In the United States, every literacy event is part of our complex history, culture, and politics over language use. Morrison (1989) puts it this way: “The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language—its unpolicied, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language” (p. 11). The intimate and interwoven nature of language and language use is also entangled in beliefs, values, and perceptions held by individual stakeholders. Frank (2000) suggests that it is imperative to be able to understand alternative perceptions to effect social change.

In this article, we illustrate the complexity of translating linguistic research into practice. Using a narrative approach, we share how a teacher negotiated the intersection of her beliefs and values, the application of linguistic theories, a desire to value and appreciate the languages used in her classroom, and historic, social, and political realities. The translation process is not a quick and easy, step-by-step, cookie-cutter method; it is a socially situated process that needs to respect linguistic theories and research as well as the needs and concerns of students, families, and community. We believe that it is important to have conversations about language use and to work toward acceptance of students’ right to their own language.

We use a narrative approach to capture the process, but not necessarily to “exhaust the possibilities” (Chase, 2005, p. 667) or reach a “definitive conclusion” (p. 653). This narrative represents our lived experiences and voices, and thereby captures a time and space in our lives. Our narrative is written to add to the literature on the gap between linguistic research and language use and practice. Moreover, we believe that it helps to demystify how teachers make decisions and what information can influence teacher decision making. In the sections that follow, the narrative appears to “lock” us into a time and a space in response to a series of events; however, the text should not be read or interpreted as the sum total of our understanding of the intersections of race, language, and teaching.

INTERSECTIONS

In the fall of 2004, we experienced an intersection of theory and practice centering on the language use of African American English (AAE). As a rule when we approach intersections, literally and figuratively, we slow down, wait, proceed cautiously, and then move beyond the beginning. Literally, the intersection included: 1) Dr. Willis, an African American university teacher educator intent on offering students information drawn from research on the literacy needs of underserved children—especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds—with an emphasis on the need for sensitivity, understanding, and the skills for addressing their needs; 2) Lynn, a European American classroom teacher, intent on learning and honing her craft as well as addressing the needs of each individual child in her classroom; 3) Ms. Adam, Lynn’s full-time African American assistant, intent on preventing the miseducation of African American children; and 4) Steve’s (an 11-year-old African American student) loving parents, intent on assuring he receives a quality education that will prepare him for life and the opportunities afforded by postsecondary education. Figuratively, this intersection included: 1) students’ right to their own language; 2) respecting, valuing, and appreciating the language children bring to school; 3) strategies to use children’s language as a springboard for teaching/learning English language arts and Standard Academic English (SAE); and 4) different, competing, and overlapping personal interests and political opinions.

Lynn Isenbarger and Arlette Ingram Willis

An Intersection of Theory and Practice: Accepting the Language a Child Brings into the Classroom

A European American classroom teacher and her African American teacher educator discuss the everyday experiences of teachers who seek to acknowledge and address the linguistic and cultural understandings that students bring with them to our classrooms.
In this article, we use the term African American English (also known as African American Vernacular English, Black English, Black Vernacular English, and Ebonics) as representative of a systematic and rule-governed natural speech form that many people of African American descent speak (Redd and Webster, 2005). We also use the term Standard Academic English as representative of the dialect of English used in academic writing, official or government documents, and the news media (Redd and Webb, 2005). Now we turn to the narrative that describes why, and how, what we brought to these intersections gave us cause to slow down, wait and look about, proceed cautiously, and move beyond points where we began.

LYNN ISENBARGER, TEACHER AND GRADUATE STUDENT

As a first-year teacher in 1998, I set a personal goal to accept each child as an individual and do my best to meet his or her needs as a learner. I work toward fulfilling this goal while remaining open to parental concerns as well as applying research-based practices. During the 2004–2005 school year, I had a teaching experience that illustrated that while research is good in theory, situations can arise that make it difficult to achieve these professional ideas.

The fifth-grade classroom in which this project took place is an inclusive class of 25 students with a mix of socioeconomic backgrounds. The students who receive additional academic services include four who are identified as having a learning disability, one who has significant cognitive and physical challenges, three who receive Title I services, and eight who are identified as gifted. Demographically, there are 1 Asian, 5 African American, and 20 European American children; 14 students are female and 11 male. The two adults who work full-time in this classroom community are myself, a Caucasian female teacher, and Ms. Adam (pseudonym), a female African American inclusion assistant.

The student who is the subject of this paper is an 11-year-old African American male whose pseudonym is Steve. He is an enthusiastic, outgoing child who enjoys and values his education. He is well accepted by his peers, liked by his teachers, and has excellent support from his parents. Furthermore, he is conscientious about completing his assignments and receives Title I services in Reading. Devout in his faith and active in his church, Steve readily shares experiences and feelings from that part of his life; in his journal, he wrote about his baptism and what that ordinance meant to him.

Steve has a unique and engaging way of interpreting his world at times, looking for larger meaning in daily activities. Ms. Adam and I refer to these as “Steve-isms” and marvel at the bits of wisdom embedded within what he says. For example, on the first day of class in January 2005, Steve came to me with a thoughtful look on his face. The change of the year had caused him to reflect. “You know,” he mused, “it seems to me that we are real lucky. Not only have we seen a century change, but we lived in a millennium change, too. Not too many people get to see that in their lifetimes, do they?” And Steve walked off murmuring, “That’s real neat.”

Theory, Theories, and Theorizing

During the fall of 2004, I took a university course called, “Teaching Reading in Grades 4–12” with Dr. Willis as the instructor. I was hoping to gain insights and skills that would help me reach my personal goal of tailoring instruction to individual students as well as improving the overall quality of my teaching. One of the books included on the reading list was The Skin That We Speak by Delpit and Dowdy (2002).

Delpit asserts, “To reject a person’s language can only feel as if we are rejecting him.” I began reflecting on and questioning my own teaching in relation to that premise.

Delpit asserts, “To reject a person’s language can only feel as if we are rejecting him.” I began reflecting on and questioning my own teaching in relation to that premise. Were the students in my room who spoke something other than Standard Academic English feeling accepted? When they worked on writing assignments, did they feel rejected because I was requiring them to switch to SAE? Would they produce better pieces if I relaxed my tacit rule about which language was acceptable?

In the past, I had believed students’ writings had to be perfect before being published—correct grammar, no spelling errors, capitalizations and punctuation all in order. And certainly nothing except SAE was to be used. But my past insistence on perfect papers had often meant rewriting again and again. I had tried varying the colors of
ink as I marked the essays, trying to make the corrections on their drafts look less intimidating, but to no avail. Until I read Delpit and Dowdy, I had not realized that my insistence upon the usage of SAE could feel like a comment on a child’s culture and language.

This self-revelation didn’t make me feel very good inside, as a teacher or as a human being. On further reflection, I am not sure that some of the children even comprehended why I wanted the change. I had more questions for myself: Was I holding these children up to an unreasonable expectation? Was I forgetting that learning to write was a process, and students’ abilities exist along a writing continuum? Might I be unfairly expecting leaps in student writing (from grade 4) for which they were not prepared through no fault of their own? In fact, I wondered, was it perhaps my fault because I had not yet taught them the steps?

Digression

The previous summer (2004), I had decided to change how I taught writing. I had made a Monitoring Notebook in August, allotting five to six pages per child; I decided to focus on one thing for each student to fix in the pieces they wrote for me and then record that in the Monitoring Notebook. One student might be asked to be sure all new paragraphs were indented, another to go back and add three adjectives to each paragraph. That way, I could see how the children were progressing and tailor my instruction to what they needed in order to make progress toward that goal. Ideally, this would help me adjust my teaching to the individual student, rather than expecting all students to be at the same stage of writing. I had not considered accepting anything besides SAE in student writing until I read the first six chapters of The Skin That We Speak.

That reading made clear that my goal for change was going to be broader than I initially anticipated. I had some early self-doubts—not about the rightness of accepting students’ dialects, but about my ability to accept it.

A Surprising Response

My wonderings were answered very quickly during Parent/Teacher Conferences in October. I always begin each conference by asking if there are any concerns the parent(s) would like to discuss. As soon as I posed the question to Steve’s parents, his mother started talking. Neither she nor her husband were happy with the fact that the English in Steve’s written work was not SAE. They were very concerned about the grammar he was using in his pieces and wanted me to work with him on it.

I was quite taken aback by this. I thought I had been accepting of Steve and the language he spoke, and was doing the right thing. Clearly, his family felt differently. Steve wrote fairly competently. He put a good deal of thought into his plan and then produced a rough draft full of good characterization, a plausible plot, and other elements of good writing. Unlike his peers who often asked me how long their written pieces had to be (which meant they would write that much and consider the assignment completed), Steve’s written work was always lengthy, single-spaced, and quite involved. He took his assignments seriously and spent an enormous amount of time planning and writing, all signs of a student who is interested in doing well in school. But often his word choices were what I had surmised to be Black Standard English. Some of the phrases Steve used were similar to phrases I’d heard in the community, among my children’s friends, and in concert with the assigned readings in the course I took from Dr. Willis. In light of trying to be more accepting of my students, I had not been correcting them.

For example, the story of Max Song, a character Steve fashioned in response to an assignment to create a superhero who would “battle” cultural problems of today, contains several examples of what I was accepting in Steve’s written work. He wrote: “You may think... [Max] is an average fifteen year old boy... who likes video games, skateboarding, and other boy stuff. In reality he was a dragon from planet Dragonon... who came to protect earth from danger.” According to Steve, Max could jump through a magic
ring that transported him to where the action was and then change into various beings by saying, “Power up!” This chant also was how he turned into human form for his undercover work at Miltent High School. Below are excerpts from this story that illustrate what I had accepted in Steve’s written work:

Bell ring then Max run into his room . . .
Meanwhile Master Jin find out that Max brought . . .

“No, don’t do that it never work.”
It jump on Max and got a fang on him . . .

Word and phrase choices such as these were what I had surmised to be Black Standard English, and in my effort to be more accepting of all my students’ language, I had not been correcting them. Generally, my comments or suggestions for changes for Steve’s writing referred to conventions:

Excellent planning and writing, Steve.
Go back and fix the spelling errors.
Indent your paragraphs.

From Steve’s parents’ perspective, though, it appeared that I might have inadvertently lowered my expectations and accepted less than he was able to do (and certainly less than his parents wished for him) by not requiring him to use SAE.

As I listened to his mother and father voice their concerns, I thought about Steve and his verbal language. I realized that I had never heard him speak Black Standard English in the classroom, either to me, to Ms. Adam, or with any of the children. His parents used SAE whenever they conversed with me; did they do so at home, too? Did Steve speak SAE at home consistently as well? And if that was the case, why, then, was he not writing in SAE? For whatever reason, he wrote one way, but spoke another.

I had not asked (and did not ask) Steve why he chose to speak one way and write another. I had been taught since childhood that it was rude and impolite to ask probing questions about sensitive issues. Questioning him about his language usage would be rude from my perspective, and perhaps even feel insulting and overbearing since I was a white teacher and Steve was an African American student. In hindsight, I wish I had let go of my concerns and simply asked Steve why there was such a difference between his speech and writing.

Race, Culture, and Language
Since it so alarmed his parents that I had given Steve’s language the stamp of teacher-approval, I assured them that I would work with their son, and the conference moved on to other things. I thought about this conference for quite some time. I reflected on another of Delpit’s (1988) articles, “The Silenced Dialogue,” in which she shares comments made by graduate students regarding their interactions with white teachers and professors. Especially piercing are comments made by African Americans who feel that white teachers never listen to input from black colleagues or students, teaching only what they want regardless of other perspectives. Delpit (1988) writes:

Children have the right to their own language, their own culture. We must fight cultural hegemony and fight the system by insisting that children be allowed to express themselves in their own language style. It is not they, the children, who must change, but the schools. (p. 291)

I was confused. I was getting two different opinions on what was right, one from researchers, another from parents. How could I, a white teacher, choose the best teaching strategy for my African American students when there were conflicting ideas within the African American community?

I decided to talk to Ms. Adam, who has raised two daughters; I suspected she had addressed this issue before from a parent’s viewpoint. Since she is employed in education, I knew she had a perspective as an experienced educator. Ms. Adam is someone I trust, a friend who will accept my questions about “cultural differences” and answer them honestly according to her best understanding.

I began by telling her about the conference with Steve’s parents and how they had reacted to my acceptance of Steve’s written language. Ms. Adam replied she was not surprised, and mentioned that she’d gone to school with Steve’s father. “I have never, ever heard his father use
Black Standard English,” she said. “Come to think of it, from Steve, either. I wonder why he wrote that way.” We agreed this puzzled us. I brought up Delpit’s ideas of accepting a child’s language and how it felt as a rejection of culture if I did not. Even before I finished speaking, Ms. Adam was shaking her head in disbelief. “Girl, you can’t do that! Don’t teach our babies anything except Standard English! Tell them (i.e., the researchers) to keep their opinions to themselves!” And she launched into a lengthy dialogue about her perceptions of Ebonics and why she felt SAE had to be taught to all children, not just African Americans. Some of her reasons for teaching SAE were:

1) Children will need Academic English for job applications, at the doctor’s office, and in other situations in order to present themselves well;
2) It is most definitely not a rejection of culture to reject Black Standard English;
3) Ebonics is a barrier to African Americans (in her opinion): “Teach them proper English”;
4) Poor speaking can go back generations in the black community. Have ESL classes for Ebonics speakers if need be.

Ms. Adam also shared with me a story from her own family. “My children were not allowed to speak Ebonics. They used to take flack from white kids on the school bus because we lived in the projects; they would say, ‘You don’t speak like project kids. You talk like white people.’ And that was all right with me.” She concluded by advising, “Lynn, just cue off Steve’s speech. He speaks properly. Cue off that.”

Still trying to come to an understanding about the issue, I reflected further in my journal for Dr. Willis’s class and discussed the situation with her, the students in her class, as well as with colleagues in my building. Those to whom I spoke had strong opinions about the issue, with most asserting that SAE had to be taught to all children. Many people, both black and white, cited the same reasons Ms. Adam had listed.

Given Steve’s parents’ strong desire to prepare their son for adult life, and their belief that SAE would best serve him, especially in his written work, coupled with the input from Ms. Adam, my classmates, and colleagues, I made the decision to correct Steve’s language in his writing and expect him to use SAE.

Reflections
This experience underscores my firm belief that no one person can or should be the voice of an entire community. Delpit and other researchers may provide thought-provoking, well-researched, documented experiences about how to teach African American children, and their work provides insight to me as a teacher on how to reach my students. But they cannot and do not speak for the entire African American community.

Steve generally spoke with his peers the same way he talked to me in the classroom, so I do not think his change in language usage was due to any desire to impress friends. Most of the children he chose to spend time with, though, were Caucasian. Did he modify his language around them, too? Was the non-Academic English in Steve’s writing coming from home? According to Ms. Adam, who has known Steve’s father, she has never heard him speak in black dialect. Based on her report, my guess is that SAE is spoken at home. So the question remains, why did I see it in his writing?

As I look back at a few samples of his work, I wonder if my perceptions of Steve’s language were incorrect.

I asked another African American friend, Diane Martin, to read about my experience with Steve and to provide her perspective. I respect and trust her opinions and perspective, not only as a friend and an African American, but also as a classmate in Dr. Willis’s course, a language arts middle school teacher, and the former teacher of one of my own children. After reading an earlier draft of this paper, Diane wrote:

What if Steve and his parents spoke Ebonics as their primary language? What if Steve did not like...
to write because his papers were always marked up when he received them back? Then would your approach have been successful as a springboard to Steve being encouraged to first record his ideas on paper, and then learn how to write in standard Academic English?

Diane’s question about what I would do were the situation reversed is a good one. I think I would have tried the same approach, accepting what was brought into the classroom, and, as Diane says, letting that be the “springboard” for future revisions.

Diane also asked me if this experience with Steve and his family had changed my approach to teaching African American students about writing. Right now, it is a change I am still exploring. As I stated earlier, I believe in teaching the individual child, and tailoring instruction to his or her needs. According to Delpit and Dowdy (2002), I need to accept the language a child brings into the classroom as an expression of self. I agree, yet my experience in the classroom has shown me that parents may have a different viewpoint. I strongly believe parents are an integral component in the education of their children and their voices should be heard. Balancing what research has shown with parental concerns, when they are radically different, is tough, especially when one is an outsider to the culture of both the researchers and the parents.

As for teaching writing, I must remember my original goal—teaching every student as an individual. Should I have this experience with a student again, I will ask the next time I see a discrepancy between the way a child speaks and writes. That is my responsibility as a teacher, regardless of my discomfort about how my query might be perceived. I lost sight of the “whole” Steve by focusing on his ethnicity and language and their connection to his writing. I overlooked the other facets that make Steve who he is—a bright, thoughtful, hard-working boy who is also African American.

**ARLETTE INGRAM WILLIS, UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR**

In the fall of 2004, when constructing my syllabus, I responded to an often heard complaint that theory is removed from real classrooms. I wanted my graduate students to do more than read research studies, I wanted them to interrogate theories and ideas, asking “Are academic theories applicable in real classrooms?” My students taught grades 5–12. Each student was required to select an idea or strategy from our readings and discussions to use with or adapt for students enrolled in local public schools. I asked them to interrogate the research by determining whether the strategies they read about worked with students in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Additional requirements included keeping a journal about class readings and discussions, writing short papers describing their experiences implementing a reading and writing idea or strategy, and presenting their use of an idea or strategy to our class.

The dual focus of the course is reading and writing, and I attempted to give time to reading and writing research, translating research into practice, as well as other forms of literacy (i.e., media literacy). To do so meant that I introduce/re-introduce the idea that SAE is a dialect among other dialects in spoken and written English. I highlighted the idea that SAE is not superior to other forms of English, although it is used to evaluate student progress and valued as an indicator of academic success. Key to successful writing of all students is building on the language they bring with them to class, to inform them of opportunities to use SAE, but not to deprive them of their own languages.

My goal was not to offer students a comprehensive review of African American English (AAE), African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black English (BE), Black English Vernacular (BEV), or Ebonics—the labels used to characterize the language or form of English spoken predominately by African Americans. I aimed: 1) to inform/remind my students that the children who enter their classrooms are, for the most part, efficient and effective users of language in spoken and written forms, even when the language they use is not SAE or Standard Written English (SWE); and 2) to restate the importance of respecting, accepting, and appreciating the languages used by their students, using SAE as an example of a dialect frequently used in schools. I remained cognizant that graduate students are at different stages in their lives and the profession. In many ways, the structure of the course was
optimal because it encouraged students to adapt theories and strategies to use with their students, and to reflect on their use of a theory or strategy, noting what worked well, did not work well, and to always question theory and research that is not in sync with their experiences.

Digression

I enjoy the richly satisfying rhythm, fluidity, depth, and sound of AAE; it speaks to me of home, dreams, and love. Rickford and Rickford (2000) write that many African Americans speak a language that is distinctive, whether it is labeled African American English, African American Vernacular English, Black English, Black Vernacular English, or Ebonics, and “are fluent speakers of Standard English” (p. 1). I consider myself among those who speak both SAE and AAE and who code-switch (change language forms when a situation dictates). To me, language is as intimate and necessary as breathing; language is a way to express how we see, feel, and experience life. To deny students the opportunity to express themselves freely, openly, honestly is ill-conceived policy and practice. Morrison (1996) writes:

There is a certain kind of peace that is not merely the absence of war. It is larger than that. . . . The peace I am thinking of is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one—an activity that occurs most naturally, most often in the reading/writing world we live in. (np)

All students should have opportunities in school to experience such peace when reading and writing in their own language.

The research of linguists Ball (1992, 1996), Smitherman (1994, 1998), and Richardson (1995) has focused on the use of AAE in writing and in the evaluation of prose for students in high school and college, respectively. Smitherman’s (1994) re-analysis of National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) writing samples of African American students reveals the importance of: 1) valuing the rich cultural discourse of BEV, 2) planning lessons that encourage students to use storytelling in essays, 3) expecting personalization in writing, 4) limiting overcorrection of BEV during the writing process, and 5) expressing concern about the evaluation of writing on national assessment tests. Each scholar has commented on the connection between orality, dialogue, rhythm, tenor, and voice, in text written by African American students. And, each believes that historically and in our current climate of accountability, traditional approaches to addressing language differences between SAE and AAE have failed African American students. Finally, I drew from the experiences of my own sons’ transition when they realized that their language, AAE, is not as accepted in school as SAE, and learned that they needed to code-switch from speech to written text (Willis, 1995).

I entered the course with some deeply held beliefs: 1) all students have the right to use their own language, a right that is not limited to non-English speakers but one that extends to students who speak varieties of English; 2) teachers should be informed about the history of language use in schools and knowledgeable about the varieties of English; 3) classrooms should offer opportunities for students to use multiple forms of English for oral and written purposes; and 4) SAE and SWE are forms of English that are associated with power and domination, but are not superior. My thinking is aligned with resolutions passed by NCTE: The Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (NCTE, 1974) passed a resolution on “students’ rights to their own patterns and varieties of language.” They also created a position statement entitled “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” which was later adopted at the CCCC Annual Convention. In 2003, CCCC reaffirmed its commitment to this position (NCTE, 2003, http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/div/114918.htm).

Theory, Theories, and Theorizing

My students had learned of the heated debates throughout U.S. history waged over the use of non-English languages and forms of English. The more recent debate over student familiarity and use of AAE, that began several decades ago, continues as everyone from politicians to community leaders has opinions on the best way to address language difference in schools. Rickford and Rickford (2000), for instance, track how misunderstandings surrounding the Oakland School Board’s resolution to recognize Ebonics as the primary language of African American students in their district led to uninformed commentary by politicians, scholars, entertainers, linguists, and Internet users. What is most clear in their description of the even-
Accepting a Child’s Language

...tual demise of the resolution is the overzealous response by a misinformed media and public. The Oakland School Board did not imply they wanted to teach AAE; rather they acknowledged AAE as a language used by many of their students. Moreover, they believed AAE could be used as a springboard for learning SAE (formal speaking and writing) in the same manner used for teaching students whose first language is not English. They did try to remind the public that AAE plays “an essential role in African American life and culture, and by extension, in American life and culture” (p. 14).

Educators often point to research by Ball (1992, 1996); Baugh (2000); Richardson (1995, 2003); Rickford and Rickford (2000); Rickford (1999); Smith (1998); and Smitherman (2000) to demonstrate that the opinions of linguists differ from that of politicians, administrators, teachers, and parents with regard to why, how, and under what conditions AAE is appropriate. Smitherman (2006) characterizes the state of affairs this way:

“African American diversity notwithstanding, there is an underlying commonality among all those with the blood of a slave running in their veins (as Hip Hop artist Nas would say). Culture, history, experience, not just skin color and race continue to define African America. And Black Language is all up in this mix. At some point in their lives, in one context or another, some 90 percent of Black Americans speak “Negro,” . . . Despite elitist language pronouncements by folk like Cosby, despite language eradication efforts in the schools, despite White America’s ambivalence toward the language (borrowing and castigating it at the same time), “speaking Negro” has persisted over generations and decades. The language is bound up with and symbolic of identity, camaraderie, culture, and home. (p. 19)

When addressing language and writing, state and local school administrators and classroom teachers are caught within a maze of federal and state mandates, research drawn from education and linguistics, and personal and public opinions.

argued that writing is fundamental to education, the tests were reinstated. Both camps have a voice, wield power, and attempt to dictate policy.

Race, Culture, and Language

In this class, the first set of readings offers information about students’ right to use their language. Along with the national and state initiatives to inform, train, and retrain teachers about second language and bilingual issues, I believe that it also is important to help them rethink what they know, and do not know, about children whose first language is English, but not SAE.

We begin our discussions with Delpit’s (1988) article, “The Silent Dialogue,” followed by Delpit and Dowdy’s (2002) text, interspersed with journal articles and chapters from a variety of sources. After years of using Delpit’s (1988) article, I have learned to anticipate resistance as European American students are usually offended by the text. Interestingly, while there is some passive resistance in this class, the white students reply that her portrayal of white teachers does not accurately capture their efforts to support students of color. Further, they claim not to see students of color as less capable and they do permit them to fail, but work diligently to make sure that each student is able to succeed. In short, they believed that comments made in the Delpit article characterize the efforts of white teachers as insensitive and uncaring, as well as ignorant of cultural and linguistic differences. The discussion drifts from responding to the article to discussions of linguistic terms used to discuss the language of many African Americans (not all African Americans speak AAE). Several students volunteer to share their experiences and understandings of teaching writing to African American students who use AAE. They share both positive and less than positive interactions around the use of AAE. I listen to their comments, not surprised to hear the resistance and strain in their claims of respecting the language of all students who enter their classes. Their subtext also holds claims of colorblindness and universality, while being simultaneously tinged with appeals to standards and objectivity that contradict their earlier claims of accepting students’ right to use the language(s) of their homes and community.

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Next we read and discuss Delpit and Dowdy’s (2002) text that was selected because it includes the work of eminent scholars in linguistics, educational researchers, teacher educators, and classroom teachers. It is an ideal text for this course as it contains autobiographical language sketches, essays, reflections, and research studies. In addition, many of the assigned readings center on how race intersects with language use in schools and how the intersection is understood, misunderstood, supported, and unsupported by teachers. While it is important to talk about language, we also need to discuss educational inequities and the cultural and ideological hegemony that surrounds teaching SAE and SWE. These discussions need to be held among teachers who are often conflicted about whether to permit languages other than English and varieties of English to exist in classrooms along with SAE and SWE. Given the public’s recurring debates over AAE, we had lively discussions in which the teachers both supported and challenged the readings. After one such discussion, I received the following unsolicited note from Lynn:

*I am enjoying the class very much, and I am seeing connections to what we’re discussing *everywhere* (including the comics section I showed yesterday! LOL). I had a very interesting English class with my students after our discussion from The Skin That We Speak. I hope to incorporate that into one of my journal entries. (9/23/04)*

In class, she appeared to share openly her responses to the readings, engage in thoughtful discussions, and offered her reflections on her experiences.

**A Surprising Response**

Lynn’s journals described her thinking during the summer of 2004, both prior to my class and during it, all of which suggested she was trying to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Her comments evidence that she is a reflective person and a teacher who understands that her own background, identity, and experiences influence her teaching. Further, they indicate to me that Lynn is making a conscientious effort to hone her skills as a teacher who is respectful of the cultures and languages of the students in her classroom. Her journals on writing and her class project are genuine attempts to put into practice ideas that she holds and concepts that are supported by theory and research. As Baker (2002) observes, “One cannot pretend to respect students’ home languages” (p. 56, italics in the original); Lynn’s efforts were sincere. Even so, as I read her concern about her response to Steve’s written language, Ms. Adam’s response, and Steve’s parents’ request, I realized that Lynn’s attempt to value Steve’s language use, respect his culture, and offer a space within her classroom for writing in more than one language—the way teachers are encouraged to do—had not engendered the response she expected.

I believe Lynn’s intent was well-informed, caring, and not meant to derail Steve’s academic progress. She saw herself as a white woman at an intersection of her own beliefs, ideas, and theory; class theories, readings, and discussions with her African American instructor; and the beliefs and ideas of Ms. Adam and Steve’s parents. She struggled to understand that there are a diversity of opinions among scholars as well as African Americans regarding AAE—its existence, use, and function within communities, academia, and texts.

I also understand the response by Ms. Adam and Steve’s parents as a reflection of a much deeper and larger struggle against miseducation, educational inequity, and achievement gap stereotypes. They are correct to be ever-vigilant about Steve’s progress in order to ensure that he is given the tools needed to be academically successful. They believed that Lynn’s acceptance of his AAE text was ill-informed, and they feared that allowing Steve to use nonstandard written English would hinder his academic future. Their concerns and their desire to document Steve’s progress in school are genuine attempts to assure he receives a quality education.

**REFLECTIONS**

Responding to student writing, by both authors, became a challenge as our theories intersected with readings, discussions, and realities of race, language, and education. I continue to maintain that: 1) all students have a right to their own language(s); 2) it is important to arm teachers with the latest research and give them information that will help them as decision makers; 3) more information about the languages used by non-English speakers and those who speak varieties of English should be taught; and 4) opportunities to use SAE...
Below are a few titles reflecting the immense variety of oral and written genres and styles found in our world. The books are first meant for pleasure, but they can also serve to open conversation about how each of us learns to vary our language styles depending on our audience, our purposes, and our situation.

Berry, a Jamaican-born poet and author celebrates the Caribbean-creole language of his island childhood. Ages 8 and up.


Nathaniel “raps” about himself and his world. Ages 7–10.

This fantasy weaves together African and African American history, folklore and language forms. Ages 10 and up.

Hamilton’s superb retelling of African American folktales beautifully captures African American oral traditions. All ages.

Herron, Carolivia. *Nappy Hair*. Illustrated by Joe Cepeda.
Herron, a scholar in classical poetry, based this celebration of uniqueness on an episode from her own family history. Ages 7–10.

Two teenage girls open a hair-braiding salon in Brooklyn. Ages 12 and up.

This picture storybook of a young African American girl who outwits a fox is based on a tale from McKissack’s childhood. Ages 7–10.

Myers plays with “rap” and other linguistic forms in this light-hearted comedy. Ages 9–12.

—Barbara Z. Kiefer

and SWE should be offered, but not to the exclusion of other languages or varieties of English.

I have reconsidered my teaching approach and in the future will offer more information about AAE in my courses. For example, Redd and Webb (2005) describe five different approaches used to teach writing to AAE speakers that teachers may find useful. First, the traditional approach focuses on immersing students in SAE, forbidding home/dialect language use, and explicitly teaching grammar. Second, the dialect approach is a modification of the traditional approach and borrows teaching strategies from English as a Second Language, while allowing code-switching (the ability to change or switch dialects depending on the situation, also known as bidialecticalism). Third, the dialect awareness approach is inspired by the idea that all forms of English are dialects and there should be no language prejudice; learning about all forms of English will add value to them. Fourth, the culturally appropriate approach centers on African American culture and uses Afrocentric resources, materials, content, etc. The fifth option is the bridge approach, which offers all students an opportunity to start writing using their own language before transitioning to SWE, “the U.S. standard for academic and professional writing” (Redd and Webb, 2005, p. 133).

In short, we believe that our narrative is representative of real world experiences and the process of translating research into practice. Readers who take a “Monday morning quarterback” approach may question “why” (SAE) or “how come” (AAE): 1) Lynn did not ask Steve why he used AAE in his story when he does not speak it in class; 2) Lynn did not inform Steve’s parents and Ms. Adam of the new information she was learning and suggest books and articles for them to read; 3) Lynn did not depend on the new theories and knowledge she learned in her graduate course instead of responding to the concerns raised by Ms. Adam and Steve’s parents; 4) Willis did not volunteer to meet with Ms. Adam and Steve’s parents to share information on AAE; 5) Willis did not tell Lynn that she must create space in her curriculum for standard and nonstandard
forms of English when teaching writing; or 6) Willis did not immediately revise her syllabus to more explicitly and extensively review linguistic research.

We believe that our intersections forced us to examine our own unstated assumptions about the interconnections of race, culture, language, and teaching writing. There are no simple answers to helping teacher educators and teachers learn how to value and appreciate linguistic differences in spoken and written forms of English, but that does not mean we stop trying. What we have learned from the process is that translating theories about language use into classroom practice requires addressing multiple concerns and stakeholders. We recommend that when approaching this intersection, proceed cautiously, taking into consideration students’ needs both now and in the future and remembering that the rights of students to their own language are at stake.

References


Lynn Isenbarger is an elementary school classroom teacher and recently received her master’s degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Arlette Ingram Willis is professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.