto.”

Kayla, despite the hecklers, continues to tell the popular fairy tale in her own way, using several nonstandard features. We move on with the lesson, but some questions linger in the back of my mind:

1.1 Research Questions

- a. How do my pedagogical practices influence students’ language related ideologies?
- b. How can I make visible these ideologies and open them up for self-reflection and critique?
- c. How can I become a better teacher to students who speak different language varieties?
- d. How can I use student language varieties as a tool to explore the role of Standard English?

1.2 Statement of the Problem

I teach 9th, 10th, and 11th grade English at a diverse suburban public high school in Phoenix, Arizona. More than half of the student population ($n = 2600$) is composed of minority students. 18% are Black or African American, 28% are Hispanic, and 12% are from other minority groups, including Native American and Asian (M. Keller, personal communication, January 29, 2014). In my classroom, I have students from a variety of language and dialect backgrounds. The student population at my site is growing increasingly diverse, but the curriculum has not changed to keep up. For instance, Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards mandate that I teach Standard English to my students; the very first standard (9.10.L.1) states that after taking my class, students must be able to "demonstrate command of the conventions of Standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking" (p. 25). The concept of Standard English is difficult to define because standardness exists on a continuum and can be subjective; labels such as "correct English," "proper English," and "good English" are often applied, but with some ambiguity. The Standard English promoted by the Arizona state standards is most likely informal standard English, which Wolfram and Schilling-Estes define as "a variety free of stigmatized features" (p. 13). This is consistent with the fact that the Arizona state standards only mention other language varieties in the context of correction: "[Students should be able to] recognize variations from Standard English in their own and others' writing and speaking and identify and use strategies to improve expression in conventional language" (27). In other words, I must teach students how to correct any stigmatized features and other variations from the standard.

This "one size fits all" approach to language variation does not adequately meet the needs of students from different language and dialect backgrounds, as demonstrated by scores on the

AIMS (Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards) test; in 2011, American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students passed the AIMS reading, writing, and math tests at much lower rates than their White and Asian counterparts (Milem, Bryan, Sesate, & Montaña, 2013, p. 24).

Table 1

<u>% of students who passed or exceeded AIMS tests in 2011</u>			
	<u>Reading</u>	<u>Writing</u>	<u>Math</u>
American Indian	56.2	33.1	34.3
Asian American	85.8	76.2	78
Black or African American	67.1	45.8	44
Hispanic	67.9	45	47.5
White	86	73.9	69.8

This is consistent with the findings of Fisher and Lapp (2013), Rickford (1999), Van Keulen, Weddington, and Debose (2010), and many others, who posit that our current public school system has failed to reach students of different ethnicities, cultures, and language backgrounds. It is clear that, if we are going to reach students from a variety of nonstandard dialect backgrounds, some changes need to be made to our current system.

As a classroom teacher, I do not have much influence concerning standards, curriculum, and core texts. However, in my limited space and time, I can develop and implement some lessons and practices to better teach students from a variety of language and dialect backgrounds. Although my student population is diverse, I chose to focus on African American Vernacular English in particular because the African American population at my site is rapidly growing (M. Keller, personal communication, January 29, 2014), this is a group of students with which I have very little experience, and African American Language plays a vital role in youth language use (Paris, 2009). While I did not formally conduct research in my classroom, I have recorded some of my observations and concerns over the course of a school year (2013-2014) in an effort to

become a better teacher to such a diverse population. I will frame my action research in the wider context of language variation, but my primary focus is on African American Vernacular English.

2 BACKGROUND LITERATURE

2.1 Difference, Not Deficit

First, it is important to acknowledge that nonstandard dialects are legitimate linguistic systems with rules and histories. Take African American Vernacular English, for instance: Rickford (1997) asserts that this dialect, (also known as AAVE, Black English, or African American English) is not just “slang,” as many people assume:

Well, no, because slang refers just to the vocabulary of a language or dialect, and even so, just to the small set of new and (usually) short-lived words like chillin ("relaxing") or homey ("close friend") which are used primarily by young people in informal contexts. AAVE includes non-slang words like ashy (referring to the appearance of dry skin, especially in winter) which have been around for a while, and are used by people of all age groups. AAVE also includes distinctive patterns of pronunciation and grammar, the elements of language on which linguists tend to concentrate because they are more systematic and deep-rooted. (para. 4).

Early published research posited that speakers of nonstandard dialects, particularly AAVE, lack cognitive ability and language skills (see Green, 1963, and Musgrave, 1962). However, research in language variation by Labov (1970a, 1970b), Wolfram (1969), and others has refuted the “language deficit” concept and demonstrated that nonstandard dialects are different, but not inferior. For instance, Baratz (1970) points out that if a form is absent in AAVE, it does not follow that the process is absent. She cites as an example the concept of “if,” which can be used in Black English without the word “if” itself: “Thus while in Standard English one might say ‘I don’t know if Robert can come over tonight,’ in Negro non-standard the equivalent would be ‘I don’t know can Robert come over tonight’” (p. 22). In Standard English, a lexical item is used to fulfill the interrogative function; in the nonstandard variety, a “structural shift” is used to convey the same message. In essence, both varieties are quite capable of conveying the same messages, but accomplish this in slightly different ways.

2.2 Why Learn Standard English?

Is it necessary for speakers of nonstandard dialects to learn Standard English? After all, a language system such as AAVE is a fully developed and adequate system of language that is different, and not inferior to English. Therefore, the student's nonstandard dialect should be a perfectly acceptable substitute for Standard English. As O'Neil (1973) put it, "We do not expect dialects of a language to differ in any important ways: neither in their underlying constituents nor their order, not in the major transformations, not in their underlying phonological segments . . . (p. 185). Therefore, O'Neil concludes, Standard English and its various nonstandard dialects are mutually intelligible, rendering the teaching of Standard English unnecessary. This is consistent with Labov (1969) and Smitherman (1977), who point out that AAVE in particular shares the same deep structure as Standard American English. "Deep structure is where the true meaning of a given language resides," and "although each speaker of a language has his or her unique way of talking, the speakers all share common deep structures; otherwise, they could not understand one another and there would be no communication" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 192).

Moreover, O'Neil and others (Sledd, 1973) argue that teaching Standard English to "lower-class" students, whether to supplement or replace their current dialects, is a result of racism and cultural elitism, designed to suppress speakers of nonstandard dialects while pretending to promote them. He points out that many speakers of nonstandard dialects (particularly blacks, with which he is concerned) reject standardization and value their own cultural identities and dialects, and "properly so, for decisions about education belong to the people they affect" (p. 190).

However, Baratz (1970) argues that, while all dialects are equal, some dialects are more valuable in certain social contexts. For instance, Standard English is rated as more desirable than

AAVE by most middle class individuals. Furthermore, Baratz points out that although various dialects are used orally, “the exigencies of reading and writing call for Standard English,” (p. 25), and there are virtually no textbooks, newspapers, or manuals written in Black English. By refusing to teach Standard English to speakers of nonstandard varieties, educators further limit the students’ possibilities of entering “the mainstream of American life” (p. 26).

In keeping with this, Wolfram (1997) points out that although dialects are perfectly capable of accomplishing the same goals of communication, some linguistic variants are socially stigmatized, or they “carry a stigma through their association with low-status groups” (p. 120). Such social stigmas are perpetuated by schools, teachers, the media, and a range of other language authorities. Feigenbaum (1970) chimes in with the assertion that while no dialect is superior to another, there is a criterion for selecting a language for a situation, and that is “appropriateness.” There are situations in which nonstandard varieties may be appropriate, such as when students are with friends or at a sporting event. Conversely, there are situations in which Standard English is appropriate, such as the classroom. As such, Feigenbaum states that the language teacher’s objective should be to provide the students with Standard English without stamping out nonstandard varieties, so that the students’ linguistic behavior can be appropriate regardless of the situation.

This is in keeping with Jordan (1985), who recognizes that while Black English is a legitimate dialect that represents a population of speakers, Standard English opens many doors that nonstandard varieties cannot. For instance, when Jordan and her students sought justice for a student whose black brother was killed by White policemen, they struggled over whether to present their arguments in Standard English or in Black English. She writes, “Should we use the language of the killer — Standard English — in order to make our ideas acceptable to those

controlling the killers? But wouldn't what we had to say be rejected, summarily, if we said it in our own language, the language of the victim?" (p. 372). In the end, the students unanimously chose to stay true to their language and to the language of the victim. While this was a victory for Black English, Jordan and her students realized that this made their argument less accessible for the audience that they really needed to reach. Jordan writes, "Everyone in the room realized that our decision in favor of Black English had doomed our writings, even as the distinctive reality of our Black lives always has doomed our efforts to 'be who we been' in this country" (p. 372). True to Jordan's words, the newspapers rejected their piece, the TV news stations ignored the story, and nobody could find the money to prosecute the police officers.

Fisher and Lapp (2013) put it this way: students will encounter situations in which academic English, "proper English," or Standard English is viewed as prestigious, and they should be able to communicate in this way if they choose to do so. "Armed with this expanded knowledge of language and power to choose among their registers, we believe our students will have the same opportunities, both in and outside school, as their peers who, from their home experiences, initially speak academic English with greater ease" (p. 635). Knowledge is power, and students should have the right to choose from their repertoire to suit the situation.

3 PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

3.1. The Eradicationist Approach

Teachers such as Christensen (2000, 2009), who are committed to honoring learner's home languages while also teaching them how and when to use Standard English, are not common in our educational system today. Rather, educators typically respond to speakers of nonstandard dialects with the eradicationist approach; at my site in particular, I have heard several of my colleagues speak about how they do not permit nonstandard language use in their classrooms. In fact, several teachers agreed with the teacher whose "banned words" sign (which includes slang such as "bruh," hip hop song references, and informal lexical items such as "cuz") has recently gone viral ("You will speak properly," 2014). Considering that teachers are one of the most important factors in any classroom, it follows that their perceptions and practices significantly influence student ideologies of language, for better or for worse.

In this case, the eradicationist approach marginalizes students who do not identify with the standard. Based on the notion that Standard English is superior in many ways to nonstandard varieties (Lippi-Green 2011), this approach devalues any dialect that departs from the standard by simply ignoring it – teaching the standard without adapting the instruction to accommodate speakers of other dialects. This approach can also harm students academically because it informs a range of practices in the language classroom, such as basing standardized tests and curricula on Standard English, to the detriment of other varieties. Even further, some teachers who embrace this approach refer to nonstandard dialects as "ghetto" English, bad grammar, broken English, and more (Sweetland 2006). This overt language discrimination marginalizes students who speak nonstandard language varieties, thereby excluding them from the educational process.

Siegel (2007) observed a similar phenomenon when he examined the role of Hawai'i Creole English in the classroom; he acknowledges that speakers of minority dialects do not do well in the current education system. He proposes that this failure to thrive is not a result of the students' dialect backgrounds, but rather a result of students' exclusion from the classroom and from the educational process. When Standard English is the only acceptable form in the classroom, students suffer from teachers' negative attitudes toward their creoles and minority dialects. Similarly, Razfar (2012) examined this language discrimination in various contexts, including a public school with a significant population of Spanish speaking students. One particular teacher at this school clearly expressed the predominant belief that Spanish, and other languages aside from English, are appropriate for use at home, but not in the classroom. Because of this overt language discrimination, Razfar writes, speakers of Spanish "were relegated to marginal positions both spatially and temporally" (p. 132).

Even if teachers value the linguistic and cultural heritage of their students, they often implicitly marginalize students of other dialect backgrounds. For instance, Razfar (2005) gives the example of Mr. Sanders, an English teacher who uses explicit error correction to maintain Standard English as the dominant discourse in his classroom. In the example that Razfar gives, Mr. Sanders repairs the speech of a Latina English language learner named Natasha. Natasha uses the word "ain't" in class, and Mr. Sanders corrects her, reminding her to "try to speak English the right way" (Razfar, 2005). Although Mr. Sanders nominally expresses positive perceptions on the diversity of the American population, his everyday treatment of language serves to marginalize language variation and diversity in favor of a single, uniform language identity.

Similarly, Christensen (2009) discovered to her dismay that although she values the linguistic and cultural heritage of her students, she does not always overtly convey this message. For instance, she found that the majority of her African American students maintained negative views of AAVE; students wrote that AAVE was from the “ghetto,” or “slang” that African Americans use to replace correct sentences. Although Christensen used her classroom to raise awareness of the historical oppression of languages, particularly those of the Irish, Kenyans, and Native Americans, her students did not recognize the marginalizing of their own dialect because they did not recognize AAVE as a language.

Such negative perceptions and practices can contribute to the achievement gap between minority and white students because they result in decreased instructional quality for students of nonstandard dialects. Furthermore, such negative perceptions convey low expectations for speakers of nonstandard dialects, and low teacher expectations have a negative effect on student outcomes, as demonstrated by Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest (2003), Thomas & Stevenson (2009), and many others. Thomas and Stevenson found that “teachers’ disposition toward their students can elevate or undermine the academic and social success of students, depending on whether these attitudes are positive or negative” (p. 167), citing specifically that teachers have lower expectation of achievement for black boys than for any other student group. This is in keeping with Neal, et al. (2003), who demonstrated that white teachers perceive African American students to be more aggressive, and particularly perceive black male students to be academically inferior.

Joiner (1979) began to bridge this gap for one school district with the Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children, et al. v. Ann Arbor School District case. In this landmark decision, Judge Joiner found that the Ann Arbor School District violated federal law by failing to

recognize black students' dialects, particularly AAVE, and the effect on their education. The judge ordered the school district to identify speakers of Black English and use that knowledge to teach Standard English, code switching skills, and more. On the continuum of eradicationism to bidialectalism, this is one step in the right direction.

3.2. The Bidialectal Approach

Another, more effective approach to nonstandard varieties in the classroom is bidialectalism, or mediation between the standard and other dialects; this approach seeks to expand students' linguistic repertoires and embraces the perception that students can have command of both varieties of English. Rather than replacing the students' vernaculars with Standard English, educators seek to accommodate a wider range of speakers in order to provide them with access to the standard. Taylor, Payne, and Cole (1983) describe bidialectalism as the process whereby educators "teach students to become competent in Standard English while facilitating the retention of their indigenous non-standard English dialects" (p. 36). In such an education, the child's vernacular is used in the instructed, usually in contrast to Standard English. The ultimate goal thereof is to promote the acquisition of Standard English while also preserving the integrity of the students' dialects. The goal of such a program, the authors assert, is "the production of a person who is competent in two dialects" (p. 36).

Bidialectalism is perhaps the most widely accepted and implemented sociolinguistic approach to language arts instruction for students who speak other dialects. For instance, Taylor, Payne, and Cole (1983) found that there were at least 49 bidialectal programs in the United States by 1983. Approximately one-half of the programs were established because of perceived needs by the program developers, and the student population is composed mostly of black

students. About half of the students expressed very positive attitudes regarding the bidialectal programs.

Siegel (2007) distinguishes between two kinds of bidialectal approaches: accommodation programs and awareness programs. The first allows for students' home languages in stories, writing, literature, and music. Students are allowed to express themselves using a language or dialect that makes them comfortable. The latter also allows for a variety of student expression, but also incorporates more critical components. Students learn about languages and how some come to be more acceptable than others, and they also compare the characteristics of their own language variety to the standard. In fact, this is one of the benefits of allowing students to use their vernaculars in education contexts. As Siegel (1999) put it, by examining features of their own language varieties, students are more likely to notice the differences between the standard and their vernaculars. This allows them to develop a metalinguistic understanding of the standard, thus reducing interference and promoting their perceptions of language distance.

Sweetland (2006) argues that the bidialectal approach to language education is the most viable because it enables students to maintain their vernacular while “simultaneously achieving success in white, Standard English-dominated spheres such as education and business” (p. 20).

3.3 Start with Respect

Any such bidialectal program begins with the educator; because teachers are the single most significant factor in any classroom; teachers' perceptions of language variation crucially impact the instructional quality, language ideologies, and academic success of their students, for better or for worse. Therefore, to implement a bidialectal approach, educators must be accepting of their students' dialects because “the child who is made to accept another dialect for learning must accept the view that his own language is inferior” (Goodman, 1969, p. 26). A student's

dialect, which is a reflection of his parents, family, community, culture, and self, is of course cherished by him. Therefore, teachers cannot ask a student to choose between his own identity and school acceptance in order to learn. Rather, teachers should strike a balance between respecting the students' native dialects and teaching them the standard.

Delpit (2006) reminds educators that this balance is crucial because students' native dialects are very important to them. She writes, "The linguistic form that a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity" (p. 53). Therefore, devaluing their variety of English suggests that something is wrong with that student and his or her family and community. Similarly, Baugh (1999) points out that speakers of black English value their dialect because "their personal and cultural identities are closely linked to the language of their friends, family, and forebears" (p. 5). Furthermore, Baugh asserts, AAVE is a symbol of black culture and racial solidarity. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers respect students' dialects, thus extending respect to the students' races, cultures, families, and more.

The consequences of teachers' disregard for nonstandard dialects can be dire; in fact, this may contribute to a lack of academic success for minority students. Siegel (2007) points out that one of the major obstacles to success for speakers of minority dialects is "negative self-image of students because of denigration of their language and culture" (p. 67), and Sweetland (2006) adds that "teacher attitudes and practices are integral parts of the problem [of academic underachievement for minority students]" (p. 72). For instance, Taylor (1989) tells of a case study involving Lester, a black senior at a predominantly white university. Lester felt self-conscious about his social and linguistic background, which was not recognized or honored. As a result, Lester was depressed and struggling academically. In response, Taylor began "Project Bidialectalism," an experiment that focused on black students' educational and social needs. Her

goal was to understand black students' achievement and failure, helping them to achieve excellence in academics and equal chances in employment. Taylor's approach differed from that of the rest of her university because she allowed minority students to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage, while her colleagues clung to the deficit model of the past. Not every educator can conduct an experiment or design a program, but every teacher can respect students, dignify their dialects, and transmit to students the belief that they are capable of handling two or more dialects (and most of them already do) (Alexander, 1985).

3.4 How to Respect and Celebrate Language Varieties in the Classroom

How can teachers demonstrate respect for student language variation? Educators should begin by recognizing that speaking two dialects (a nonstandard one and the standard) is actually a skill, not a sign of ignorance. Fordham (1999) examined a particularly volatile relationship between students and teachers in a predominantly African American high school in Washington, D.C., particularly as it conflicts with Standard English. In this case, the students who demonstrate mastery of Standard English rules seemed to refuse to use them in everyday conversation with each other, producing much frustration amongst language teachers. Fordham found that students' commitment to black identity was "embedded in their linguistic repertoire" (275), causing them to "diss" (disrespect) Standard English by "leasing" rather than internalizing the dialect, using it only as a *lingua franca* to achieve specific academic goals; by contrast, they maintain ownership of AAVE by using it in every other context. Fordham concludes that, rather than viewing such behavior as a deficiency, school officials should recognize and actively encourage such skilled bidialectalism.

Furthermore, educators can use this skilled bidialectalism as a tool in the classroom. Davis (2005) conducted a critical academic literacy project in an effort to change the

predominant “‘language as problem’ discourse to one of ‘language as resource’” (p. 190). Students in her context come from a wide range of dialect backgrounds, including Hawai’i Creole English. The public school system, however, does not address the unique academic needs of language minority students, and Davis implemented the SHALL (Studies of Heritage and Academic Languages and Literacies) curriculum to remediate this. Davis developed and piloted courses and provided teachers with education on the theories and practices of the curriculum, with the intention of sharing the results and resources with other high school teachers. Davis (2005) offered to Filipino, Hawaiian, and Samoan students academic English classes that were designed to help them navigate the social and educational expectations of their context. In these classes, Davis provided students with a third space in which to negotiate between the dominant discourse of public education and their own literacy practices. In this third space, students “explored the features, perceptions, and roles of English, Hawai’i Creole English, Ilokano, Samoan, and other languages spoken in the community” (p. 198). For many students, this was the first time seeing bilingual materials with their own language in print. Through this project, Davis asserts, students began to view their bilingualism as the powerful resource that it is, rather than a problem. The implications of Davis’s study extend beyond her particular sociocultural site. Across the United States, students of minority language backgrounds face the same problems: “inappropriate assessment procedures, low expectations for academic success, and school work that fails to challenge students” (p. 209). The practices and theories of this project have the potential to transform practices and theories across the United States and beyond.

3.4.1. Strategies for Celebrating AAVE in the Classroom

Although students of minority language backgrounds face the same problems, and bidialectal approaches could benefit them all, I am particularly interested in students who use

African American language. Scholars of African American language and culture have proposed that, rather than eradicating AAVE from the classroom, educators should celebrate it. For instance, Jordan (1985) writes of her experience as a celebrator of AAVE. While teaching a class composed predominantly of black students, Jordan realized that her students were frustrated at the fact that none of them had ever heard their own dialect legitimized by the school system. She writes, “None of the students had ever learned how to read and write their own verbal system of communication: Black English. Alternatively, this fact began to baffle or else bemuse and then infuriate my students” (p. 365). As a response, Jordan chose to celebrate Black English in her classroom, creating a list of guidelines for the dialect along with her students. She then encouraged them to write their assignments in Black English, even translating into their vernacular works of literature such as Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*.

In addition to particular features of AAVE, teachers can incorporate discursive practices of the dialect. For instance, call-response is a distinguishing feature of African American speech that is easily usable in the classroom; call-response is a spontaneous interaction between speaker and listener, in which the speaker’s statements, or calls, are “punctuated by” expressions, or responses, from the listeners; it is “a basic organizing principle of Black American culture generally, for it enables traditional black folk to achieve a unified state of balance or harmony which is fundamental to the traditional African world view” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 104). Because the black world view does not differentiate between the religious and the secular, call-response can occur both in church and on the street – and even in the classroom. Boone (2003) examined this very phenomenon, describing call-response as “a reciprocal speech event which serves to unite the speaker and the audience in a collective display emphasizing the community” (213), enables the members of the community to promote and maintain their cultural identity by

participating in behaviors that are unique to the African American community. Derived from black gospel oratory tradition, the call-response speech pattern can be used to motivate students and contribute to a welcoming and affirming learning environment for African American students (Sulentic, 1999). Furthermore, in more diverse environments, call-response can be used to heighten awareness about black speech patterns and educate others about African American cultural ideals.

Signifying, another form of social discourse in the African American community, can be used as a scaffold for teaching skills in literary interpretation. Smitherman (1977) defines signifying (or signification) as “the act of talking negatively about somebody through stunning and clever verbal putdowns” (82). Signifying often involves double meanings, innuendos, and quick wit; some forms include playing the dozens (Labov, 1972), and sounding, a verbal duel of friendly insults. It often involves metaphor, irony, or both. The participants in Lee’s (1993) study were students from two high schools, both nearly 100% African American, whose graduation rates were 40-50%. In this study, Lee analyzed the relationship between skill in signifying and overall gain in reading skills, including interpreting fiction. The author concludes that strategies required for interpreting the irony, metaphors, and symbolism of signifying are very similar to the strategies required to interpret the same in fiction. Her work demonstrates that such a strategy can help students make crucial links between school and the streets, thereby increasing their motivation and investment in their education and enriching classroom life (Blackburn & Stern, 2000).

Elements of African American popular culture can also play an important role in the classroom. Successful approaches to literacy are specific to students’ contexts because focusing on the students and their literacy practices can bring students’ unique experiences and histories

back into the classroom. Low (2005) suggests that educators take the popular culture of their students seriously because our students are “embedded within culture, actively producing culture and being produced by it” (p. 106). Thus, popular culture is an important source of knowledge about students’ literacy practices, and it can offer insight into how contemporary adolescents communicate and make meaning. While the deficit perception may cause teachers to hesitate about incorporating black popular culture into their classrooms, and elements of black popular culture such as rap and hip hop have a bad reputation in the classroom because they are seen as “deviant, lacking, undesirable, or evil” forms of expression (Koza 1999), rap presents a range of possible viewpoints, from “gangsta” to “poet-activist,” with which students might identify.

For instance, Low (2005) collaborated with a high school English teacher at an urban school to develop a “performance poetry” or “spoken word” unit (p. 116). The two classes were on opposite ends of the spectrum: one was a senior English class composed of all male students who had not typically done well in English, and the other was a co-ed Advanced Poetry class with some of the top students in their grade. Low used “Bakardi Slang,” a rap song by a popular Toronto artist, to focus on exploration of identity, both of the poet and the listener. Low found that, in taking youth culture seriously, she enabled students to be vulnerable, express themselves, and grapple with important issues such as gang violence, stereotypes, racism, and relationships. Low’s treatment of students’ culture create a safe space for students to think and write about what really mattered to them, and it brought students’ individual histories and experiences back into the classroom.

It is important to note that, although African American language is often tied to race, it is an important factor in youth culture overall, as demonstrated by Low (above), who used elements of African American popular culture to reach a more diverse population. Similarly, Paris (2009)

found that students of all ethnicities at his diverse school used features of AAVE; for instance, Samoa and Mexican American students used the habitual be, multiple negation, zero copula, and more. They also participated in rhetorical traditions of black language, such as the dozens or capping, an extended form of signifying (see above) in which participants play on words to humorously insult their friends and family members. Paris concludes that this behavior is a tool of “interethnic solidarity” (p. 443) used to unite youth of a variety of colors. Paris asserts that educators can make the most of such youth language practices by adopting a “pedagogy of pluralism—a stance to teaching both within and across differences—in multiethnic schools” (p. 430). In other words, we can use this behavior to extend all students’ understanding of, and pride in, their heritage languages.

3.4.2. The Effects of Celebrating Language Varieties in the Classroom

The effects of celebrating student languages and cultures in the classroom are positive and numerous. For instance, Ladson-Billings (1992) demonstrates how students who previously struggled academically flourished under the pedagogy of two teachers who “use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge” (p. 314). In her context, Ladson-Billings asserts that culturally relevant pedagogy requires the recognition of African-American culture as valuable and important, rather than something to suppress in an effort to fit students into the existing social and economic molds. One such teacher, Ann Lewis, is a teacher who is not black herself but “might be categorized as culturally African-American” (p. 314) because she was previously married to a black man, has raised her children with a strong sense of the African-American heritage, and competently uses and understands African American Vernacular English. The other teacher, Julia Devereaux, is an African-American woman. Both teachers implement a culturally

relevant approach to teaching, legitimizing African-American and Latino culture by making it a frame of reference, rather than brushing it aside. They purposefully center their curriculum around students and their heritage in a (successful) effort to engage the students in meaningful learning. Additionally, both Lewis and Devereaux are fluent in Black English, using it in non-instructional conversations with their students. Students are also allowed to use their home languages in the classroom without correction or reprimand. Both teachers strongly identify with their African-American students, cultivating a sense of community and solidarity and allowing students to “be themselves.” In Devereaux’s classroom, the “intellectual leaders” are 12 African-American girls who dominate the discussions, and the nine African-American boys in Lewis’s 6th grade class flourish in this culturally relevant atmosphere, leading the way intellectually in her classroom. Not only this this a rare phenomenon for black boys in our current educational system (see Thomas & Stevenson, 2009), but this is a clear reversal of behavior for each of the boys, who had been considered “troublemakers” in years past.

Similarly, Christensen (2000) makes her curriculum culturally relevant by “inviting students’ lives into the classroom” (p. 18). In her diverse classroom, she has Pacific Islander, Mexican, and African-American students, and she invites them to celebrate their differences and similarities. For instance, she asks students to write “I am from” poems about their families, languages, and heritages, encouraging them to use their home language to lend authenticity to their work. Additionally, she and her students read poetry by Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Countee Cullen, and other authors who celebrate African-American culture; they read works by Pablo Neruda, Gary Soto, Naomi Shihab Nye, and others who celebrate a variety of languages, cultures, and histories. Christensen (2009) also developed a unit to raise awareness of AAVE and code switching. In this unit, students learn the rules and history of African American Vernacular

English to evoke pride and curiosity in her students. Christensen's students also read literature that uses AAVE, such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, discussing the decisions that authors make when they use nonstandard dialects. As part of a wider discussion about suppression of indigenous or colonized languages around the world, this unit has proven to be enjoyable and very enlightening for students of all races and language backgrounds.

The benefits of culturally relevant teaching are not limited to any one classroom, but can have an impact on a school-wide level. For instance, Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, and DiBella (2004) examined Providence-St. Mel, a school in one of the poorest parts of Chicago that serves urban African American students and produces outstanding results. For instance, 100% of its high school graduates are accepted into 4-year colleges, and roughly half of them are accepted into Tier 1 colleges. The authors studied this school to develop a theory about how this school accomplishes what it does. In addition to several factors including high standards of achievement, Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, and DiBella (2004) found that Providence-St. Mel School flourished by celebrating African American culture and heritage. Pictures and biographies of important African Americans, such as W.E.B. Dubois, Bessie Smith, and Joe Louis, are prominently displayed in halls and in classrooms, and Martin Luther King Day is celebrated with a special assembly about King and civil rights. Additionally, students read literature about African and African American life, such as work by Chinua Achebe, Richard Wright, and other works that feature African American protagonists. The discussions of such literature are often situated in the context of students' lives as African Americans. School plays, library displays, fine arts instruction, and more recognize and honor African American heritage and achievements, all in an effort to shape "positive racial identities" (p. 228) in students. The overall message, according to the authors, is this: Blacks have made significant contribution to

the country and the world, and the world is now waiting for this generation of African Americans to rise up and make their contribution. This message, along with other practices, contributes to an atmosphere of high achievement for all students.

3.5 Becoming a Better Teacher

If teachers are to celebrate and incorporate student language varieties and cultures, they must first be aware of them. In fact, students who speak nonstandard dialects (in this case, AAVE in particular) perform better when both they and their teachers are educated about language variation; their unique linguistic needs are best met “when a) their teacher has been sensitized to issues of language variation; b) they receive high-quality writing instruction; and c) dialect differences are discussed and standard-vernacular contrasts are explicitly taught” (Sweetland, 2006, p. 38). Overall, teachers who participated in sociolinguistic training had far more positive attitudes toward their students’ language variation; as a result, the students who learned in these atmospheres of sociolinguistic diversity demonstrated greater self-efficacy in writing. Ladson-Billings (2000) agrees that teachers need to receive special preparation to work with African American students, suggesting three methods in particular. First, teachers should construct their own personal and cultural autobiographies as a way to reflect on the role of culture in education. Secondly, Ladson-Billings asserts that all pre-service teachers should be required to spend time in diverse schools and communities in order to dispel stereotypes and learn more about the strengths of diverse cultures. Lastly, the author suggests “situated pedagogies,” or adjusting the curriculum to make the school and home experiences more consistent.

Some scholars go so far as to assert that teachers who wish to work with speakers of nonstandard varieties must learn the students’ dialect. In the process, the teacher will “develop a

greater respect for what it is she is asking of her children and what the difficulties are in learning another system, especially one which in many ways is superficially comparable to standard English” (Baratz, 1970, p. 28). Edwards (1985) recommends that language arts teachers learn the linguistic rules of “inner-city English,” and use that information to predict where students will struggle in the acquisition of Standard English. Based on those predictions, Edwards suggests that teachers prepare and implement lessons that address the specific areas of difficulty. Above all, Edwards emphasizes, teachers should approach “inner-city English speakers” in a manner that is respectful to their students’ dialects. Baratz (1970) takes this one step further, suggesting that inner-city teachers must be familiar with “the ghetto culture” of the students in order to appreciate the lives, talents, and learning styles of the students.

Siegel (2007) writes about an excellent example of such teacher education: a workshop that is presented by Da Pidgin Coup, a group from the University of Hawai’i that formed to address issues surrounding Hawai’i Creole English. Da Pidgin Coup educates teachers about the origins of pidgins and creoles, and the features and rules of HCE and how they compare to those of Standard English. Siegel reports that the teachers are often surprised and delighted to find that HCE is just as rule-governed and complex as Standard English, if not more so. The workshops not only educate teachers about the nature of Pidgin and other language varieties, but provide a model of awareness activities that teachers can use in their own classrooms.

4 USING LANGUAGE VARIATION AS A TOOL

4.1 Practical Application

What does all of this mean for the classroom teacher who encounters students from a variety of dialect backgrounds? How can we implement these ideas in our limited space and time? Some of the earliest methods for teaching Standard English to speakers of nonstandard varieties involved contrastive analysis (Feigenbaum 1970). Taylor (1989) successfully implemented contrastive analysis for her “Project Bidialectalism,” designed to help minority students succeed in predominantly white Aurora University. Taylor worked with a number of students from inner city Chicago who used a lot of AAVE features in their Standard English writing. Taylor divided her student into a control group and an experimental group. With the former, she taught English using conventional techniques and did not address the students’ dialects at all. With the latter, she used contrastive analysis to highlight differences between Black English and Standard English. The results are astounding: after 11 weeks, the students in the control group demonstrated an 8.5% increase in use of Black English features in their writing, while students in the experimental group demonstrated a 59% decrease in their use of Black English features. Taylor’s work establishes that contrastive analysis, and the resulting metalinguistic awareness, can serve as a tremendously effective tool in the bidialectal classroom.

Contrastive analysis is still an effective method; more recently, Sweetland (2006) found students who participated in contrastive analysis lessons demonstrated greater ability to use Standard English effectively, possibly because it allows students to “experience the differences . . . [between] their home and school registers” (Fisher & Lapp, 2013, p. 636).

Alexander (1985) suggests some very practical activities for the classroom to foster understanding of dialects. For instance, teachers can discuss the histories and sources of different

dialects, and the reasons why dialects should be respected. Teachers can also read aloud passages in other dialects in order to help students grasp the variability of English and the dignity of their own dialects. Additionally, “practice drills” can help students understand the patterns of both Standard English and other dialects. In particular, the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a master of bidialectalism, can be used for exercises in identifying dialects. When it comes to reading, Alexander (1985) suggests that if students demonstrate reading comprehension in nonstandard English, but their interpretations are correct, then they must be “given credit for understanding” (26). Of course, this means that a teacher must be familiar with the student’s dialect.

Christensen (2000) also suggests the use of “Praise Poems” as she uses them in her classroom. After reading poetry that celebrates various cultures (see above), including Lucille Clifton’s “Homage to my Hips,” she encourages students to write their own poems, celebrating their own “people,” culture, and language. Students write about their home languages, their weight, their skin color, their mother or grandfather, and more. Situated in a conversation about so many other personal characteristics, this approach to embracing students’ dialects is non-threatening, celebratory, and even joyous.

4.2 My Context and Experience

In my classroom, I have students from a variety of language and dialect backgrounds; I first began to notice students’ perceptions regarding nonstandard varieties of English when a few of them corrected other students’ use of nonstandard features. Although Van den Hoogen and Kuijper (1992) assert that many speakers of nonstandard dialects do not notice the differences between their Standard English and their own vernacular, I have observed that my students

monitor their peers' speech, notice their use of nonstandard features, and frequently correct them.

I began to wonder:

- a. How do my pedagogical practices influence students' language related ideologies?
- b. How can I make visible these ideologies and open them up for self-reflection and critique?
- c. How can I become a better teacher to students who speak different language varieties?
- e. How can I use student language varieties as a tool to explore the role of Standard English?

In spite of the increasingly diverse student population, our curricular texts at my school are not very diverse. Shakespeare, Homer, and white American authors dominate the curriculum. However, in 9th grade English we read *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, which presents two different nonstandard dialects and addresses issues of diversity in race and language. We also have the option to include supplementary texts by Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and a few other African American authors. Additionally, when given a choice of core texts for one short unit, I chose to include works by Pablo Neruda, N. Scott Momaday, and other authors who celebrate various cultures.

In my context, I have found that students are generally very aware of the differences between the standard and their dialects. For instance, when students use their vernaculars in the classroom, other students often correct them and then look to me for confirmation. For example, one African American student used the nonstandard "ain't," along with several other features of AAVE, in a story that she was telling to the class. Another student, also African American, loudly corrected her, and then turned to me and asked, "Right, Ms. G? We use proper English in

class.” My students also monitor my “teacher talk” and have corrected me from occasionally; for instance, one day a student named Ken started to put away his school supplies, getting ready to leave a few minutes too early. I asked him, “What’s up, Ken? You in a hurry?” Another student, Khalil, piped up with, “Speak proper, English teacher. You’re talkin’ African.” The bell rang before I could ask Khalil to elaborate in his statement, but his comment was consistent with many others made in my classroom: although my elision of the copula here is a common feature of informal English, Khalil perceived it to be particularly associated with African American language, and he is one of many students with this belief. I theorize that this perception exists because many lexical items and features of AAL have found their way into youth language use (Paris, 2009), or because African American language and culture crucially influences hip hop and rap, musical genres that are favored by my students and other youth (Peterson, 2014). Regardless of how my students developed their ideologies of nonstandard language varieties, it is clear that my students view nonstandard, informal, or stigmatized language use as slang, “ghetto,” and unacceptable in the classroom.

I attempted to make visible these ideologies during our unit on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the novel, the Finches’ African American servant, Calpurnia, switches to a nonstandard black dialect while at her all black church. For instance, she tells the other churchgoers regarding Scout and Jem, “They’s my comp’ny,” (Lee, 1960, p. 135), regularizing the copular verb. Scout is surprised, noting that Calpurnia “was talking like the rest of them” (p. 135). Later in that same chapter, Scout expresses her negative perceptions regarding Calpurnia’s nonstandard dialect.

She asks Calpurnia, “Why do you talk nigger-talk to the – to your folks when you know it’s not right?” (p. 143).

When Calpurnia protests that she is black, Jem pipes up with, “That doesn’t mean you hafta talk that way when you know better.” (p. 143).

After some thought, Calpurnia wisely replies, “Suppose you and Scout talked colored-folks’ talk at home – it’d be out of place, wouldn’t it? Now what if I talked white-folks’ talk at church, and with my neighbors? They’d think I was puttin’ on airs to beat Moses” (p. 143).

Through the character of Calpurnia, Lee manages to teach a lesson about accepting dialect variation.

This passage in particular opened the door for a useful conversation with my students. I asked them, “Why do you think Calpurnia speaks differently when she attends her church?” A few responded that this is how she fits in with her friends at church, and I pointed out that many students experience the same phenomena: “Your friends would think it is weird if you spoke to them the same way that you speak to your English teacher, right?” Many students agreed, citing examples of slang that they use with their friends and not in the classroom. I pointed out that this is similar to what Calpurnia does, and that different ways of speaking are like a “ticket” into certain groups of people. This conversation revealed a great deal about my students’ perceptions regarding nonstandard dialects, including the fact that they understand the concept of covert prestige. As Wolfram (1997) puts it, covert prestige is applied to linguistic variants that are “positively valued apart from, or even in opposition to, their social significant in wider society” (p. 122). Calpurnia is an excellent example of a speaker who adopts vernacular forms in order to maintain solidarity with her fellow congregants, but my 14-17 year old students do this as well. For instance, a student might adopt features such as negative concord (*I didn’t say nothin’*) or the use of habitual *be* (*she be dancin’ all night long*) that stigmatize him at school and in other mainstream contexts; in doing so, he is choosing (consciously or unconsciously) social prestige

with his friends over social prestige in the classroom. Dialogue such as this enlightening conversation, arising naturally out of the existing curriculum, can be a powerful tool for creating awareness of dialect variation and related concepts in the classroom.

I had a similar discussion in my 11th grade English class as we read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In the novel, Zora Neale Hurston uses regional “eye dialect,” or nonstandard spelling to represent actual pronunciation (Krapp, 1925), to demonstrate the social class of characters, lend “local color,” and more. For instance, the people in Eatonville who sit on the porch and watch the world go by have a distinct dialect. Vowel shifts are common; *you*, *I*, and *get* are written as *yuh*, *ah*, and *git*, respectively. These characters often employ double negatives such as “Nobody don’t know,” and overgeneralize past tense verbs, turning *knew* into *knowed*. For instance, after the flood occurs in the novel, Janie and Tea Cake are discussing the possibility of going elsewhere to find work:

“Janie, us got tuh git outa dis house and outa dis man’s town. Ah don’t mean tuh work lak dat no mo’.’

‘Naw, naw, Tea Cake .Less stay right in heah until it’s all over. If dey can’t see yuh, dey can’t bother yuh.’

‘Aw naw. S’posin’ dey come round searchin’? Less git outa heah tuhnight.’

‘Where us goin’, Tea Cake?’” (p. 171)

At first, my students stumbled over the lines written in this dialect, confused by the nonstandard spelling. I encouraged them to read the text aloud, paying more attention to sound than meaning. Pretty soon, the students who were listening realized that the words were more familiar than they had originally thought. In fact, many of them realized that they had heard people use such features before; they had just never seen them spelled out.

I asked students what they could infer, based on dialect, about the characters' race or ethnicity, age, level of education, economic status, and so forth. Several students noticed that Tea Cake's dialect differs slightly from that of the other people of Eatonville; for instance, Tea Cake is the only character who uses *us* as a nominative pronoun. Based on this observation, and the fact that Tea Cake is a migrant worker of low socioeconomic status, my students inferred that Tea Cake is less educated than other characters. Although their observations might be informed by negative perceptions, in this case they are accurate: Hurston uses language to portray Tea Cake as "lower class," uneducated, and an outsider. My concern with this particular text is that it could reinforce the negative stigma associated with the African American language in the novel because nearly all of the characters who speak this way are disadvantaged socioeconomically, and my students seemed to conclude that they were "weird" or "ghetto."

I posit that my students were less familiar with Hurston's eye dialect, which is an example of "orthography overindulged" (Peterson, 2014), than with the work of Harper Lee, Richard Wright, and other African American authors, who employ less visible orthographic strategies. For instance, Hurston illustrates diacritics abundantly, and includes phonological characteristics such as consonant cluster reduction (final [f] for *th* in words such as *mouth*; *mouf*), postvocalic *r*-lessness, and so forth. These features can have the effect of contorting the characters' speech into "ignorant approximations of Standard English" (Peterson, 2014, p. 45). For whatever reason, it was clear that most students did not see this novel as a representation of African American culture, but perceived a great distance between themselves and the characters. Hence, I have excluded this novel from the practices and lessons at the end of this paper; however, Hurston's work could provide an excellent source for a discussion of eye dialect, linguistic identities, and so forth.

To Kill a Mockingbird also provided a starting point to discuss the use of the word “nigger.” In the novel, both white and black characters use the word for different reasons, and I wanted to address the elephant in the room before my 9th graders got to those parts. After showing students a diagram of the word’s etymology, I began by asking them, “What do you know about the N-word?”

“It’s an offensive word used to describe black people,” Kristen said immediately, and several students nodded their heads in agreement.

“Well, no, it depends on how you say it. ‘Nigga’ is not an insult. It just means, like, ‘homie,’” Julia responded.

Sarah chimed in, “Yeah, like, I hear people say it in the hall all the time.” She spread her arms wide in greeting, “What up, my nigga?”

After the laughter died down, I pushed a little further. “OK, so if it’s not offensive, am I allowed to say it? Can I greet you like that when you come into the classroom?”

The reaction was mixed. John shook his head. “No offense, Ms. G., but you’re white. You’re not allowed to say that.” But Carmen said, “Yeah, sure. Go ahead. It’s not a bad word anymore.”

I was astonished at my students’ responses; as a white woman, I had been conditioned believe that such words should never be spoken. I asked them, “So, how did the meaning of the N-word change? How did it go from a hurtful derogatory word to something that you call your friends?”

Philip raised his hand and said, “I think that people said it so much that it didn’t mean the same thing anymore. You know how, when you look at a word for a long time, it starts to look weird? And it doesn’t look like a word anymore? Like that.”

Philip's comment was a perfect transition to my first source of evidence: a CNN report called "Funeral for the N-Word" (2008). In this clip, African American scholar Michael Eric Dyson and CNN report Roland Martin discuss ownership of the N-word; Martin touches on the concept of covert prestige by pointing out that some words are acceptable in some social groups and not in others. Next, I showed a clip of Maya Angelou, who criticizes rappers Snoop Dogg and Kanye West for using the N-word in their music and asserts that nobody should be able to use the word because "all vulgarity is vulgarity" ("The Power," 2007). Lastly, I played part of a discussion between Oprah Winfrey and Jay Z, who argues that, by using the word freely in rap music, he and other artists have taken the power out of the word and turned it into a term of endearment ("Jay Z," 2011). As my students watched, I asked them to take notes in two columns: for using the N-word and against using the N-word. When we finished watching the clips, we discussed arguments for and against using the N-word. Most students agreed with Jay Z and Kanye West's assertion that the word has lost its power over time, while a smaller majority sided with Maya Angelou. I concluded the discussion by asking my students how we should handle the word as we read the novel. Almost unanimously, students agreed that we should say the word out loud. Again surprised, I asked why.

Matteo replied, "Well, it helps us see what it was like back then."

"Yeah," KeyShawn chimed in. "It's accurate. It's, like, historical."

"Plus, if you change it, it waters down the story. We don't get the same effect," Ryan added.

This discussion proved both valuable and enlightening, and far more heartfelt than I had expected. Through this teachable moment, I was able to discuss the notions of language change, covert prestige, language as social currency, and more. I was also able to share this lesson with

my colleagues; after piloting it in my class, I sent my lesson plan and materials out to the other Freshman English teachers. Some responded positively, and others did not respond at all. One teacher tried it out in her class, and she reported that the ensuing dialogue had been much like mine: powerful, illuminating, and sincere.

4.3 Lessons and Activities

Through my research and observations, I have sought to come up with practices and lessons that I can use to: raise awareness of the nature of nonstandard dialects, better address the needs of my students from different dialect backgrounds, and use dialects as a tool to explore the role of Standard English in and out of my classroom. Although I do not have the freedom to construct a whole unit, I can implement my research in some very practical ways.

First, I would like to create awareness of the need for situationally appropriate language. In this unit, students will view a video about language registers and discuss when and where to use different language varieties. Although Fisher and Lapp (2013) used this exercise to help their students expand their knowledge of academic English, I would modify it to help my students understand that all language varieties are appropriate somewhere. Students will write a few lines of dialogue each for three different conversations: with a teacher (or another authority figure), a parent, and a friend; they will then discuss which registers or language varieties they used in each situation. If time permits, students can present their dialogue to small groups, act them out in pairs, or create videos and post them on *Youtube*. I have not implemented this activity in particular, but it would be an excellent starting point for discussions of covert prestige, similar to the conversation above based on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Furthermore, this would address one of the Arizona College and Career Ready Standards, which states that students should be able to produce writing in which the style is “appropriate to task, purpose, and audience” (p. 16). This

lesson would work particularly well in my diverse classroom because the focus is not on one particular dialect, but could include many dialects and language varieties, as well as levels of formality.

Next, as Alexander (1985) points out, the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., are an excellent starting point for a discussion of code-switching and bidialectalism. In this activity, students will read and listen to King's most famous speech, "I Have a Dream." Students will then analyze King's speech and dialect, looking for specific uses of slang, features that are consistent with a particular region, and discourse that reflects African American religious practices. Students will also discuss the purpose of code-switching and the way that it affects King's speech and audience. This project can be modified or extended to include a number of prominent American writers and speakers who have mastered two dialects: Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Barack Obama, Lil Wayne, Jay-Z, and more (Fisher & Lapp, 2013). Although I have not implemented this particular activity, I have discussed similar concepts with my students while analyzing King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." I asked students to identify words, phrases, and features that are particularly religious or regional; we discussed why King would include such references, with consideration for his specific audience. This conversation was fruitful but brief, as this particular piece by King is very formal and aimed at white Protestant clergymen. Other speeches by King, and works by the authors mentioned above, would better lend themselves to such a discussion because they are better examples of regionalism, code-switching, and covert prestige.

Lastly, praise poems, as demonstrated by Christensen (2000), are a way to recognize and dignify students' languages and cultures. Through this activity, Christensen encourages her students to "praise themselves, their 'people,' their culture, their language" (p. 52), their bodies,

and more. I have modified this lesson to suit my purposes and to focus more on cultures and languages. Students will read poetry by Gary Soto, Langston Hughes, Carolyn Forché, and Langston Hughes; each of these poems celebrates a particular language or culture. Then, students will write a praise poem in the same style, focusing on their unique cultures and languages. (See Appendix A.) I have not implemented this lesson, but Christensen has achieved success with this project, helping students critique and construct their world. As she puts it, praise poems help provide “a small space to undermine a social system that daily damages my students with belittling messages” (p. 55). As noted above, teachers’ respect for student language variation is crucially important, and this is one way of overtly conveying respect. Furthermore, this activity works for students of all ethnicities, cultures, and language variations; this is a way to value and celebrate language variation without singling out any one group of students.

5 CONCLUSION

Based on the literature and my experience, I can conclude that my language related ideologies crucially affect student ideologies regarding language variation. Even if I personally see the value of nonstandard dialects and stigmatized language varieties, I must make this clear in my practices. I can do this by respecting, welcoming, and celebrating language variation in my classroom. In doing so, I can help students recognize their own language related ideologies and perhaps expand their view of language; of course, this means that I will have to be familiar with student language varieties in order to better teach them. Using a range of pedagogical practices and specific lessons, I can use student language varieties as a tool to teach Standard English, which I am required by the state to do. These principles and practices can be incorporated by secondary school teachers who, like me, have limited space and time in which to reach a kaleidoscope of students.

I also discovered that I do not have to implement a major overhaul of their curriculum, and not every discussion of language variation has to be a thoroughly planned. Rather, I can take advantage of teachable moments to help students develop enduring understandings of language variation. For instance, my discussion of the use of the N-word blossomed into much more than I had expected, and students were so enthusiastic that we spent an entire 60 minute class period on it. Rather than sticking to my plan or trying to force it, I let the conversation emerge organically, letting students be the experts and express their own ideas about language change. Eventually, my students ended up exactly where I wanted them to be, but their taking ownership of it made the discussion that much more meaningful. Furthermore, I can make a difference in my own classroom as well as my department. Every day, the classroom teacher conducts action research, exploring what works and what doesn't work; such practices and the results thereof can be

shared within and across academic disciplines, helping to improve the quality of education for all students.

Perhaps most importantly, my action research has made it clear that much remains to be accomplished at this intersection of linguistics and secondary English education (Smitherman, 2000, Rickford, 1999, Wolfram, 1999, Paris, 2009). Although many teachers are respectful of students' nonstandard language varieties, we often fail to use the lexicons or grammars of these varieties as tools for learning. "We dedicate entire classes to learning English, but teachers, their curriculum, and the broader structures of teacher preparation and linguistic ignorance are ill-equipped to use the Englishes of our students as critical resources in learning" (Paris, 2009, p. 444). Moving forward, secondary educators need to acknowledge the ethnic and linguistic diversity of their classrooms, use it to improve literacy learning, and examine the effects of these approaches.

This thesis is one step in that direction; educators such as myself who work in similar contexts can use my contributions to supplement their curriculum and improve the quality of instruction for all students. Below, I have suggested some steps that any teacher can take immediately to begin to build a community of learning that celebrates all student language variation.

5.2 Take Action: Steps for Immediate Implementation

Pedagogical Practices

1. Show respect for nonstandard dialects and the students who use them; recognize their code-switching as a valuable skill and powerful resource.

Make Ideologies Visible

2. Show students examples of their own vernaculars in print by incorporating texts that showcase a variety of dialects; use these as a starting point for discussions to make visible student ideologies regarding language variation.

Become a Better Teacher

3. Learn about and take seriously youth culture (such as music and lexical items) to help students make the connection between their world and their education.

Language as a Tool

4. Use the resources in the appendix, or plan other bidialectal lessons that use student language variation as a tool to teach Standard English.

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APPENDIX A

SITUATIONALLY APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE ACTIVITY

Procedure

1. Students will view the following video about language registers:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9AMiK mzV0M>
2. Students will discuss:
 - a. What kinds of registers (language varieties) are necessary to function in different situations? Why do we need a range of registers?
 - b. How many registers (language varieties) do you think you use? How many do you think you have command of?
 - c. Are there additional registers (language varieties) that you would like to add to your language toolbox?
3. Students will write a few lines of dialogue for a three different situations:
 - a. Write a conversation that might occur if you ask a teacher for a favor (such as a higher grade, a letter of recommendation, or an extension on a project).*
 - b. Write a conversation that might occur if you to ask your parent or guardian for a favor (such as higher allowance, a later curfew, or a new pair of shoes).
 - c. Write a conversation that might occur if you ask your best friend for a favor (such as to borrow their favorite jacket, to use their science notes, or to catch a ride home with them).
4. Students will discuss:
 - a. What registers (language varieties) do you use in each situation? How are they different? How are they the same?
 - b. Do you think that you have all the language that you need to interact as you would like?

5. If time permits, students can:
 - a. Present their written dialogue in small groups
 - b. Act out their scenarios for the class
 - c. Create videos of their dialogue and post them

*This can be changed or extended to include some other authority figure, such as the school principal, a police officer, or a manager at a potential job.

APPENDIX B
PRAISE POEMS ACTIVITY

Procedure

1. Students will read the following poems by Lucille Clifton, Langston Hughes, Gary Soto, and Carolyn Forche.
2. Students will discuss:
 - a. What are the poems praising?
 - b. Why do you think the authors praise themselves?
 - c. What about you (your body, home, culture, language, or community) deserves praise?
3. Students will write a praise poem to admire something about themselves that does not often receive praise.
 - a. If students need inspiration, they can read sample student poems from Christensen's (2009) book, including the one by Chetan Patel.

“Homage to my hips” by Lucille Clifton

these hips are big hips

they need space to

move around in.

they don't fit into little

petty places. these hips

are free hips.

they don't like to be held back.

these hips have never been enslaved,

they go where they want to go

they do what they want to do.

these hips are mighty hips.

these hips are magic hips.

i have known them

to put a spell on a man and

spin him like a top!

“Harlem Sweeties” by Langston Hughes

Have you dug the spill
Of Sugar Hill?
Cast your gims
On this sepia thrill:
Brown sugar lassie,
Caramel treat,
Honey-gold baby
Sweet enough to eat.
Peach-skinned girlie,
Coffee and cream,
Chocolate darling
Out of a dream.
Walnut tinted
Or cocoa brown,
Pomegranate-lipped
Pride of the town.
Rich cream-colored
To plum-tinted black,
Feminine sweetness
In Harlem’s no lack.
Glow of the quince
To blush of the rose.

Persimmon bronze
To cinnamon toes.
Blackberry cordial,
Virginia Dare wine—
All those sweet colors
Flavor Harlem of mine!
Walnut or cocoa,
Let me repeat:
Caramel, brown sugar,
A chocolate treat.
Molasses taffy,
Coffee and cream,
Licorice, clove, cinnamon
To a honey-brown dream.
Ginger, wine-gold,
Persimmon, blackberry,
All through the spectrum
Harlem girls vary—
So if you want to know beauty’s
Rainbow-sweet thrill,
Stroll down luscious,
Delicious, fine Sugar Hill.

“Ode to La Tortilla”

by Gary Soto

In a dish towel,	Dances in my hands
Warm as gloves just	As I carry it
Taken off, finger by finger.	To the drainboard,
Mamá is rolling	Where I smear it
Them out. The radio	With butter,
On the window sings,	The yellow ribbon of butter
El cielo es azul . . .	That will drip
I look in the black pan:	Slowly down my arm
The face of the tortilla	When I eat on the front lawn.
With a bubble of air	The sparrow will drop
Rising. Mamá	Like fruit
Tells me to turn	From the tree
It over, and when	To stare at me
I do, carefully,	With his glassy eyes.
It's blistered brown.	I will rip a piece
I count to ten,	For him. He will jump
Uno, dos, tres . . .	On his food
And then snap it out	And gargle it down,
Of the pan. the tortilla	Chirp once and fly
	Back into the wintry tree.

“The Morning Baking” by Carolyn Forché

Grandma, come back, I forgot

How much lard for these rolls

Think you can put yourself in the ground

Like plain potatoes and grow in Ohio?

I am damn sick of getting fat like you

Think you can lie through your Slovak?

Tell filthy stories about the blood sausage?

Pish-pish nights at the virgin in Detroit?

I blame your raising me up for my Slav tongue

You beat me up out back, taught me to dance

I'll tell you I don't remember any kind of bread

Your wavy loaves of flesh

Stink through my sleep

The stars on your silk robes

But I'm glad I'll look when I'm old

Like a gypsy dusha hauling mil

“Tiger Eyes” by Chetan Patel

I look into a mirror
and watch the history inside of me
flood out.

I see the Kshatriya warrior,
sword in hand,
the Sudra laborer,
working hard at his feet.

I see the stories passed
under the Banyan tree
and the cleansing Ganges,
slicing down the Himalayas.

I see the village Panchayat,
the Lok Sabha,

the House of People.

I see the deep fried Samosas,
full of carrots and peas,
wrapped in flour,
ready to eat.

I see the river flooding
in the monsoons,
the locus lying
in the fields of Jammu.

I see the tiger eyes
waiting in the high grass,
for me to come back
and relive the past.

APPENDIX C
CODE SWITCHING ACTIVITY

Procedure

1. Students will read and listen to “I Have a Dream,” Martin Luther King Junior’s most famous speech. King is a master of rhetoric, dialect, and code switching.
2. Students will analyze King’s speech and dialect:
 - a. Identify uses of slang
 - b. Identify language that is consistent with a particular geographic region
 - c. Identify language and features that are religious in nature
3. Students will discuss:
 - a. What is King’s audience for this speech? How does King use dialect to reach his specific audience?
 - b. How does King’s dialect shift over the course of the speech? How does this affect his message?
 - c. King code-switches, or uses both formal standard language and informal nonstandard language within the same piece. What is the purpose of code-switching in this instance?