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Exploring Children's Perceptions of African American English

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EXPLORING CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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by

Tamika L. Lewis

2015

To: Dean Delia C. Garcia
College of Education

This dissertation, written by Tamika L. Lewis, and entitled Exploring Children's Perceptions of African American English, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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DEDICATION

To my girls, Imani (Hope) and Skylar (Scholar), without you, I am not me. Through your eyes I see the best in me, and strive to be better.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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The differences in attitudes toward African American English (AAE) and Mainstream American English (MAE) were investigated among elementary students (*N*=34) and middle school students (*N*=40) using the Speech Evaluation Instrument (SEI). Participants listened to audio recordings of speakers of AAE and MAE and then completed the SEI.

Both elementary and middle school students perceived MAE positively (p =.005), as hypothesized. However, for both hypotheses related to AAE, the researcher hypothesized that both groups would perceive the language negatively; however, in both cases, the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis. Comparing how each group perceived the two languages, it was found that both groups perceived MAE more positively than they did AAE. With regard to perceptions of AAE, middle school students did not perceive AAE more favorably than elementary students did, as had been hypothesized.

On individual scales of the Speech Evaluation Instrument, both elementary and middle school students perceived speakers of MAE more positively than they did speakers of AAE. Students felt that speakers of MAE were better readers, smarter, and

more likely to be rich than speakers of AAE. Although, middle school students were more likely to feel that speakers of MAE were more intelligent and more likely to be leaders than speakers of AAE; elementary students did not feel the same way. For middle school students there was a statistically significant difference in how they perceived speakers of the two languages. Middle school students perceived speakers of MAE to be more helpful, more friendly, nicer, and kinder than speakers of AAE.

The study concluded that both elementary and middle school students perceived MAE more positively than they did AAE. There appeared to be a shift in perceptions the longer students are in school. The study also revealed that perceiving MAE more positively than AAE did not indicate the participants perceived AAE negatively.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

African American English is a language spoken by nearly 85% of African Americans. Linguists have long acknowledged that it is a rule-governed language like all other languages (Green, 2007; Rickford, 1999; Wolfram, 1970). Despite that fact, it is not officially recognized by most in society as a language. This failure to acknowledge it as a language leads to a number of biases and misunderstandings about African American English (AAE) and those who speak it. Attitudes about language can lead to unfavorable consequences for those who speak AAE, such as housing discrimination, blocked access to employment, and lowered educational outcomes (Purnell, Idsardi, and Baugh, 1999). These attitudes often shape how people are perceived, how they are treated, and which opportunities are open to speakers of AAE. When negative attitudes about AAE are widely held and are held as common knowledge, they have the ability to affect how speakers of AAE perceive themselves and their place in this society. Without a full understanding of beliefs and perceptions of AAE, we cannot get a complete grasp of the consequences of these belief systems. In particular, educators may be unaware of the effects these attitudes have on pedagogical practices and student performance.

Language Defined

Most definitions refer to language as a code, specifically, a socially shared code or conventional system for representing concepts and ideas through the use of arbitrary symbols and rule-governed combination of these symbols (Jay, 2003; Owens, 1992; Reed, 1994; Wardhaugh, 1977). To say that language is arbitrary refers to the fact that the words used to describe things are socially agreed upon for their meaning and definition.

For example, speakers of American English have agreed that the name of the piece of furniture we sleep on is “bed”; speakers of Spanish have labeled it “cama.” Language is not limited to the spoken word; it also encompasses the written word, sign language, and Braille (Jay, 2003). It is structured, based on a system of rules that dictate which letters are combined, which sounds are appropriate, and the order in which words must be strung together to make sense to others. There are consistent patterns, which occur in all languages, and they vary from one language system to another. No language system is inherently better than another.

Two major components of language are form and function. Form refers to the structure of language; function refers to how language is used. Form encompasses, phonological, morphological, and semantic features of language. Phonology refers to the sounds made by letters and words; morphology is the meaning derived from words and word parts; semantics is the meaning derived from the structure of the sentence. For example, in the English language, we know that nearly all words must contain a combination of vowels and consonants. Consonant pairings are typically limited to two consecutive consonants, with three consecutive consonants occurring less frequently. In other languages such as Russian, three or four consecutive vowel pairs are commonplace. Morphology refers to the study of the structure of words and units. Words are made up of morphemes, which are the smallest units of meaning. Examples of morphemes include the plural marker *-s*, which communicates plurality, and *-er*, which expresses one who performs the action of the verb as in *dancer*. Syntax dictates the order words must appear in a sentence for it to be considered structurally sound. For example, in American English, adjectives precede nouns but in Spanish, the opposite is true. Semantics is a

system of rules that dictate the meaning of words. In addition to the structural features (or form) of language, there is the function.

The primary function of language is to allow humans to meaningfully interact with and make meaning of the world in which we live. It is our means of expressing our innermost feelings and thoughts. It is one of the ways we express our creativity. Through language, human beings are able to identify and inscribe both the concrete and the abstract realities of human life experiences, exigency, and memory. As a powerful human tool for survival and agency, human beings use language to influence perceptions and change perspectives. Through language, we communicate to the world that we are as individuals, where we come from and from whom we trace our ancestry. Taken together, even cursory definitions of language suggest that language is a shared experience, which is socially defined, and agreed upon. That is to say, the speakers of the language determine the rules for what is acceptable and these rules are well established and well known. This is true for both Mainstream American English and African American English.

The dominant language spoken by most Americans is usually referred to as Standard English. However, throughout this proposal, I will use the term Mainstream American English (MAE); as the term *standard* can be misleading. The classification of a language as standard is a social classification and a means of marginalizing other languages. It establishes an arbitrary benchmark by which all other languages are measured as "good" or "bad." Although, Mainstream American English is not better than other language forms, it is the language that all Americans are expected to speak if they are to be fully functioning, successful members of society. Typically, it is the language of

business, academia, and power. It is also a language, which in its infancy, was a dialect of German (Hilliard, 2002; Lerer, 1998). Once the people using this dialect gained political and cultural status, English then became more than just a dialect and its status was elevated to language (Lerer, 1998). Although the dominant language in the United States is English, the 2010 U.S. Census identified 381 languages being spoken throughout the country. These languages on this list include Spanish, Italian, German, Arabic, and Greek and all of them are officially recognized languages. African American English is not on the list and is not generally provided this same recognition, despite the fact that it is spoken by nearly 85% of the African American population and has been recognized as a distinct language and not a dialect. This is partly because AAE is misconceived as a "broken" form of Mainstream English, based on the fact that the two languages share a common vocabulary.

Defining African American English

There are a number of terms used to refer to the language spoken by most African Americans. These terms include African American Vernacular English (AAVE), African American Language (AAL), Black English, and Ebonics. The most popular, contemporary term is Ebonics, which literally means ebony sound. Although the term Ebonics is most commonly used to refer to the language spoken by African Americans, the term is somewhat problematic. It was coined at the Language and Urban Child Conference in 1973. Dr. Robert L. Williams, clinical psychologist who was a member of the caucus that coined the phrase, stated that the term refers to "linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendants of

African origin," (Smitherman, 2005, p. 50). The term was originally meant to describe the languages spoken by people of African descent residing in the Caribbean as well as the US. The language spoken by people of African descent in the Caribbean (Jamaica, Trinidad, Bahamas, etc.) is vastly different than that spoken by people of African descent in the United States. Gadsden and Harris (2009) have referred to the language spoken by African Americans as African American English because it has its geographic rootedness in the United States. For this study, the term African American English (AAE) was utilized because the language ascribed to African Americans shares English vocabulary while abiding by grammatical and phonological rules of African languages.

Green (2011) defined AAE as "a system of syntactic, semantic (and pragmatic), phonological, morphological, and lexical patterns that are intertwined with patterns of general English." Simply stated, this speaks to the overlapping in the features of AAE and Mainstream American English. Green demonstrated that the linguistic features present in all languages are also present in AAE. Recognizing African American English's roots and connection to Africa, Smitherman (1977) wrote, "Black Dialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America. Black language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture" (p.2). Herein, we see that while African American English, uses the vocabulary of Mainstream American English there are significant differences. In addition to the differences in grammatical structure and form, Smitherman argued that the manner in which the words are used is not consistent with how they are used in MAE. African American English includes the various idioms, patois, argots, ideolets, and social dialects

of people of African descent, especially those who have been forced to adjust to colonial conditions (Smitherman, 1998). Even before arriving in America, Africans were not permitted to speak their language and were severely punished for any attempts to do so. AAE emerged from Africans' need to communicate with each other and survive slavery in America (1998).

There is evidence that Africans from the same tribes were deliberately separated in an effort to limit their ability to communicate with one another, reducing the chances they would join together to overthrow ship crews. This sentiment is reflected in the words of slave ship captain William Smith (1744):

> As for the languages of Gambia, they are so many and so different, that the natives, on either side the river, cannot understand each other; which, if rightly consider'd, is no small happiness to the Europeans who go thither to trade for slaves... I have known some melancholy Instances of whole ship crews being surpriz'd, and cut-off by them. But the safest way is to trade with the different nations, on either side the river, and having some of every sort on board, there will be no more likelihood of their succeeding in a plot, than of finishing the Tower of Babel. (as cited in Dillard, 2008, p. 74)

Slave traders recognized how effectively they could neutralize the threat posed by a group of people simply by preventing their ability to communicate. Slave traders limited language and communication to effectively separate and control Africans. However despite their efforts to restrict language and communication, the actions of the trader sets the stage for the birth of a new language. According to Creolists, it is these circumstances that gave rise to pidgin language. By being thrown into a group of

heterogeneous language speakers, Africans were forced to develop a common language in order to communicate with each other. Thompson 2000 noted that as far back as 1930 the similarities between African American English and the Umbundu dialect of Angola were being identified (i.e., the absence of consonant pairs at the end of words; Thompson, 2000). In the following section, I review some of the differences between AAE and MAE.

Differences between African American English and Mainstream American English

When placing African American English in an English Language system, scholars have suggested that there is the postvocalic /r/ deletion which refers to the dropping of the /r/ sound at the end of words. For example the letter *r* is dropped from the end of most words. Floor, door, and four become flo', do', and fo', with the apostrophes representing the omission of the ending sound of the words. Words such as sister, brother, and flavor become sista', brotha', flava.' However, when viewing African American English as an African Language System one would not say that something has been dropped or omitted because in African-Congo language the final *r* is non-existent (Smith, as cited in The Real Ebonics Debate, 1998). Additionally, final consonant clusters do not exist in African-Congo languages, so words such as test and fast, would be pronounced tes and fas. Words such as sand and hand, become "san" and "han." In African American English the final consonant cluster of *th*, is substituted with an *f* sound, changing words such as mouth, south, both, and teeth to mof', sof', bof', and teef. This same consonant pairing, at the beginning of a word is substituted with a *d* as in the (da), that (dat), and there (der).

As an English Language system, African American English is said to omit the words is or are from sentences. This is the zero copula rule. However, in African-Congo languages there is no copula verb. Speakers of African American English do not omit the verb to be, but logically follow the rules that are consistent with the grammatical structure of the language from which it is derived. Another prominent feature of African American English is the invariant *be* to refer to habitual acts. For example, “he be working” which translates to “he is always working.” Another aspect of African American English is the use of the double subject, as in the sentence, “The boy, he nice.” From a Mainstream English perspective the structure of this sentence is wrong and there is no need to have two subjects. The structure of the sentence is intended to be topic comment. This same feature can be found in American Sign Language as well as a number of other languages. In fact a number of the rules and features of African American English are found in other recognized and official languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. It is clear that there are rules and structure to the language spoken by African Americans and it is a language, yet among most Americans the label of dialect persists.

Social Constructs of Language

For many years, there has been a continuing debate as to the status of African American English as a dialect or a language. Yet linguists have long agreed that it is indeed a language. In 1997, the Linguistic Society of America issued a declaration stating African American English is a rule based and systematic language form. If those who are considered experts in the area of language have deemed AAE a language, why does this

question persist? Why is it that the message has not reached the general public and misunderstandings about AAE persist?

The answer to these questions my lie in the classification of a language as standard or proper which is a social classification and a means of marginalizing other languages. Linguists define a dialect as a variation of a language, but do not qualify a language as better than a dialect. Most dialects are considered non-standard forms of a language. According to linguists, everyone speaks a dialect of a language (Adger, Wolfram and Christian, 2007, Smitherman, 1977). This would indicate that even speakers of Mainstream American English speak a dialect of the language that has been established as the standard. If this is indeed true, attempts to diminish AAE by referring to it as a dialect are invalid. According to Neil (1998) dialects are viewed as diminished versions of a standard language. The standard language is considered the legitimate language that all citizens should strive to speak. In referring to African American English as a dialect there is an attempt by those in power to diminish the language and make it less than and inferior to Mainstream American English (Smitherman, 1977), as a reflection of the stigma associated with African American people and cultures.

Languages are considered acceptable and valuable if they are recognized in institutions and are politically acknowledged. Those with political power establish policies that support their native language (Harbert, 2009). For example, O'Neil (1998) pointed out that Norwegian and Swedish are practically the same language; however, because the languages are spoken in two separate countries (with separate and distinct political and military systems), they are defined as different languages. Prior to Yugoslavia breaking into a number of Republics the national language was Serbo-

Croatian. Language systems, which were once considered dialects of this language, have since become the languages Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian (Greenberg, 2000). The recognition of these forms of speaking in public institutions in each of these countries has resulted in them being considered a valid and accepted means of communicating. Those in power consider them languages.

Despite the fact that linguists have long recognized AAE as a language, society's designation of AAE as a dialect of English marginalizes it and sets it outside Mainstream American English. Classifying MAE as the standard, establishes it as the benchmark, the norm, the correct and proper way of speaking. In contrast, all other forms of the language, the dialects, are perceived as abnormal, deviant, slang, and improper. Comparative frameworks, which assess the validity and value of one language in comparison to another language, too often set an arbitrary and baseless standard. This standard is then used to characterize minority language forms as deficient and deviant.

Stigmatizing African American English

Although speakers of languages other than English face some challenges in America, none of these speakers or languages seem to draw as much criticism as AAE. The stigma and negative attitudes associated with AAE are well documented. Some misconceptions about African American English (AAE) are that it is lazy English, slang, and ghetto. Fordham (1999) asserted that speakers of AAE are perceived as "lacking civility, cultural graces, or good taste." Todd (1997) described the language as abnormal, defective, and dysfunctional. He referred to it as a language "learned on the streets" with no regard to the fact that African American children acquire their language from their caregivers and immediate surroundings, just as most children do. Referring to it as a

"street language" demonstrates a lack of respect for AAE and those who speak it. According to Thompson (2000), the first empirical study on the language spoken by African Americans was published by J. A. Harris in 1884. Harris described the language as inferior and limiting, but at the same time wonderfully poetic. In the manuscript he referred to the language as "baby talk." As cited in Thompson's 2000 publication, H.W. Odom in 1910 and J. Dowd in 1926 echoed this sentiment, both referring to the language as infantile. Thompson theorized that using such terms to describe AAE supported the belief that African Americans were genetically deficient, intellectually inferior, and incapable of growing beyond the early childhood stages of development. Denigration of AAE fits the narrative of human, cultural deprivation ascribed to people of African descent.

The belief that speakers of Ebonics are culturally deficient or culturally deprived has persisted throughout much of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries (Gadsden & Harris, 2009). Despite being shown to be a rule-governed linguistic system, many continue to view it as inferior to Mainstream American English (Smitherman, 1977). Research has shown that negative attitudes and beliefs about AAE cut across all races and socio-economic levels. Rosenthal (1977) investigated the attitudes of preschoolers toward the language. The subjects in that study were 90 upper middle class White children and 46 working class Black children. She found that all students were able to distinguish MAE from AAE. She also found that both groups identified speakers of MAE as nicer than speakers of AAE. They also felt that they "talked better" and associated them with a higher socioeconomic status. This dissertation asked the questions: Do similar beliefs about the language prevail today? Are children still prone to believe that speakers of

AAE are not as nice or not as linguistically capable as the MAE speaker counterparts? These questions were the basis for this study.

Purpose of the Study

This dissertation was undertaken in order to explore the attitudes of elementary and middle school students towards African American English and Mainstream American English. Much of the research conducted on the perceptions of African American English has shown that AAE is perceived negatively by most in society, including among African Americans. The attitudes of children towards AAE are important as they are poised to become future leaders and policy makers, educators, managers, and politicians. If we can gain a better understanding of their perceptions of the language we can have an idea about what, if any, issues need to be addressed to ensure that future generations do not continue to perpetuate the unfounded biases and language discrimination that speakers of AAE must cope with daily. Additionally, we must begin to counteract children's sense of inferiority, which may be perpetuated by negative perceptions of their language. Lastly, this knowledge is valuable because it can inform educators about pedagogical practices that build on African American children's ways with words rather than penalize them for being speakers of African American English.

The researcher will employ Critical Theory in order to understand these attitudes. Eisner (2002) defines Critical Theory as "an approach to the study of schools and society that has as its main function the revelation of the tacit values that underlie the enterprise" (p. 73). That is, critical theorists shed light on the hidden values of school and society and how these values affect the educational experiences of children. Eisner argues that critical theorists are concerned with revealing the subtle and covert role schools play in

perpetuating social inequality. The aim of critical theory involves "emancipating … those affected by the schools from its debilitating practices" (p.73). Student language is an important part of their identity. Thus labeling their language as inferior or deficient can have profound consequences. From this view, schools operate from a deficit perspective when educating African American children and replicate inequity rather than level the playing field. Critical Theory places emphasis on identifying and correcting social issues. Utilizing this theoretical framework, one is expected to voice the experiences of the oppressed, silenced, and marginalized.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. Are the attitudes of elementary students towards African American English negative?
2. Are the attitudes of middle school students towards African American English negative?
3. Are the attitudes of elementary students towards Mainstream American English positive?
4. Are the attitudes of middle school students towards Mainstream American English positive?
5. Do elementary students view Mainstream American English more favorably than African American English?
6. Do middle school students view Mainstream American English more favorably than African American English?

7. Do middle school students perceive African American English more favorably than do elementary students?

Research Hypotheses

1. Scores for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will fall within the unfavorable range for African American English.
2. Scores for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will fall within the unfavorable range for African American English.
3. Scores for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will fall within the favorable range for Mainstream American English.
4. Scores for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will fall within the favorable range for Mainstream American English.
5. The mean score for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will be higher for Mainstream American English than for African American English.
6. The mean score for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will be higher for Mainstream American English than for African American English.
7. Elementary students will perceive African American English less favorably than do middle school students.

Null Hypotheses

1. Scores for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will fall within the favorable range for African American English.
2. Scores for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will fall within the favorable range for African American English.

3. Scores for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will fall within the unfavorable range for Mainstream American English.
4. Scores for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will fall within the unfavorable range for Mainstream American English.
5. The mean score for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will be lower for Mainstream American English than for African American English.
6. The mean score for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument will be lower for Mainstream American English than for African American English.
7. Elementary students will perceive African American English more favorably than middle school students.

This chapter provided an overview of African American English and the features and rules of the language. There was also a discussion regarding the status of the language in American society and how it differs from Mainstream American English. Lastly, there was a review of the purpose of this current study, the research questions, hypotheses, and null hypotheses.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature relevant to the research conducted. This includes an exploration of language and schooling and language and culture. Lastly, this chapter presents a review of the literature on attitudes about language.

Language and Schooling

Language has been at the foundation of the cultural conflict between students and educational institutions. The seminal court case involving language and schooling occurred in 1979. This was the case of *King v. Ann Arbor School Board (1979),* which became known as the *Black English Case.* The presiding judge, Judge Joiner, ruled that African American English is a language and that the academic failures of student speakers of the language should be attributed to teachers' failure to consider the child's home language in instruction. This proved to be one of the defining moments in the recognition of African American English as a language to be acknowledged in schools. In the school setting, Mainstream English is not merely encouraged, but required. Mainstream English is the language spoken by educators and the language in which textbooks are written. Mastery of Mainstream English is one of the determining factors in a child's success, not only in school, but in life. That is, Mainstream English is the language upon which competence with language is measured and normed. Teachers are charged with teaching Mainstream English to all students who come from homes where it is not the primary language. Students are discouraged from using their home language in school and for many students this is not even an option. Language is so intricately tied to who we are and our social identities, that attempting to separate it from the child can be

extremely difficult (Gee, 2008; Smitherman, 1977). Additionally, some may actively resist acquiring and/or using Mainstream English for fear of risking their standing in their home and community.

> The commencement of formal education is usually one of the first settings in a person's life when their language may be judged right or wrong; when assumptions may be made about their intelligence, family life, future potential, and moral fiber every time a sentence is uttered. (Delpit, 2002)

Students begin to receive the messages that their language is wrong, bad, inappropriate, and unacceptable. These messages come from sources outside of the home community (i.e., schools and teachers) and in some instances, from within. Most teachers feel they have an obligation to teach children to speak "proper" English, yet many fail to consider how this is approached and some lack the skills and know how to teach MAE without simultaneously denigrating their students' home language. In persistently "correcting" students, there is a tendency to focus on form rather than substance. During the correction process, teachers may inadvertently communicate their disdain for African American English, which is part of the child, their experiences, and their culture. Moreover, their feelings about the language are expressed both verbally and non-verbally. It may be expressed in many ways: the rolling of the eyes or the overly exaggerated sigh which follows the students' utterances or denying the child the opportunity to read aloud or sharing during class discussions.

Terms such as *slovenly speech, broken English, verbally destitute, linguistically handicapped* and *linguistically deprived,* have all been used to describe AAE. All of these terms support the notion that children who speak AAE are being perceived and

assessed through a cultural deficiency lens. It is clear from the terminology that some educators and researchers define difference as deviant. From this perspective, they are limited only to seeing fault with the child and the child's culture and are unable to recognize as deficient the pedagogy and assumptions that support it. Perceiving something as innately wrong with the child allows educators an "out" and affords them the opportunity to take less responsibility for educating these children. Moreover, it provides them with a rationale for these children's inability to achieve, one which makes educators less accountable. This rationale does not require educators and schools to look at themselves, their strategies, and the system itself and the ways that hegemonic practices are perpetuated through our system of schooling.

Language is a conscious part of a person's identity (Adger, et al., 2007). Expressing contempt for the child's language, makes the job of teachers that much more difficult. Telling a child that where she or he comes from is bad, wrong, and lazy contributes to the alienation of the child and perhaps their family as well. Children who speak African American English begin to assume that a teacher does not like what they do, and does not like or value them as an individual (Boykin, 1986). Instead of viewing schools as safe spaces in which they are able to develop their potential, the school becomes a hostile place in which their self-esteem and self-concept are challenged. Consequently, some children reject and resist what schools have to offer. Children become less receptive to taking feedback and suggestions about language from the teachers. Baldwin (1979) wrote:

> A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is

> that the child repudiates his experience and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be Black…. (p. 652)

Most teachers do not set out with the intention to harm children. However, unexamined beliefs about speakers of African American English are shaped by the hegemonic structure of society which influences their life experiences as well as the teacher education programs in which they are trained.

Students who speak AAE are more likely to be labeled and assigned to special education classes (Smitherman, 1998). As a result of the negative connotations associated with Black people and the Black languages, teachers, especially English/Language Arts teachers, may underestimate not only the students' potential but also their current level of functioning. It has been well documented that schools with predominantly Caucasian students and teachers are apt to place minority students into special education classes at disproportionately high rates (Robinson & Stockman, 2009). Robinson and Stockman conducted research with speech language pathologists (SLP) to determine if *dialect density* affected their diagnosis of speech delays. Dialect density was defined as the average number of dialect features that are used in a linguistic unit. All subjects were White and had little knowledge of or experience with AAE. They found that the presence of even one AAE feature was detectable by the SLPs and that the more features present the less comprehensible speakers of AAE were to the SLPs who had limited contact with or exposure to AAE. This inability to understand what the speaker was saying, resulted in the SLP misdiagnosing a child as having a speech delay when they actually did not. The current study offers educators, as well as speech pathologists, insight into the perceptions

of speakers of African American English. In doing so, it can potentially shed light on their own perceptions and biases.

Language and Expectations

The effects of teacher's expectations on students' academic performance have been well documented (Jussim, Eccels, & Madon, 1996; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). In Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) "Pygmalion in the classroom" studies, teachers participating in the study were told that average students had above average intelligence and could be expected to show significant growth throughout the course of the year. When these students were tested 8 months later, they demonstrated more academic growth than their average peers who had not been labeled intelligent. The intellectual capacity of speakers of African American English is often underestimated in educational institutions. Teachers often have an inability to get past the child's oral language, and consequently, make false assumptions about the child's true capabilities. Studies have shown that teachers are more likely to view these children as less confident, less intelligent, and less likely to be successful than speakers of Mainstream English (Cecil, 1988; Cross, DeVaney, & Jones, 2001; Franklin & Hixon, 1999; Schwartz, 1982). Students are perceived as being less knowledgeable, are offered less challenging work, have limited opportunity for stimulating or advanced educational experiences, and are more likely to be exposed to persistent remediation (Delpit, 1995). An important part of the remedial process is spent attempting to get students who speak AAE to speak MAE, using *read my lips* and *repeat after me* techniques. Lower teacher expectations sometimes result in teachers accepting substandard performance from students (Ladson-Billings, 2002) and lower student performance (Brenner & Rashmida, 2007; McKown &

Weinstein, 2008). Ladson-Billings observed that African American students are often given "permission to fail." Some teachers feel that they are doing minorities a favor by not requiring the same level of work from them as their White peers. In an effort to not tax the perceived lesser abilities of these students, teachers offer them fewer opportunities to learn (Delpit, 1995). Moreover, this requiring less extends far beyond not placing demands on students. It also includes focusing on "isolated, decontextualized" skills that can be boring, uninspiring, and appear irrelevant to the learner. Perennially working on the basics, delimits and eliminates exposure to higher order skills.

Language and Reading

The academic struggles of students who speak African American English are well documented. Students who do not speak mainstream dialects have difficulty becoming proficient readers. This occurs even though there is little evidence to support a correlation between a child's ability to learn to read and speaking their "mother's dialect" (when it is non-Mainstream English) (Delpit, 1995). This may be attributable to the inability of teachers to filter the speaker's language and compensating with reading instruction by focusing on language remediation rather than fluency and comprehension.

Fluency and comprehension may sometimes be confounded when students who speak AAE are learning to read phonetically. Students can be observed sounding out a word as instructed and then immediately translating the word into its African American English counterpart. For example, in watching a young girl sound out the word pork, we hear her clearly articulate "*p -or-k*" and when she realizes she knows the word she repeats is as "pok" eliminating the *r*. In such situations, educators may be less likely to recognize this translation as an ability to move fluently from one language form to another and

more likely to see this as a deficit (Goodman & Buck, 1973). This focus on dialect correction rather than on correcting reading errors often impedes reading development. The constant interruptions lead to less fluency in reading and encourage students to avoid reading and resist teachers (Delpit, 1995). Ignoring dialect "mispronunciations" and permitting the child to continue to read, allows the student to become more confident in his abilities and less self-conscious about his reading.

Joan Wynne (2002) illustrated how psychologically damaging language bias can be to students. She took a group of high school journalism students to a workshop where they received an award for one of 10 best high school newspapers. When the keynote speaker opened the floor to questions, the students who, by all standards were brilliant, were so self-conscious about their language they wrote a list of questions for her to ask the speaker. When prompted to ask the questions themselves one replied, "We don't talk right." In reflection she wrote:

> No one had taught me that the language I had grown up loving was used to bludgeon others into submission and feelings of inferiority. But even worse, none of my teachers had ever encouraged me to assist these youngsters in creating a psychological sanctuary so they didn't succumb to unfounded language bias when exposed to the dominant culture. In the absence of that instruction, I had made those adolescents vulnerable to the prejudices of the majority, reflected in their own internalized notions of being linguistically inadequate. Nothing had prepared my students or me for that moment of defeat, a moment when they should have been reveling in victorious celebration. (p. 206)

From this anecdote, the negative messages regarding language these children have taken in are very clear to see. The children have bought into society's belief that their language makes them less worthy and in doing so, they silence themselves. Black children's understanding of how they are perceived in the world is not limited to their language. Studies have demonstrated that children as young as preschool age associate blackness with being ugly and bad (Clark & Clark, 1938; Davis, 2003). In both, studies the researchers presented preschool students with a White doll and a Black doll. When asked which doll was bad, the children, both White and Black, overwhelmingly picked the Black doll. In the proposed study, the intent is to determine if these feelings and beliefs holds true for a group of students residing in Miami. The proposed study will ascertain if they have accepted and internalized the society's messages about their language.

Ebonics: Taking Center Stage/Teaching and Learning

In 1996 the Oakland School Board announced that all schools in the district would be required to participate in the Mainstream English Proficiency Program. This program recognized Ebonics as a systematic and rule-based language not a pidgin language, or product of cognitive deficiency or slang, or bad English. Slang usually refers to a small group of words within a language which are short-lived. A pidgin is a fusion of two languages, but considered to be less complex and lacks some of the grammatical structure of the original languages (Rickford, 1997). In the resolution, the Board wrote "predictable patterns exist in the grammar" and "validated and persuasive linguistic evidence" demonstrates that African Americans have "retained a West and Niger-Congo African linguistic structure in the substratum of their speech" and, consequently, are not

speakers of English. Additionally, the resolution stated that the language is "genetically based" (Fields, 1997). This is was an attempt to acknowledge that providing these students instruction in their home language would be beneficial in acquiring Mainstream American English and would improve academic performance. The Board's attempt to recognize speakers of Ebonics as speakers of another language would afford African American children the same privileges as those provided to Asian-Americans and Hispanic Americans whose home language was not MAE. Treating Ebonics as a foreign language would allow the school district to access funding and resources from bilingual, English as a Second Language, and state and federal funding sources. These funds could be utilized to provide additional support to students and training to teachers to improve the academic performance of speakers of AAE.

This announcement led to a firestorm of controversy. The school board was criticized and ridiculed for what many felt was their attempt to teach Black children Ebonics. Believing that the district's intention was to teach these children Ebonics, a language in which they are already fluent, is a clear indication of the inaccuracy of the information being reported. Many came out in opposition to the resolution without fully understanding the true intentions of the Board. The Board had attempted to acknowledge that there was a need to address the underachievement of African American children in their district, where the average grade point average (GPA) of Black students was 1.4 and these students represented 71% of the students identified as special needs. They also attempted to recognize that language acquisition was critical to school success in all subjects (Perry & Delpit, 1998).

Rejecting the "Standard"

Although there is much discussion about what strategies should be used to teach children to speak Mainstream American English, something that must be considered is whether or not these children want to learn to speak MAE. Research (Adger, et al., 2007; Delpit, 2002) has shown that speakers of Ebonics willingly reject acquiring and using ME as a means of resistance. This resistance is motivated by an attempt to reject things associated with those who have rejected them and their culture. Adger, et al., (2007) argued that the social dynamics of the school are a factor in the acquisition of Mainstream English. If there is conflict between those who speak the accepted, "standard" form of the language and those who speak African American English, students are likely to resist the acquisition and use of MAE.

Fordham (1999) noted student resistance in his observation at Capital High. He reported that students, in an attempt to hold onto their culture, "diss" (disrespect) Mainstream English. They looked upon it with the same disdain that the general population looks at African American English. Children were unwilling to embrace Mainstream American English as it was viewed as having contributed to the enslavement, dehumanization, and oppression of their people (Fordham, 1999; Green & Smart, 1997; Smitherman & Cunningham, 1997). Edwards' (1997) study of Black Patois in British classrooms revealed the power of ethnic loyalty among West Indian children. As with African-American children, the teachers of these African-Caribbean students emphasized the importance of learning Mainstream American English. The students' language that had been developed and nurtured at home went unsupported. The teacher in this study viewed the students as "corrupters" of British English. She had low expectations for them

and, as a result, these students never reached their educational potential (Edwards 1997). These lower performing students often insisted on speaking Patios in the presence of or when speaking with teachers. McKay and Hornberger (1996) interpreted this as a means of protest against the dominant culture and a "positive assertion of their Black identity and the rejection of the negative connotations associated with Black language and culture by the dominant White society" (p. 414). Similar to the experience of Black American students, Black children underperformed in British classrooms as a result of a refusal to speak British English.

However, it seems that if African American English was not devalued and pupil self-concept not undermined, students were more willing to engage the language and less likely to experience a disconnection between their home and school language patterns. They may be less likely to feel as if there is a rejection of the home in favor of the school or to feel they must give up their cultural identity. We regularly speak of the importance of Black children acquiring the ability to speak Standard English so as to ostensibly obtain some of the cultural capital associated with White American culture and gain access to the same educational and employment opportunities as their White counterparts. Individuals who speak a non-standard dialect are less likely to gain power unless they learn the standard. Although there are a number of African Americans who are able to gain access to wealth and success in America, this is less likely to happen on a wider scale until African Americans themselves stop devaluing the language and the speakers of the language. We must effectively communicate to children that failure to acquire Mainstream English blocks their access to certain privileges in American society. Additionally, African Americans must learn that the expectation to acquire Mainstream

English does not mean that one is expected to also reject African American English. If it is our desire to have children learn to embrace MAE, we must first do the same for their own language and culture.

Language and Culture

"An individual's language is intricately bound up with his or her sense of identity and group consciousness" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 171). Our language tells the world who we are, where we come from, and our cultural background. Language is central to some definitions of culture, making it paramount to one's cultural identity. Gee (2009) used the term *Discourse* as synonymous to culture. He proposed that Discourse encompasses cultural norms, ways of speaking, values, and behaviors that are associated with particular communities (Gee, 1990). Gee's Discourse should not be confused with the more common definition of the term discourse (spelled with a small "d"), a linguistic form. Also central to most definitions of culture is the concept of the transferability of ways of knowing. For example, Richerson and Boyd (2005) defined culture as "information capable of affecting individuals' behavior that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation, and other forms of transmission" (p. 5). The cultural identity of any particular group is defined by that group's collective historical experiences, the traditions, and lessons passed on from generation to generation. Variables such as socioeconomic status, race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation contribute to how culture manifests itself in all individuals. The adults in the family and in the surrounding community act as the first educators for all children. Most typically developing children learn the rules for structuring language of the dominant speech community by age four, prior to entering elementary school. While this provides

many children with a great advantage as they enter school, other children are not so fortunate. This is particularly true if the language form they learned at home is at odds with the language form spoken in the classroom and deemed by society as substandard. This is often the case with students from African-American household in which AAE is the primary language form at home.

Different Worlds

European culture has been established by the dominant culture as the benchmark by which all cultures should be assessed. Boykin (1986) labeled it the "reference point by which all other groups are measured" (p. 68). This is the measuring stick by which Black culture is evaluated and labeled deviant. It has been suggested by a number of theorists that the culture of African American and European Americans are diametrically opposed (Brice-Heath, 1983; Boykins, 1986; Delpit, 2002; Smitherman, 1977). According to Boykins, Africans emphasize spiritualism, harmony, interconnectedness, event orientation to time, and their culture is an orally-based culture. European Americans emphasize materialism, mastery over nature, separateness, reason, clock orientation to time, and theirs is a print based culture. African cultures view time as rhythmical and cyclical instead of linear. Smitherman wrote that for African cultures, the key is to be 'in time,' not on time. The White American perspective on nature encourages the exploitation of natural resources and habitats, placing the needs of people as a priority, whereas African tradition encourages a more balanced view and respect of nature (Smitherman, 1977). Blake (2009) identifies a number of cultural behaviors of African Americans which would affect school performance, traits which in and of themselves are not bad or wrong, but different than those valued in schools. These traits include being

intuitive thinkers and a belief that not all events have logical antecedents. These values drive their behavior and give insight into what is valued in their community. However these are traits and behaviors which are not necessarily rewarded and valued in schools.

Smitherman (1977) pointed out that one of the primary differences between the cultures of Black Americans and European Americans is the value placed on the written word. African Americans place more value on the spoken word and are from a culture that prides itself on its rich oral traditions. European Americans value the written word more because they come from a printed-oriented European background (Smitherman, 1977). From an African American perspective, as with many other cultures (e.g., Native Americans), books and such are limited in what they can communicate and teach about everyday life, common sense, and survival in the real world. From this perspective, much can be gained from engaging with the world and passing on knowledge through story telling.

Brice-Heath (1983) discussed the differences in the two cultures extensively in her ethnography, *Ways with Words*. In comparing two working class communities, one Black, the other White, she found that the approaches to the socialization of the children are vastly different. In the working class White American households, she found that parents created a number of reading activities for the children, and made deliberate attempts to model reading which included labeling and listing. These households were more likely to have reading material in the form of magazines and children's books. The African American households had fewer magazines, books were limited to school books; reading and writing tasks were not intentionally created for children, and there was no conscious demonstrating or modeling of reading and writing. Reading tasks were those

that were relevant to everyday life (e.g., reading food labels at the store, reading mail to determine to whom it was delivered). The African American children were encouraged to tell stories and learned that the witty child gets more attention from adults. Although these behaviors are not the same as those in the White households, they are in no way less beneficial to the child.

The children raised in the White community in which there is more in common with an African American perspective, as with many other cultures (e.g., Native Americans), books and such are limited in what they can communicate and teach about everyday life, common sense, and survival in the real world. From this perspective, much can be gained from engaging with the world and passing on knowledge through story telling.

Brice-Heath (1983) asserted that African American children are surrounded by "constant human communication, verbal and nonverbal. They are listeners and observers in a stream of communication which flows about them, but is not especially channeled or modified for them" (p. 75). Communication with babies includes teasing, commands, singing, requests to identify people, and verbal warnings and they grow into children who are more aware of contextual clues that guide them in the best course of action in different situations. Many African American children are astute at detecting when they have crossed a line by the unmistakable "look" of a parent. These students enter school with the ability to use language metaphorically and express reasonable explanations (Blake, 2009). Thus, these children are not behind or delayed nor do they possess "limited" communication skills. The communication skills with which they enter school

are different than those valued by primary school teachers. However, by the time schools value these traits they are less prevalent in the child.

Culturally Deficient or Culturally Different

The cultural mismatch between public schools and the home life of language and ethnic minority students has been frequently cited as a source of the academic failure of African American and other non-mainstream minority students (Delpit, 2002; Kozol, 2005). Schooling and academic success are normed on White middle-class linguistic, social and cultural practices; accordingly home values and socialization patterns of White, middle-class children are consistent with those of the school. Cultural difference theorists argue that the disproportionate school failure of African American and other racial, ethnic, and non-elite cultural minorities can be attributed to a mismatch and/or conflict between the school culture and students' home culture (Perry, 2003). Cultural differences are defined by groups' values, norms, and mores, as well as the cultural lens through which they view the world.

The theory of cultural deprivation asserts that the culture of some minority students is the source and cause of their school failure. Some theorists believe that the manner in which African American children are socialized hinders their ability to do well academically. This model seeks to place blame with the culture of non-elite minorities to explain the poor achievement in school. In the Moynihan Report (1965), questions were raised about the role family culture plays in the underachievement of African American children (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). In the report, Moynihan, in his examination of the state of the "American Negro" and their prospects for success, asserted that the "deterioration of the Negro family" is the "source of the weakness of the Negro

community." He described the family life of "lower class" African Americans as "highly unstable" and asserted that it is "approaching complete breakdown." It should be noted that many civil rights activists regarded this report as racist (Meehan, 1966). Moynihan failed to acknowledge that the source of the "deteriorated" condition of the African American family could have been attributed to the destructive practices of the slave era that included the removing of fathers from families. By failing to take into account the role the U.S. played in the "deteriorated" state of the Black family, Moynihan presented a biased picture that places all blame with the victim and none with the culture that played the role of victimizer.

Jencks and Phillips (1998) argued that changing the parenting practices of African Americans would have the most profound effect on the educational outcome for their children. They suggest that there are issues with how these parents talk to their children, deal with their questions, and how they react when the child learns or fails to learn. They assessed parents in the areas of (a) experiences outside the home such as trips to the museum; (b) literary experiences within the home, such as number of books (specifically more than ten), reading to the child and magazine subscriptions; (c) cognitively stimulating activities such as practicing letter recognition and identifying colors, shapes, and numbers; (d) disciplinary practices; and (e) maternal warmth. They theorized that parents who want their children to do well in school must utilize middle class parenting practices. This means that African American families must have home lives consistent with those of middle class White Americans. They asserted that the homes should provide explicit opportunities for literacy activities and children are read to and surrounded by print material. This parallels the habits and behaviors found in the White

households in Brice-Heath's Ways With Words (1983) discussed earlier. Additionally, this supports the notion of White middle class culture has more capital than that of minorities.

As with language, the quality of African American culture and socialization practices are measured against a standard established by the dominant culture. To assert that it is the parenting practices of African American parents that must be changed in order for African American children to experience success in schools is shortsighted and arrogant. Looking at African American culture through a lens of cultural deficiency is a way of diverting attention from the systemic problems that permeate the school system and society. There are groups of children who fail in a system in which they are mandated to participate and this system refuses to meet their needs, and then attempts to absolve itself of any responsibility.

Through the lens of the cultural deficit model, in order for African American children to achieve success, it is suggested that modifications must be made on the part of their families and the children. There is little regard given to the skills and learning styles of African American children. These African American children view the world as a whole, prefer intuitive and analytical reasoning, focus on people stimuli rather than object stimuli, and can effectively use both verbal and non-verbal communication. Yet there is no expectation for the school to utilize these skills and build on them and all accommodations are expected to be made by the child and the family. This is problematic, given schools and educators are specifically charged with the task of educating all children regardless of race, class, or creed.

According to Labov (1972), the cultural deficit model proposes that children reared in the inner cities are verbally destitute. They are at a disadvantage because of their limited exposure to well-formed language and little verbal stimulation. This model posits that children raised in inner cities have limited vocabulary, do not speak in complete sentences, or convey logical thoughts. Bernstein (1971), in comparing the linguistic codes of working class and middle class groups, stated that working class children are oriented to "restricted linguistic codes" while middle class children use "elaborated codes." He claims that working class children's speech patterns are a product of "common circumstances" resulting in meaning being implicit and dependent on context. Whereas the speech patterns of middle class families "use elaborated codes to express the unique perspectives and experience of the speaker" which results in meaning being less connected to local relationships and social structure." Even his use of the terms "restricted" and "elaborated" leads one to perceive one language form as better (elaborated) and the other as inappropriate and insufficient (restricted). With this there is the presumption that the language of one group, and hence their identity, is better than that of another.

The cultural deficit model blames children and their families for school failure and does not critically look at the role of the school in this failure (MacLeod, 1995). MacLeod writes:

> The view that the problem resides almost exclusively with the children and their families, and that some sort of cultural injection is needed to compensate for what they are missing is not only intellectually bankrupt but also has contributed to the

widespread popular notion that the plight of poor whites and minorities is entirely their own fault. (p. 100)

Differences in access, wealth, and opportunities are not attributed to school failure, but are deemed natural consequences of what is considered a non-normative culture. The "Culture of Poverty" model which was prominent in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s, has lost some of its popularity. Many popular educators still express it (Payne, 2005; Hart & Risley, 1995). However, Murrel (2002) asserted that we should anticipate that this mode of thinking will resurface as "political landscape changes around issues of education" (p. 11). There are still many who accept this viewpoint and behave in a manner that gives credence to it. Labeling one group as culturally deficient in comparison to middle and upper class is determined by those who establish the standards. Those in power, in this instance Americans of European descent, are the dominant group and as such they possess the power to establish the criteria for what is acceptable and appropriate (MacLeod, 1995).

The cultural difference model views cultures that are different from the mainstream and see the values, norms, and behaviors as not only different, but essential for participation in one's group. From this perspective, African American culture, its values, norms, modes of communication, and behaviors, are viewed as different and not to be measured or assessed against the culture of White middle-class America. From a cultural difference perspective, the responsibility for the failure of this group of children is not a reflection of their culture. As a consequence of social, cultural, historical, cognitive and affective ways of talking and making meaning in African American society, the socialization process for these children leads to different ways of viewing and

interacting with the world. In this theory, difference is not considered an innate deficiency.

The cultural deficit model asserts that children of non-dominant groups fail in school because the culture, including language, in which they are socialized is deficient and fails to adequately prepare them for school. The cultural difference model contends that the non-dominant culture is different, not deficient and that schools do an inadequate job of meeting the needs of children of poor and minority families. Although one culture is not superior to the other, it is clear that in American society, there are values and ways of behaving that are more valued than others. White American culture has more cultural capital in the United States. Cultural capital, a phrase coined by Pierre Bourdieu, is an "instrument for appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1973). Knowledge, education, and any advantages a person has which give them a higher status in society, including high expectations is cultural capital.

Despite its loss of popularity and the now political incorrectness of the cultural deficit theory, school districts, schools, and teachers still operate in a manner consistent with the theory. Florida's Board of Education recently established race-based academic goals. For example, the plan calls for 90% of Asian American students to be reading at or above grade level by 2018, 88% of White students, 81% of Hispanics students, and 74% of Black students (Stanglin, 2012) In addition to feeding into stereotypes about the capabilities of different groups of people, these standards also communicate that less should be expected from students of African descent. Teachers, educators, and policy makers perceive the child as having the problem and see no issue with their own

worldview, pedagogical approaches, or the curriculum. They only expect that the child change, not them or the system in which they operate. This is consistent with the arguments of Adger, et al. (2007):

> Members of the more powerful groups often believe that members of the stigmatized groups must change in order to be accepted. Success in school for children from these disenfranchised groups, for example, may depend on changing aspects of their language and language use and adapting to school norms, which are generally more like the norms of the powerful groups than those of the stigmatized groups. For members of a mainstream, powerful group, no change or adaptation is necessary. (p. 17)

Educators are responsible for educating all children, not just select ones. As American educators, one might logically expect that we will be exposed to children from varying racial and cultural backgrounds.

Language prejudice continues to be one of the most "resistant and insidious" of all prejudices in our society. Discrimination on the basis of race, class, sex, ethnicity, and religion are no longer legally acceptable (which is not to say it doesn't occur). However, language discrimination is unobjectionable despite the fact that the language correlates with class, race, and ethnicity (Hamilton, 2005; Wolfram, 2007). Schools are the initial and primary institution in the perpetuation of the lies and misconceptions about language (Smitherman, 1977). The acceptance of this form of discrimination leaves some of our most vulnerable citizens to fend for themselves in a psychologically damaging setting with no recourse and few advocates.

The Research: Language and Attitudes

Kraemer and others (Kraemer, Rivers, and Ratusnik, 2000) studied the perceptions of 278 undergraduate students. The subjects included 208 White, 19 Hispanics, 17 African-Americans, 4 Asians, and 30 others. The subjects listened to audio recordings of an African-American reading 4 linguistically different versions of a passage. One version was in Mainstream English, and the other three versions reflected African American English phonological features, lexical features, and morphosyntactic features. Participants were asked to rate the speaker on 10 characteristics using a scale of 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest). The 10 characteristics were literate, intelligence, financially secure, social, professional, ambitious, successful, educated, articulate, and competent. Participants perceived Mainstream American English more favorably than AAE. Speakers of MAE were more likely to be perceived as literate, articulate, and ambitious. Speakers of AAE were rated lowest on articulate, professional, and financially secure. Participants responded least favorably to AAE morphosyntactic features.

Billings (2005) assessed the attitudes of 261 African American and European American high school and college students towards speakers of MAE and AAE. After watching a video-recording of 3 conditions (African Americans speaking AAE, African Americans speaking MAE, and European Americans speaking MAE), participants rated them on 10 scales measuring competence and trustworthiness. Billings found that when African Americans used MAE they were received more positively than when they used AAE. African American and European American participants found European American speakers of MAE more competent. Speakers of AAE were rated lower in intelligence, education, articulation, and qualification. Additionally, Billings found that African

Americans were more critical of African American English than were European Americans.

Negative perceptions of AAE are sometimes manifested in both verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Harber, 1979; Smitherman-Donaldson, 1988; Spears, 1987; Speicher & McMahon, 1992), which can have harmful effects on speakers of AAE specifically in the areas of academic achievements, employment, and vocational opportunities (Alder, 1980, 1987; Bountress, 1988, 1994; Cecil, 1988; Franklin & Hixon, 1999; Mitchener-Colston, 1996; Taylor, 1986, 1997; Terrell & Terrell, 1983; Wolfram & Fasold, 1979). Speakers of AAE have a harder time securing employment and housing. Purnell, et al., (1999) found that when property owners were called by people speaking MAE, AAE, and Chicano English, they were more likely to schedule appointments with MAE speakers (70%). Only 30% of speakers of African American and Chicano English were given appointments. Such behavior limits the housing prospects of some Hispanics and African Americans, and allows others to discriminate based on language which is associated with a specific group of people. So, in addition to the language discrimination there is also discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity.

According to Stockman (1996), "speakers without speech impairments can be handicapped if their dialect is judged to be inadequate for a particular work or educational setting" (p. 143). Speakers of African American English have a harder time finding employment, specifically in high paying and/or white collar jobs. They are more likely to be found working in entry/low level, low paying jobs. Terrell and Terrell (1983) sent six African American women on job interviews. Six of the women were speakers of

MAE and the other three were speakers of AAE. The results showed that speakers of AAE were given shorter interviews and were less likely to be offered jobs.

Delpit (2002) recounts the story of a speech pathologist hired by a large consulting firm to work with one of their employees. Despite being highly skilled and competent, the company received a number of complaints about the employee because of what was considered language deficits:

> Even after the consulting firm assured the company representative that this woman was absolutely the best in the country for what they wanted, they still balked…None of the companies that hired her could move past her language to appreciate her expertise. Indeed, just before the consulting firm contacted the speech pathologist, one company had sent the firm a long, insulting letter listing every word the consultant had "mispronounced" and every grammatical "mistake" she had made. (p. 38)

As illustrated in this anecdote, people can be so sensitive to language difference that it can act as a filter, blocking perception and obscuring relevant information. The employers in this situation were unable to see past the language to fully appreciate the woman's gifts and talents. As a result of the cultural brainwashing that occurs regularly, there appears to have been little attempt to hide the language bias. The prevalence of the language bias is not limited to the workplace nor is it limited to in one particular group of people.

Unfortunately, language bias and negative attitudes toward African American English are not limited to non-AAE speakers. Even those who speak the language have strong anti-AAE sentiment. Gayles and Denerville (2007), conducted a study with

students in an Intro to African American Studies class and found that the attitudes towards AAE of African Americans were also quite negative. In comparing AAE to a British Accent, students recorded a total of 22 positive ratings and 1 negative rating for the British Accent and 20 negative ratings and 3 positive ratings for African American English. These findings were shocking to the participants, especially considering that only 3 of the 45 students in the class were white. The harshest criticisms came from people of color. One student reflected on the irony of them all speaking AAE but having a negative perception of it. To her this was an indication that they were ashamed of the language.

Those within Black communities who speak AAE fluently and regularly, still perceive the language negatively. During the Oakland School Board African American English debate, a number of Black leaders came out against the language. One of the most vocal was Jessie Jackson, whose public speeches are laced with a number of features of African American English. Bill Cosby has been extremely vocal about his opinion of African American English. In a speech at Constitution Hall in Washington, DC, on May 19, 2004, he is quoted as saying:

> I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk (laughter). And then I heard the father talk. This is all in the house. You used to talk a certain way on the corner and you got into the house and switched to English. Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with ‘Why you ain't?’ You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth.

White and others (1998) researched the perceptions of African American undergraduate students attending a college in the Midwest. They wanted to evaluate how this group rated the use of AAE compared to MAE when used in two different settings, one formal and the other informal. Additionally, they wanted to explore if there was a correlation between the participant's level of commitment to a Black identity and their perception of AAE. They found that participants perceived AAE as having less status in a formal business setting. They also found that participants with a lower rating on inventories assessing level of connectedness to a Black identity had more negative perceptions of AAE. The same was true for informal settings. Despite how closely they identified with being African American, the use of AAE, regardless of setting, was not perceived highly.

Regrettably, having repeatedly heard messages about the inferior nature of AAE, many speakers of the language have internalized these messages and accepted them as truth. Some who actually speak the language perceive it as deficient (Gayles & Denerville, 2007; Hensley, 1972; White, 1998). This is unfortunate, because speakers of AAE face language discrimination from many in the dominant culture but also from those within their very own culture.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

This chapter provides an overview of the procedures used to conduct this research. It begins with the research questions, followed by a description of the population and the sampling procedures. The variables and procedures will be discussed along with a description of the measurement tool. The rationale for the selection of the measurement tool, its validity, and the advantages and disadvantages of the tool will be discussed. Lastly, there will an explication of the procedures for conducting the research and managing, collecting, and analyzing the data.

Research Questions are:

1. Are the attitudes of elementary students towards African American English negative?
2. Are the attitudes of middle school students towards African American English negative?
3. Are the attitudes of elementary students towards Mainstream American English positive?
4. Are the attitudes of middle school students towards Mainstream American English positive?
5. Do elementary students view MAE more favorably than AAE?
6. Do middle school students view MAE more favorably than AAE?
7. Do middle school students perceive AAE more favorably than do elementary students?

Population and Sampling Procedures

The sample for this research included Black and Hispanic children (*n*=74), ages 8 to 13 years old residing in Miami, Florida. This sample consisted of 54% middle school students (*n*= 40) and 46% elementary students (*n*=34) from working and middle class families. Participating children were speakers of Mainstream American English and/or African American English and had the ability to read at a minimum of third grade level as measured by the STAR Reader Assessment conducted by the school. Children were selected from a private school in an urban community in South Florida. Ninety-five percent of the student population qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and attended the school on scholarship. The other 5% of the sample were from middle and upper-middle class families. Convenience sampling was used as the researcher is the director of the private school and has firsthand knowledge of the students' use of AAE and their exposure to AAE through interactions with school personnel. The majority of the participants regularly utilized African American English, including the students who were Jamaican-American, Haitian-American, and Haitian-American. Additionally, the children were accustomed to hearing the adults in the school speak both Mainstream American English and African American English.

School Information

A parental consent form was developed and given to the parents of each participant. The consent form provided parents with a brief description of the study and what their child would be expected to do. The form clearly explained participation in the study did not affect their child's enrollment in the school nor negatively impact their grade. Assent was obtained from only the children whose parents consented to their

participation. Children electing to participate were given extra credit for their reading/language arts class. Prior to conducting the research, IRB approval was obtained, as human subjects were utilized.

Measurement Variables

The dependent variable is students' perceptions of different languages. The independent variables are types of English (Mainstream American English or African American English) and years in school. Years is school refers to whether the child is in elementary school, Grades 3 to 5 or middle school, Grades 6 to 8.

Data Collection

Data collection involved completion of the Speech Evaluation Instrument. The Speech Evaluation Instrument is a semantic differential scale that has been used extensively to assess attitudes about language (Adger, et al., 2007; Osgood & Tannebaum, 1957). Semantic differential scales have been found to be a valid measure of attitudes, indicating the tool provides an accurate description of how participants feel and what they think about an issue (Nickols & Shaw, 1964; Tittle & Hill, 1967; and Heise, 1970). The Speech Evaluation Instrument, developed by Zahn and Hopper (1985), contains sets of bipolar adjectives and a 6-point scale. Zahn and Hopper studied the adjective pairs used in a number of studies on language attitudes to develop the Speech Evaluation Instrument (SEI). The results of their factor analysis on the adjective pairs indicate the terms loaded into three different categories, attractiveness, superiority, and dynamism. These categories corresponded to those established by Tannenbaum, which included superiority (potency), evaluation (attractiveness), and dynamism (activity).

The superiority (or potency) factor provides insight into beliefs about social class, competence, and intellectual status and includes the following items: literate-illiterate, educated-uneducated, intelligent-unintelligent. The next factor, evaluation (or attractiveness), represents character, sociability, and social attractiveness. It includes items such as sweet-sour, nice-awful, kind-unkind, and friendly-unfriendly. The last factor, dynamism (or activity), rates social power and activity level and includes items such as active-passive, strong-weak, talkative-shy, and energetic-lazy. Zahn and Hopper's original scale contained 30 items, 15 of which were used in the present study. Fifteen items were selected to accommodate children and reduce the chances of boredom while completing the instrument. Some of the terms were modified, (i.e., literate-illiterate was changed to can read-cannot read) because the participants were elementary and middle school students and some may not have been familiar with the terms.

A pilot study was conducted to assess participants' ability to effectively utilize the Speech Evaluation Instrument. In the pilot study, participants listened to the same poem, read by two different people. One speaker read the poem in Mainstream American English and the other read the poem in African American English. During the discussion, after scores were recorded, a number of the younger children expressed confusion about one of the original adjective pairings, powerful and powerless. One participant mentioned not knowing if the speakers had any "special powers" and other students echoed this sentiment. Consequently, this adjective pairing was discarded.

Reliability

The modified Semantic Differential Scale utilized for this study demonstrated internal reliability. The reliability for Zahn and Hopper's original tool had a Cronbach's

Coefficient Alpha of .90 (Zahn, 1989). Cronbach's Alpha for the modified tool utilized in this study was .870. All scales positively correlated with the total of .870, except the talkative scale. The talkative item was negatively correlated for both Mainstream American English and African American English.

Procedures

Each participant listened to four audio recordings of informational text recorded by four different speakers. The four recordings included: (a) Mainstream American English spoken by a White female, (b) Mainstream American English spoken by a White male, (c) African American English spoken by a Black female, and (d) African American English spoken by a Black male. Each person read a script describing an activity. The scripts for the recordings were developed to ensure the rules of African American English were followed. Each recording was approximately 1 minute long. Participants were tested in small groups of 10 students. They were told the purpose of the study was to learn more about children's attitudes about languages. These instructions were provided in Mainstream American English. Participants listened to two recordings in one session and two recordings in a second session conducted 2 days later. The order of the presentation of the recordings was randomized to reduce the chance of order effect. After listening to the first recording, participants were given the Speech Evaluation Instrument to complete. Each recording was presented once and participants were given a separate rating form for each recording. This procedure continued until all recordings had been listened to and rated.

Participants rated each recording on the 15 adjective pairing scales, ranging from 1 to 6. When the tool was designed, reversals were used to counteract response bias.

That is, negative and positive traits were randomly assigned to the left and right sides of the scale in an effort to reduce the chance of response set. A 6-point scale was utilized, thereby eliminating the option of a center point. Garrett (2010) proposed that the center point may be ambiguous, and represent neutrality or having no opinion.

Participants received training on how to properly complete the SEI. Two training sessions were conducted to assess participants' attitudes toward concepts unrelated to this study. The tools and the adjective pairings were reviewed with the participants, ensuring each participant had an understanding of the meaning of each word. In describing each adjective pair, the researcher described what each of the numbers on the scales represented. Participants were shown two pictures of cars, one luxury car and one older model, weather-beaten car. Students were then prompted to think about the person who would own the car and instructed to complete the SEI. Upon completion of the training session, the researcher and participants reviewed their assessments in a group. Participants were provided the opportunity to share their ratings and provide a rationale for their rating. If there were inconsistencies in the rating and the rationale, this researcher pointed out ratings that were a better match.

The researcher conducted each session with the participants. As mentioned earlier, the researcher is the director of the private school in which the research was conducted. Because of the frequency of interactions and level of involvement with the students, I felt there would be no effect on participant responses. The students frequently hear me speak both African American English and Mainstream American English. Although I have not explicitly expressed opinions about MAE and AAE, behaviorally I have communicated an acceptance of both languages. This is done in both by use of

MAE and AAE and my responses (or lack thereof) to their use of AAE. I also anticipated no effect on participant responses because there was no treatment, the expectations of the researcher should have had little to no bearing on participant responses.

Data Analysis

The first step in analyzing data was to address the issue of the reversals. As mentioned early reversals were utilized in an effort to prevent response set. Prior to analyzing the data all positive terms were aligned with the higher end of the scale, 6. All negative terms were aligned with, the lower number on the scale, 1. Student scores were then adjusted accordingly. For example, the adjective pairing "reads well" and "does not read well" is shown on the Speech Evaluation Instrument as below:

Reads Well 1 2 3 4 5 6 Does Not Read Well

This is an example of a reversal because the positive adjective pairing, reads well, is aligned with a lower number. In this case, "reads well" and "does not read well" were flipped, to have "reads well" align with the 6 and "does not read well" align with the 1. Doing so resulted in the participant rating being modified accordingly. For example, if a participant scored a 2 on this scale, during data analysis the score was reversed to a 5.

The scores on all scales were combined to provide an overall attitude score for each participant, for each recording (White female Mainstream American English, White male Mainstream American English, Black female African American English, and Black male African American English). Scores above 52.5 were considered favorable for each recording. This cutoff score was obtained by finding the difference between the minimum (15) and the maximum (90) scores. Doing so provided a range (75) that was divided by 2 and added to the minimum score (or subtracted from the highest score),

giving a midpoint of 52.5. Because there were two recordings for each language, those scores were combined. The scores for the recordings for both the White female and White male were combined to obtain a total score for Mainstream American English. The same was done with scores for the Black female and Black male recordings to comprise a score for African American English. In doing so, I gained an overall score to represent the participants' attitudes towards AAE and MAE. Scores below 105 were considered unfavorable and scores of 105 or higher were considered favorable. This cutoff score was obtained by multiplying the midpoint on the individual tool (52.5) by 2. Lastly, the means of each scale and the sums of the scales associated with each of the three concepts, attractiveness, dynamism, and superiority, were compared across each language to gain a deeper understanding of the children's attitudes towards speakers of each of the languages.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested. Hypotheses are numbered to correspond with each research question.

Hypothesis 1

The mean score for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for African American English is less than 105. This hypothesis was tested using a single sample *t*-test.

Null Hypothesis 1

The mean score for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for African American English is equal to or greater than 105.

Hypothesis 2

The mean score for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for African American English is less than 105. This hypothesis was tested using a single sample *t*-test.

Null Hypothesis 2

The mean score for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for African American English is equal to or greater than 105.

Hypothesis 3

The mean score for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for Mainstream American English is 105 or higher. This hypothesis was tested using a single sample *t*-test.

Null Hypothesis 3

The mean score for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for Mainstream American English is less than 105.

Hypothesis 4

The mean score for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for Mainstream American English is 105 or higher. This hypothesis was tested using a single sample *t*-test.

Null Hypothesis 4

The mean score for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for Mainstream American English is less than 105.

Hypothesis 5

The mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for elementary students will be higher when students hear Mainstream American English than the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument when they hear African American English. This hypothesis was tested using a one-way analysis of variance.

Null Hypothesis 5

The mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for elementary students will be lower or the same when students hear Mainstream American English than the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument when they hear African American English.

Hypothesis 6

The mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for middle school students will be higher when students hear Mainstream American English than the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument when they hear African American English. This hypothesis was tested using a one-way analysis of variance.

Null Hypothesis 6

The mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for middle school students will be lower than or the same when students hear Mainstream American English than the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument when they hear African American English.

Hypothesis 7

The mean score for African American English on the Speech Evaluation Instrument of middle school students is higher than the mean score for elementary students.

This hypothesis was tested using a one-way analysis of variance.

Null Hypothesis 7

The mean score for African American English on the Speech Evaluation Instrument of middle school students is lower than or equal to the mean score for elementary students.

Data were entered into SPSS and analyzed. Sample size power analysis conducted using G-Power indicated that a sample size of 20 participants is needed in each group for a power level of .80 at alpha = .05. Participants were assigned a number and this number will be maintained on all records pertaining to the participants. All surveys were scanned and will be maintained in a secure electronic filing system for 5 years.

Chapter Summary

The chapter provided a detailed account of the procedures used to conduct this research. These procedures include quantitative techniques. This chapter provided the research questions and hypotheses. This chapter included an overview of the population, the sampling procedures, the data collection tool, and the data collection procedures. Lastly, there was a review of the procedures used to analyze the data.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter will present the results of the investigation detailed in Chapter 3. The data were analyzed and are now presented as it relates to each hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis1 states that the mean score for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for African American English is less than 105. A *t*-test as displayed in Table 1 showed the mean was actually greater than 105 (*M*=118.62, *SD*=14.21). These results indicate that elementary students' perceptions of AAE actually fell within the favorable range. Therefore, I failed to reject the first null hypothesis and cannot support the hypothesis that the mean is less than 105. Therefore, I could not conclude that elementary students perceived AAE negatively.

Table 1

Test of Hypotheses Concerning Opinions of African American English (Hypotheses 1 & 2)

Level	*n*	Mean	*SD*	*df*	*t*	*p*	*SE*
Elementary	26	118.6	14.2	25	4.89	<.001*	2.79
Middle	27	108.3	25.8	26	.656	.259	4.97

*Note: *p<.05*

Table 2 shows the means on each of the scales. Individual scale scores of 6 or above were considered favorable. The results in the table below show that elementary students rated speakers of AAE favorable on all scales. The results were statistically significant for all scale items with the exception of quiet-talkative. Students rated speakers of AAE highest on the Good-Bad scale (*M*=9.58), indicating that when hearing speakers of AAE, the children judged them to be good. Speakers of AAE were also rated

high on the Kind-Unkind scale (*M*=9.20). Elementary students rated speakers of AAE lowest on the talkative-quiet scale (*M*=6.31), fast-slow scale (*M*=7.46), and rich-poor scale (*M*=7.62).

Table 2

Adjective Pairings for Speakers of African American English for Elementary Students

Adjective Scales	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reads well-does not read well	26	7.73	2.68	.52
Smart-Not smart	26	8.65	2.30	.45
Intelligent-Unintelligent	24	8.08	1.77	.36
Rich-Poor	26	7.62	1.92	.38
Good-Bad	26	9.58	1.68	.33
Nice-Mean	26	8.85	2.17	.42
Helpful-Not helpful	26	8.42	2.45	.48
Kind-unkind	25	9.20	1.87	.37
Leader-Follower	26	8.62	2.14	.42
Friendly-Unfriendly	25	8.64	2.00	.40
Fast-Slow	26	7.46	2.40	.47
Strong-Weak	26	8.46	2.39	.47
Talkative-Quiet	26	6.31	2.17	.43
Energetic-Lazy	26	8.04	2.44	.48

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 states the mean score for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for African American English is less than 105. The results of a *t*-test, represented in Table 1, indicate the mean score is greater than 105 (*M*=108.2593, *SD*=25.83). Although the results fell within the favorable range, it was not statistically significant. Therefore, I failed to reject the null and cannot conclude that middle school students perceive AAE negatively. When looking at the individual scale scores I noticed the means for all but one scale were above 6, indicating a favorable attitude. The mean

score on the rich-poor scale was 6.59, just above 6 (see Table 3). These results were not statistically significant and could have been a result of chance. Middle school students were less inclined to believe speakers of African American English would be rich. This could be a result of them being more knowledgeable about the economic prospects and/or the limitations associated with speaking AAE. Middle school students rated speakers of AAE highest on the strong-weak scale (8.58), Kind-Unkind (8.11), and Talkative-Quiet (8.11). In addition to rating speakers of AAE lowest on the rich-poor scale, middle school students also rated speakers of AAE lowest on the intelligent-unintelligent scale (*M*=7.07) and the nice-mean scale (7.11).

Table 3

Adjective Scale for Speakers of African American English for Middle School Students

Adjective Scales	*N*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error Mean*
Reads well-does not read well	27	7.41	2.79	.54
Smart-Not smart	27	7.44	2.71	.52
Intelligent-Unintelligent	27	7.07	2.43	.47
Rich-Poor	27	6.59	2.19	.42
Good-Bad	27	7.93	2.79	.54
Nice-Mean	27	7.11	2.74	.53
Helpful-Not helpful	27	7.48	2.41	.46
Kind-unkind	27	8.11	2.79	.54
Leader-Follower	27	7.67	2.97	.57
Friendly-Unfriendly	25	7.56	2.55	.51
Fast-Slow	26	7.27	2.25	.44
Strong-Weak	26	8.58	2.50	.49
Talkative-Quiet	27	8.11	2.22	.43
Energetic-Lazy	27	7.44	3.15	.61

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 states that the mean score for elementary students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for Mainstream American English will be 105 or higher. The results of a *t*-test indicate the mean score is significantly greater than 105 at 120.2 with a

standard deviation of 31.4 (see Table 4). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and I concluded that elementary students perceive MAE favorably. This finding is consistent with prior research in the field.

Table 4

Test of Hypotheses Concerning Opinions of Mainstream American English (Hypotheses 3 & 4)

Level	*n*	Mean	*SD*	*df*	*t*	*p*	*SE*
Elementary	32	120.2	31.4	31	2.73	.005*	5.55
Middle	37	118.0	34.2	36	2.32	.013*	5.62

*Note: $p<.05$

Table 5 highlights the scale means. For elementary students, the mean scores were favorable on all scales. All results were statistically significant with the exception of the talkative-quiet scale (M=6.04). All other scores were well within the favorable range, with the highest means being on the reads well-does not read well, smart-not smart, and kind-unkind scales.

Table 5

Adjective Scale for Speakers of Mainstream American English for Elementary Students

Adjective Scales	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reads well-does not read well	27	9.85	2.63	.51
Smart-Not smart	27	9.81	1.94	.37
Intelligent-Unintelligent	27	9.00	2.09	.40
Rich-Poor	27	8.37	2.15	.41
Good-Bad	27	9.67	1.57	.30
Nice-Mean	27	9.07	1.92	.37
Helpful-Not helpful	27	8.59	2.34	.45
Kind-unkind	25	9.76	1.90	.38
Leader-Follower	25	8.72	2.51	.50
Friendly-Unfriendly	27	8.78	2.28	.44
Fast-Slow	27	8.26	2.30	.44
Strong-Weak	27	9.07	2.04	.39
Talkative-Quiet	27	6.04	2.07	.40
Energetic-Lazy	27	8.22	2.52	.48

Hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis 4 states that the mean score for middle school students on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for Mainstream American English will be 105 or higher. The results of a *t*-test indicate the mean score is significantly greater than 105 at a mean of 118 with a standard deviation of 34.2 (see Table 4). The null hypothesis is rejected and I concluded that middle school students perceive MAE favorably, which is consistent with the existing body of knowledge. For middle school students, the mean scores were lowest on the following scales: fast-slow, talkative-quiet, and energetic-lazy. On all scales related to academic and intellectual capacity speakers of MAE were rated highest. The means for reads well – does not read well and smart-not smart were the highest at 10.1. The mean for intelligent-unintelligent was 9.57.

Table 6

Adjective Scale for Speakers of Mainstream American English for Middle School Students

Adjective Scales	*N*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error Mean*
Reads well-does not read well	30	10.10	1.71	.31
Smart-Not smart	30	10.10	1.71	.31
Intelligent-Unintelligent	30	9.57	1.45	.27
Rich-Poor	30	8.37	1.67	.31
Good-Bad	30	9.27	1.68	.31
Nice-Mean	30	8.77	1.92	.35
Helpful-Not helpful	30	9.13	2.33	.43
Kind-unkind	30	9.33	1.73	.32
Leader-Follower	29	9.28	2.12	.39
Friendly-Unfriendly	29	8.72	2.25	.42
Fast-Slow	29	7.10	1.86	.35
Strong-Weak	30	8.73	1.78	.32
Talkative-Quiet	30	7.37	2.09	.38
Energetic-Lazy	30	7.90	1.97	.36

Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis 5 states, the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for elementary students will be higher when students hear Mainstream American English than the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument when they hear African American English. The results of the one-way ANOVA indicate there is a significant difference between the means for MAE and AAE with an eta of .303 (see Table 7). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected indicating that elementary students perceived MAE more favorable than AAE.

Table 7

Comparison of Elementary Students' Perceptions of MAE Versus AAE (Hypotheses 5)

Source	df	*F*	η	*p*
Language	1	10.85	.30	.003*
Error	25	(170.32)		

*Note: $p<.05$

Hypothesis 6

Hypothesis 6 states, the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for middle school students will be higher when students hear Mainstream American English than the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument when they hear African American English. The results of the one-way ANOVA indicate there is a significant difference between the means for MAE and AAE with an eta of .40 (see Table 8). Therefore, the null is rejected. The mean score when hearing MAE was significantly higher than when hearing AAE, indicating that middle school students perceived MAE more positively than AAE.

Table 8

Comparison of Middle School Students' Perceptions of MAE Versus AAE (Hypothesis 6)

Source	df	*F*	η	*p*
Language	1	16.42	.40	<.001*
Error	25	(490.37)		

*Note: $p<.05$

Hypothesis 7

Hypothesis 7 states that the mean score for African American English on the Speech Evaluation Instrument of middle school students is higher than the score for elementary students. This hypothesis was tested using a one-way analysis of variance. As discussed in hypotheses 1 and 2 neither middle school nor elementary students perceived AAE negatively. Although the results were not statistically significant for middle students, it was significant for elementary school students. In this sample, I found that middle school students did not have a more favorable opinion of AAE than elementary

students. There was not a statistical significance in the findings (see Table 9). Therefore, I failed to reject the null.

Table 9

Comparison of Middle School and Elementary Students' Perceptions of AAE (Hypotheses 7)

Source	df	*F*	η	*p*
School Level	1	3.23	.06	.039*
Error	51	(330.35)		

*Note: *p<.05*

Scale Items Evaluation

The 15 items on the Speech Evaluation Instrument can be classified into three categories: superiority, evaluation, and dynamism. Evaluating each of the scale items, in each category offers a more vivid picture of students' perceptions of speakers of African American English and Mainstream American English. Superiority encompasses reads well-does not read well, smart-not smart, intelligent-not intelligent.

Does not read well - Reads well

For elementary students, on the does not read well-reads well scale, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 9.81 (*SD*= 2.67) for MAE and 7.73 (*SD*=2.68) for AAE. A paired *t*-test revealed this difference was significant; $t(25) = 4.22$; $p<.01$. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 10.08 (*SD*=1.81) for MAE and 7.35 for AAE (*SD*=2.83). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was significant; $t(25)=4.03$; $p<.01$. These results would indicate both middle and elementary students felt that speakers of MAE were better readers than speakers of AAE.

Unintelligent-Intelligent

For elementary students on the unintelligent-intelligent scale, a t-test revealed there was a mean of 8.83 (*SD*= 2.08) for MAE and 8.08 (*SD*=1.77) for AAE. A paired t-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; $t(23) = 1.47$; $p=.08$. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 9.58 (*SD*=1.42) for MAE and 6.96 for AAE (*SD*=2.41). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was significant; $t(25)=4.66$; $p<.01$. These results suggest, for elementary students there is no difference in how they perceive speakers of MAE and AAE on the intelligence scale. However, middle school students felt speakers of MAE were more intelligent than speakers of AAE.

Not Smart – Smart

For elementary students on the not smart-smart, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 9.77 (*SD*= 1.97) for MAE and 8.65 (*SD*=2.30) for AAE. A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant; $t(25) = 2.86$; $p<.01$. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 10.19 (*SD*=1.63) for MAE and 7.35 for AAE (SD=2.71). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant; $t(25)=5.48$; $p<.01$. These results indicate that both, elementary and middle school students perceived speakers of MAE as smarter than speakers of AAE.

Poor-Rich

For elementary students on the poor-rich scale, a t-test revealed there was a mean of 8.31 (*SD*= 2.17) for MAE and 7.62 (*SD*=1.92) for AAE. A paired t-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant; $t(25) = 1.70$; $p=.05$. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 8.42 (*SD*=1.77) for MAE and 6.50 for AAE (*SD*=2.18). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant;

t(25)=4.21; *p*<.01. These results indicate that elementary and middle school students were more likely to perceive speakers of MAE as rich when compared to speakers of AAE.

Follower-Leader

For elementary students on the follower-leader scale, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 8.71 (*SD*= 2.56) for MAE and 8.71 (SD=2.19) for AAE. There was no difference in the means for MAE and AAE. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 9.32 (*SD*=2.29) for MAE and 7.60 for AAE (*SD*=3.08) A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant; *t*(24)=2.23; *p*=.02. Although middle school students felt speakers of MAE were more likely to be leaders than speakers of AAE, elementary students did not feel there was a difference in the two groups.

For middle school students the mean scores on all scales of superiority were statistically significant. They rated speakers of AAE lower than speakers of MAE on all superiority scales. These scale items reflect beliefs about social class, competence, and intellectual status. These results indicate participants believed speakers on MAE were smarter, more intelligent, and read better than speakers of AAE. They also felt they were more likely to be leaders and to be rich. Elementary students rated speakers of MAE higher than speakers of AAE on 3 of the 5 superiority scales. They felt speakers on MAE read better and were smarter than speakers of AAE and were more likely to be rich. However, there were no statistically differences in their perception of speakers of MAE and AAE on the follower-leader and unintelligent-intelligent scales (see Tables 10 and 11).

Evaluation or attractiveness is composed of the following scale items: mean-nice, unkind-kind, bad-good, unhelpful-helpful, and friendly-unfriendly.

Mean – Nice

For elementary students on the mean-nice scale, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 9.00 (*SD*= 1.92) for MAE and 8.85 (*SD*=2.17) for AAE. A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; $t(25) = .386$; $p=.352$. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 8.65 (*SD*=2.00) for MAE and 7.15 for AAE (*SD*=2.78). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was significant; $t(25)=2.19$; $p=0.02$. Elementary students did not perceive either group nicer or meaner than the other. However, middle school students perceived speakers of MAE nicer than speakers of AAE.

Unkind – Kind

For elementary students on the unkind-kind, a t-test revealed there was a mean of 9.70 (*SD*=1.96) for MAE and 9.13 (*SD*=1.91) for AAE. A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; $t(25) = 1.27$; $p=.11$. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 9.38 (*SD*=1.83) for MAE and 8.04 for AAE (*SD*=2.82). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant; $t(25)=1.89$; $p=.04$.

Unfriendly – Friendly

For elementary students on the unfriendly-friendly scale, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 8.80 (*SD*= 2.25) for MAE and 8.64 (*SD*=2.00) for AAE. A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; $t(24) = .261$; $p=.40$. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 8.83 (*SD*=2.19) for MAE

and 7.61 for AAE (*SD*=2.66). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was significant; *t*(22)=1.81; *p*=.04. Whereas, middle school students perceived speakers of MAE as friendlier than speakers of AAE, there was no difference in how the elementary students perceived the two groups.

Bad – Good

For elementary students on the bad-good scale, a t-test revealed there was a mean of 9.62(*SD*=1.58) for MAE and 9.58 (*SD*=1.68) for AAE. A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; *t*(25) = -.092; *p*=0.46. For middle school students, a t-test revealed there was a mean of 9.15 (*SD*=1.74) for MAE and 7.88 for AAE (*SD*=2.83). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant; *t(*25)=-2.06; *p*=.03. Again, middle school students perceived speakers of MAE more positively than speakers of AAE. They were more inclined to consider speakers of MAE as good. Consistent with the pattern emerging in this category, elementary student demonstrated no difference in their perception of the two groups.

Unhelpful – Helpful

For elementary students on the unhelpful-helpful scale, a t-test revealed there was a mean of 8.46 (SD= 2.28) for MAE and 8.42 (SD=2.45) for AAE. A paired t-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; t(25) = 0.09; p=.47. For middle school students, a t-test revealed there was a mean of 8.92 (SD=2.40) for MAE and 7.38 for AAE (SD=2.40). A paired t-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant; t(25)=2.63; p<.01. These results indicate there is no difference in how elementary students perceived the speakers on MAE and AAE in terms of helpfulness.

However, middle school students perceived speakers of MAE as more helpful than speakers of AAE.

On the attractiveness scales, there was no real difference in elementary students' perceptions of speakers of AAE and MAE. They did not perceive the speakers of either language more positively than speakers of the other. However, for middle school students, there was a statistically significant difference on all attractiveness scales. This indicates that middle school students perceived speakers of MAE to be more helpful, more friendly, nicer, and kinder than speakers of AAE (see Tables 10 and 11).

Evaluation of the scales on dynamism, which rates activity level, was composed of scales on strong-weak, talkative-quiet, fast-slow, and energetic-lazy.

Weak-Strong

For elementary students on the weak-strong scale, a t-test revealed there was a mean of 9.08 (SD= 2.08) for MAE and 8.46 (SD=2.39) for AAE. A paired t-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; $t(25) = .1.23$; $p=.12$. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 8.68 (SD=1.89) for MAE and 8.64 for AAE (SD=2.53). A paired *t-t*est revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; $t(24)=.06$; $p=.48$. These results indicate that neither middle school students nor elementary students perceived the speakers differently on this particular scale.

Quiet-Talkative

For elementary students on the quiet-talkative scale, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 6.00 (SD= 2.10) for MAE and 6.31 (SD=2.16) for AAE. A paired *t-t*est revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; $t(25) = .712$; $p=.24$. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 7.31 (SD=2.01) for MAE and 8.19

for AAE (SD=2.23). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was significant; *t*(25)=1.69; *p*=.05. These results indicated that speakers of MAE were less talkative that speakers of AAE by middle school students but elementary students did not perceive any difference between the groups.

Lazy-Energetic

For elementary students on the lazy-energetic scale, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 8.19 (SD= 2.56) for MAE and 8.04 (SD=2.44) for AAE. A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; *t*(25) = .435; *p*=.39. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 7.92 (SD=1.98) for MAE and 7.45 for AAE (SD=3.22). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; *t*(25)=.594; *p*=.28. These results indicate that neither middle school students nor elementary students perceived the speakers differently on this particular scale.

Slow-Fast

For elementary students on the slow-fast scale, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 8.27 (SD= 2.34) for MAE and 7.46 (SD=2.40) for AAE. A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant; *t*(25) = 1.38; *p*=.09. For middle school students, a *t*-test revealed there was a mean of 7.04 (SD=1.85) for MAE and 7.33 for AAE (SD=2.30). A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was not significant; *t*(23)=-.445; *p*=.33. These results indicate that neither middle school students nor elementary students perceived the speakers differently on this particular scale.

On the scales in dynamism, there were no statistical differences in the perceptions of speakers of AAE and MAE for elementary students. For middle school students, the same is true with the exception of quiet-talkative. On the quiet-talkative scale, middle

school students perceived speakers of AAE to be more talkative than speakers of MAE (see Tables 10 and 11).

Table 10

Elementary Students Paired t-*test for Mainstream American English and African American English*

	MAE		AAE					
Scales	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*df*	*T*	Sig
Does not read well Reads Well	9.81	2.67	7.73	2.68	26	25	4.22	<.01*
Bad - Good	9.62	1.58	9.58	1.68	26	25	-.092	.46
Mean-Nice	9.00	1.92	8.85	2.17	26	25	.386	.35
Unhelpful - Helpful	8.46	2.28	8.42	2.45	26	25	.087	.47
Unkind-Kind	9.70	1.96	9.13	1.91	23	22	1.27	.11
Not Smart - Smart	9.77	1.97	8.65	2.30	26	25	2.86	.01*
Not Friendly - Friendly	8.80	2.25	8.64	2.00	25	24	.26	.40
Unintelligent - Intelligent	8.83	2.08	8.08	1.77	24	23	1.47	.08
Quiet - Talkative	6.31	2.17	6.00	2.10	26	25	.712	.24
Poor - Rich	8.31	2.16	7.62	1.92	26	25	1.70	.05*
Follower - Leader	8.71	2.56	8.71	2.20	24	23	.00	1.0
Slow - Fast	8.27	2.34	7.46	2.40	26	25	1.38	.18
Weak - Strong	9.08	2.08	8.46	2.39	26	25	1.23	.12
Lazy - Energetic	8.19	2.56	8.04	2.44	26	25	.435	.33

Table 11

Middle School Students Paired t-test for Mainstream American English and African American English

	MAE		AAE					
Scales	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*df*	*T*	Sig
Does not read well – Reads Well	10.08	1.81	7.35	2.83	26	25	4.03	<.01*
Bad - Good	9.15	1.74	7.88	2.83	26	25	-2.06	.03*
Mean-Nice	8.65	2.00	7.15	2.78	26	25	2.19	.02*
Unhelpful - Helpful	8.92	2.39	7.38	2.40	26	25	2.63	.01*
Unkind-Kind	9.38	1.83	8.04	2.82	26	25	1.90	.04*
Not Smart - Smart	10.19	1.63	7.35	2.71	26	25	5.48	.00*
Not Friendly - Friendly	8.83	2.19	7.61	2.66	23	22	1.81	.04*
Unintelligent – Intelligent	9.58	1.42	6.96	2.41	26	25	4.64	.00*
Quiet - Talkative	7.31	2.02	8.19	2.23	26	25	1.69	.05*
Poor - Rich	8.42	1.77	6.50	2.18	26	25	4.21	.00*
Follower - Leader	9.32	2.29	7.60	3.08	25	24	2.23	.02*
Slow - Fast	7.04	1.85	7.33	2.30	24	23	-.45	.33
Weak - Strong	8.68	1.89	8.64	2.53	25	24	.059	.48
Lazy - Energetic	7.92	1.98	7.46	3.22	26	25	.59	.28

These attitudes are not naturally occurring in the child. Unlike a preference for a favorite food, this attitude is taught, learned through experience. As established by Delpit (2002) and Boykin (1986) when children who speak AAE enter school they begin to hear the disapproving messages about their language. They begin to hear the mandates to speak “proper” English. If this is the message they are hearing in school, the place designated to help them be smarter and teach them to read, then why would they then not conclude that those who speak MAE are smarter and more intelligent?

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a summary of the study and a discussion of the findings. Implications of the findings and recommendation for future research will also be discussed.

Overview of the Study

This study was designed to explore the attitudes of elementary and middle school students towards African American English and Mainstream American English. The study was conducted with elementary and middle school students attending a private school in Miami-Dade County, one of the nation's largest school districts. Although the site was a private school, a concept typically associated with economic, cultural, and academic privilege, the majority of students (95%) attending the school qualified for free or reduced cost lunch. To be eligible for free lunch or reduced cost lunch, a family must demonstrate eligibility based on established poverty guidelines. According to the current guidelines, a family of three with income of less than $19,790 would qualify for free lunch. A family of three with income of $36,612 would qualify for reduced cost lunch. These demographics are important to consider because despite being in private school, the student population is not one of economic or cultural privilege. At this private school 87% of the students qualify for free lunch, whereas 8% qualified for reduced cost lunch, and 5% qualified for paid.

The participants in this study were also of African descent. The students were African-American, Jamaican-American, Haitian-American, or Bahamian-American. A small portion of the participants were mixed race (2 Hispanic-Haitian American and 2

Hispanic-African American). The majority of the students was speakers of AAE and/or regularly exposed to AAE either in their home, community, or school environments.

Participants listened to audio of speakers of African American English and Mainstream American English. After listening to each of six recordings, participants rated the speakers on the Speech Evaluation Instrument, which was modified specifically for this study. The data were analyzed using t-tests, paired t-tests, and ANOVA to determine the significance of the statistical significance of the differences between perceptions of speakers of MAE and speakers of AAE.

Summary of the Findings

Research has demonstrated that speakers of AAE are perceived negatively and must deal with real and tangible consequences of the language bias (Billings, 2005; Hamilton, 2005; Kramer et al., 2000; Wolfram, 2007). Smitherman (1998) stated that children who speak AAE are more likely to be assigned to special education programs. They are offered less challenging work and perceived as being less intellectually capable (Delpit, 1995). Given the widespread negative perceptions of AAE, adult speakers of AAE are more likely to face discrimination in housing and employment. The results of this study are quite promising because the participants did not perceive AAE in a negatively and this may lead to more acceptance and tolerance for speakers of AAE.

Major Finding #1

In the review of the literature most researchers found that speakers of MAE were perceived more favorably than speakers of AAE (Billings, 2005; Wolfram, 2007). Although the participants in the current research also perceived speakers of MAE more favorably than speakers of AAE, they were also not inclined to perceive AAE negatively.

In this case perceiving MAE more favorable than AAE and having positive feelings towards AAE were not mutually exclusive. This is primarily reflected when looking at the ratings on the individual scales. The students in this study were able to maintain a favorable attitude towards speakers of African American English, perhaps because it is intricately tied to who they are and from where they come. They were able to see the speakers of AAE as good and kind, perhaps because the people in their lives speak this language and they have an affinity towards them. These speakers include their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles; people who care for them, support them, and sacrifice for them. The results of this study should not be a surprise as inconsistent with prior research. Rather, it is the results of other previous studies that might come into question. That is, negative to self-attribution should have provoked consternation, especially among educators. Logically, one might conclude that if the people you care for and who care for you, are speakers of AAE and your overall experiences with those people have been positive, then it would stand to reason that the participants would perceive speakers of AAE as good and kind. Similar to the participants in Kinloch's (2010) study, the participants in this study demonstrated an affinity for their home language and at the same time recognized its place (or lack thereof) in the larger society. The participants, who were as young as 8 years old, recognized AAE as not inferior to MAE, unlike the findings of other researchers. Rosenthal (1963) found that preschool students perceived speakers of AAE as bad. Clark and Clark (1939) found that preschool students also perceived Blacks as bad and ugly. In those two studies the participants were as young as 4, and had already somehow managed to figure out that the society they live in, devalued the characteristics associated with Blackness.

Although the current study sought to answer a question comparing attitudes towards AAE and MAE, there was also an attempt to answer questions regarding AAE in isolation. The first two questions pertain to attitudes towards African American English. Contrary to what was hypothesized and the existing body of knowledge, elementary age children perceived speakers of AAE favorably. Although the findings for middle school aged children were less conclusive, they did rate speakers of AAE favorably on all scales. These ratings were statistically significant on all but one scale, rich-poor. Middle school students rated speakers of AAE highest on the scales for talkative, strong and kind. Elementary students perceived speakers of AAE as good, nice, helpful, and kind. They also perceived them as smart and intelligent. This is powerful, because the participants are themselves speakers of AAE and could translate into a positive understanding of themselves. They seemed to recognize they are not limited in their potential and that who they are is not bad or incapable of learning. They recognized who they are as valid and acceptable, if not to the great society, at least to themselves. This has the potential to greatly affect the way they perceive their place in a society that is not always accepting of Blacks in America. It should be noted that 94% of all participants were able to clearly identify the speakers of AAE as Black. This population of students had a clear understanding of the language form primarily associated with African Americans. They understood that this is not a language regularly associated with White Americans. They were adept at doing so as early as 8 years of age.

Because the researcher works in the school in which the participants are students, the researcher knows the participants regularly hear school administrators and teachers utilize AAE in conjunction with MAE. The children are accustomed to hearing the

teachers code-switch, switching from African American English to Mainstream American English in different contexts or while interacting with "outside" personnel visiting the school. They have had the experiences of witnessing the teachers (all Black) match the communication styles of their families. This researcher has very vivid memories of being a child and witnessing her own mother switch from African American English when chastising her children to Mainstream American English to answer a phone call. As a child, this researcher was never explicitly taught to code-switch. It was a skill acquired through observation of adult role models and mimicking the behavior. This could be significant, as the students regularly see role models successfully navigate both languages. This could be a significant factor contributing to the positive perception of AAE.

Another factor that may contribute to the favorable opinions of AAE could be the school policy regarding students' use of language. In the school setting, students are not discouraged from speaking AAE and teachers are trained on the appropriate responses to students speaking AAE in the classroom. The school policy dictates that teachers refrain from speaking negatively of AAE and are trained explicitly on how and when to encourage students to speak MAE.

Major Finding #2

Much of the previous research in this area has been conducted with adults, including teachers, and college students (Gayles & Denerville, 2007; Kraemer et al., 2000; White, 1998). Billings (2005) studied the perception of high-school and college students. Rosenthal's (1977) work was conducted with preschoolers. The present research was unique in that the participants were elementary and middle school aged children.

This allowed for the perspective of school-aged children, which is lacking in the field. Additionally, the study discerned that there was a difference in attitudes across the different levels of school. From the results of the study there appears to be a shift in attitudes correlating with the number of years in school. Hensley (1970) and Billing's (2005) research with high school students indicated that this group overwhelming perceived AAE negatively. This investigation helped filled the gap of knowledge for students between preschool and high school. It might benefit this field of research to replicate this study with high school students and specifically, re-evaluating this group of students to ascertain if there is a shift in their beliefs about AAE as high school students.

Major Finding #3

Questions 3 and 4 asked, "Are the attitudes towards Mainstream American English of elementary and middle school students positive." The answer to both questions was yes. This is consistent with existing research. Elementary participants rated speakers of MAE favorably in on all scales. Middle school students rated speakers of MAE favorably on all scales with the exception of talkative and fast. There is a lack of clarity on how the fast-slow scale item was interpreted by the participants. Was it interpreted as a reflection of speed in completing task or as a reflection of cognitive processing? Considering other scales that rated intellect (intelligent-unintelligent, smart-not smart), the speakers of MAE were rated positively; it stands to reason the students interpreted the scale in terms of speed. Both groups rated them highest in "reads well" and intelligence.

Eighty-six percent of the participants were able to correctly identify the speakers on the recordings as White Americans. Considering the accuracy with which the students

were able to identify the speakers' race, it leads one to question what exactly are the participants rating. If they are able to identify the speaker of AAE as Black and the speaker of MAE as White, it would stand to reason that the children are not only judging speech and language, but also race and culture. This is a point of interest for future research.

Research Question 5 asked, "Do elementary students view MAE more favorably than AAE." Research Question 6 asked, "Do middle school students view MAE more favorably than AAE." When comparing the attitudes of the two groups across the two languages, it was found that both groups perceived MAE more favorably than AAE. For elementary children, the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instrument for speakers of MAE was 130.54, whereas the mean score for speakers of AAE was 118.62 (see Table 3). For middle school children, the mean score on the Speech Evaluation Instruments for speakers of MAE was 132.73 and for speakers of AAE the mean was 107.85 (see Table 4). This is consistent with much of the existing research in the field. Participants rated speakers of MAE more positively than speakers of AAE on all measures. However, not all of the differences were statistically significant (kind-unkind, friendly-unfriendly, and good-bad). There have been other researchers who have found that speakers of AAE were rated more favorably on some measure, such as easy-going and happy (Hensley, 1972). However, that was not the finding in this case.

For example, both groups, middle and elementary students, were more inclined to perceive speakers of MAE as rich. For elementary participants, speakers of MAE scored a mean of 8.37 and speakers of AAE scored a mean of 7.62. For middle school participants the mean score for speakers of MAE was 8.37 and for speakers of AAE it

was 6.59. This could be a reflection of what the children see around them, in the home and their community. The majority of the children were from working class and low-income families with the majority of the participants, 95%, receiving free/reduced lunch. It is possible the children recognized the economic limitations associated with speaking AAE.

Research Question 7 asked, "Do middle school students perceive AAE more favorably than do elementary students" The results indicated that middle school students did not perceive AAE more favorably than elementary students. The mean score of the SEI was higher for elementary students than for middle school students. In hypothesizing that middle school students would perceive AAE more favorably than MAE, it was believed that middle school students would be operating from a place of resistance and rejecting Mainstream American English. However, this did not prove to be the case. The findings from this study may be an indication that the longer children are in school the worse they feel about their language. This may also demonstrate a shift in beliefs from elementary to middle school. Much of the research in the field indicates that high school students perceive AAE negatively (Billings, 2005). Although the current study did not include high school students, the results of this study demonstrates that younger students in Grades 3 to 5 were much more positive about AAE than were middle school students in Grades 6 to 8. An explanation for why middle school students feel differently about AAE than young children can be traced to the fact that beliefs and values are formulated later in childhood (Boykin, 1986). Middle school students have more life experiences that may have exposed them to more frequent language correction or feedback regarding the inappropriateness of AAE.

As educators we must ask ourselves, what else are we teaching? Have these students begun to internalize the negative messages about the inferiority of African American English? In attempts to encourage students to speak Mainstream American English, some educators feel the need to speak poorly of AAE, telling the child they are wrong for speaking their home language.

These finding are important because as Boykin (1986) asserts that those who perpetuate social inequality need not be mean spirited, nor do they need to be White Americans. Consider these findings through the lens of critical theorists. Critical theorists assert that schools play a role in the perpetuation of social inequality and support the existing power structure. In the present study both elementary and middle school students perceived MAE more positively than AAE. Additionally, the data indicates that middle school students' perceptions of AAE were not as positive as those of elementary students. Because this belief is consistent with the assumptions held by most in the United States and perpetuated through messages heard by children throughout society and in schools, it could be surmised that these children have accepted these assumptions as truth. Having accepted Mainstream American English as superior to African American English, these children may become vulnerable to perpetuating the social inequalities that block their own success in American society. Even so, the fact that their perceptions of AAE are not negative is a step in the right direction. The challenge among this population is to help children reach a point of acceptance of the equal standing of both languages. In this way, they may be better equipped to act as agents for change who can critically challenge their own and others' assumptions about language.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study suggest a number of areas of future research. Based on the finding that middle schools students perceived AAE less favorably than do elementary students, future research can explore how the classroom discourse contributes to children's devaluation of their language the longer students are in school. In this particular study, it would have been beneficial to collect data on whether or not AAE was spoken in the homes of the participants. This information can be utilized to determine if there is a correlation between perceptions of AAE and exposure to the language. It would also be beneficial to obtain data on how many of the participants are speakers of AAE. Although this researcher personally knew that the majority of the participants speak AAE, there is no certainty about the actual number of participants who speak AAE. A number of participants were of Caribbean decent and were speakers of AAE. Questions to address in future research would include, if MAE or AAE is the primary language spoken in the homes of these children and how were the students able to acquire AAE. Lastly, I would recommend conducting qualitative research, specifically interviews, to gain more insight into why the participants perceive AAE as they do and the factors contributing to those perceptions. Lastly, it would benefit the field to conduct a similar study with white students to gain insight into their perceptions of AAE.

Limitations

There were a few limitations to the current research. In designing the tools, there is one item that should not have been included as a scale item. Black-White was less of a rating of attitude and more of a measure of speaker identification. The purpose of that scale was to ascertain if participants were able to recognize the race of the recorded

speakers. On the scale, Black was aligned with the 1 on the negative side of the scale and White was aligned with 6, the positive side of the scale. The issue with this scale item is that in correctly identifying the race of the speaker, the mean score for the AAE speakers is automatically lowered and the inverse is true of speakers of MAE. In hindsight this scale item should have been removed and added to the end of the semantic differential scale as a separate question.

Additionally, this researcher is the director of the school in which the research was conducted. Although I felt the results of the study would not be affected by this fact, response bias was possible. The students could have adjusted their responses to match what they believed were my desired responses. Although this was possible, some of the results of the study were not aligned with my hypotheses nor my expectations. I would expect that if the children were attempting to please me, the children's responses would have been more aligned with my expectations.

Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that neither elementary nor middle school students had a negative perception of AAE. In both groups, middle school and elementary students perceived speakers of MAE more favorably than speakers of AAE. These findings are particularly promising because most prior research has indicated that many in America perceive AAE negatively including those who speak AAE. These negative perceptions have led to language bias and depressed opportunities for speakers of AAE. To be able to demonstrate that a group of students do not have a negative attitude towards AAE is a positive shift in attitude and warrants further study.

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