From the 'Hood to the Classroom: A Rhetorical Perspective on Teaching Secondary English to the Urban Student

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ABSTRACT

African American students, particularly those from low socio economic levels, are often at a disadvantage when it comes to being prepared for Georgia’s state mandated tests such as the End of Course Tests (EOCT). These students often fall behind not because they are not as intelligent as their middle class counterparts, but because of negative teacher attitudes and cultural insensitivities. The research question is “What should teachers of urban students know to successfully implement a blending of critical pedagogy and rhetorical pedagogy?” The purpose of this project is to make the case for a rhetorical pedagogy that focuses not solely on changing the material, but on changing the approach to fit the audience- thus a contribution to existing research that has not been fully explored.

Stasis theory, a rhetorical framework for argumentative analysis is used to explain the problem and what steps should be taken to correct the problem; it offers a strategic method for
addressing the problem, discussing the nature of the problem, explaining the quality of the problem, and finally, stating what actions should be taken to correct the problem. Within that framework, I will show why the guiding principles of critical pedagogy and the primary suppositions of rhetorical pedagogy should be used to teach “at risk” African-American students and prepare them for state mandated tests. Critical pedagogy helps students to find their own voices, find their place in society, and challenge traditional notions of power in thoughtful, effective ways. Rhetorical pedagogy is appropriate because its primary suppositions align with Asante’s tenets of an Afrocentric curriculum and also offer solid strategies for working with urban students.

Rhetoric is power and is the central focus of any effective communication, so educators must understand the guiding principles of classical rhetoric and recognize the importance of audience consideration when preparing lesson plans. A rhetorical pedagogy should be at the core of working with urban students and educators must recognize themselves as “rhetor-teachers.” The culminating activity is a sample unit plan that aligns with Georgia Standards for 9th grade English Language Arts.

INDEX WORDS: Afrocentric curriculum, African-American students, Rhetoric, Critical pedagogy, Stasis theory, At-risk, Urban
FROM THE ‘HOOD TO THE CLASSROOM: A RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING SECONDARY ENGLISH TO THE URBAN STUDENT

by

SHAE ANDERSON

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012
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DEDICATION

For my Lily. You are the sweetest little girl in the whole wide world.

I love you to the moon and back.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Of course I have to begin by thanking God for giving me the strength to persevere even when I felt as though it would have been much easier to abandon this journey. Words cannot begin to express how thankful I am for my parents, Robert and Louise Anderson, for their tireless love, encouragement, emotional support, financial support, and free baby-sitting services. This degree is as much theirs as it is mine. Without the patient dedication of my chair, Dr. Mary Zeigler, this project would not have been possible. I cannot begin to explain how I appreciate her willingness to make time for me in her busy schedule, her kind words of inspiration, her knack for pushing me to answer my own questions without me even realizing it at times, and her firm, but gentle nudges that helped me to keep forging ahead even when I was feeling overwhelmed. I would also like to extend a very, very special thank you to Dr. Christine Gallant and Dr. Elizabeth Lopez for coming on board as members of my dissertation committee, giving outstanding feedback, and pushing me to think about my research in new ways, and make concrete plans about how I will continue the research now that the dissertation is finished. I also have to thank all of my friends and loved ones for listening to me vent and for not giving up on the friendships even though I cancelled plans for fun more times than I care to think about. Lastly, I need to give a special thank you and a big ‘ol hug to the little girl with a huge smile, a big personality and an even bigger heart, my daughter - Alexandria Lily-Frances. Lily Boo, you have helped me learn how to relax, enjoy the journey and realize that sometimes you just have to stop what you’re doing and dance. Thank you.
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context of Study

During the summer of 2008, I accepted an offer to teach English at a Title I school in a mid-sized city in Columbus, Georgia (Muscogee County). The high school has been designated as school wide Title I, and although it has made significant academic improvements in recent years, it did not make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) until the 2009-2010 school year.

A school-wide Title I school is a school in which children from low income families make up at least 40% of the enrollment, and the purpose of school wide Title I programs is to improve the entire educational program in a school which should result in improving the academic achievement of all students, particularly the lowest achieving students. A school wide program must include: school wide reform strategies, instruction by highly qualified teachers, parental involvement, and additional support for students (Georgia Department of Education).

The school, located in Muscogee County, Georgia, is 96% African-American and the other 4% are Hispanic, White, or multi-racial. While these numbers may vary a fair amount, it seems that most Title I schools in the state of Georgia are made up primarily of African-American students or economically disadvantaged students. Additionally, most students in Title I schools or schools with a targeted Title I population are typically classified as at-risk because they have a social, academic, or economic need of some kind. These students could have any combination of the following academic or economic situations: single parent household, multiple absences, homelessness, failing grades, living at or near poverty level and a variety of other scenarios that
would place the student at a disadvantage when it comes to state mandated tests such as the End of Course Tests (EOCT), Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT), and the Georgia High School Writing Test (GHSGWT). At the end of each semester, students enrolled in 9th grade English and Language Arts (ELA) must take an End of Course Test (EOCT) to assess what they have learned, or more specifically, which state standards have been mastered. Georgia is currently working towards phasing out the Graduation Test students take during their junior year and using End of Course Tests as performance indicators in core subject areas. The state of Georgia is now using The Common Core Standards found on www.georgiastandards.org.

The standards provide an overview of what students should be able to do upon completion of 9th grade English Language Arts (ELA). Mastery of these standards is assessed on the EOCT at the end of the semester and mastery also sets the foundation for the remaining English courses and standardized tests mandated by the state. Furthermore, the standards also emphasize being able to make connections between various texts and the students’ daily life and/or a contemporary context. In order to effectively teach students and help them make the necessary connections, teachers must embrace a rhetorical pedagogy. What is often not pointed out is that the standards, if read closely, emphasize a culturally relevant pedagogy, but teachers must first understand their own role as rhetor-teacher first. As a result, they must understand their rhetorical situation. This means the teacher must understand the context, the audience, and the purpose in order to be effective. The context, of course, is the classroom, but the teacher must somehow also determine how to relate the information being presented to society at large or offer a real-world connection of some kind for students. The audience is always at the heart of the rhetorical situation. Some might also simply call this a student-centered approach. However, when preparing a lesson or presentation, the rhetor-teacher must consider factors such as the students’ cultur-
al background, beliefs, experiences, prior knowledge, and values. Lastly, the rhetor-teacher must consider the purpose or goal of the lesson. The purpose will help to shape the content. However, it is important to not become so focused on the purpose that there is no audience consideration. Unfortunately, this happens quite often.

1.2 Factors to Consider

When working with Georgia’s urban students, there are quite a few factors that must be considered. One of these is teacher attitudes towards students’ home or community language, also known as Black English, when referring to African-American students. Frequently, teachers of all ethnic and racial groups, and especially English/Language Arts teachers believe that children can be forced into “speaking correctly” and using what some still refer to as the King’s English. I am not quite sure who the King of America is, but I do know that African-American children, particularly the economically disadvantaged, cannot be educated using tactics that berate them and tear down their self-esteem. Quintanar (1997) asserts, “Culturally unaware teachers actively reject students’ language and culture, either overtly or covertly” (44). Typically, teachers in this category accept no responsibility and feel as though the child has no chance for success. However, teachers who are culturally aware tend to understand the students’ background and work to acknowledge it and incorporate it into the classroom. In her discussion of culturally aware teachers, Quintanar posits, “…These teachers can be characterized as being conscious of the differences between the cultural capital of the students and the school; able to incorporate the students’ language and culture in the educational process; and able to try different teaching techniques and methods that are more appropriate for linguistic minority students (45). Urban students simply do not respond well to these strategies. Instead of ridiculing students for their use of Black English or “Spoken Soul” as Rickford and Rickford (2000) describe it, we must find
ways to help students navigate between the two worlds they must operate in – their home/community spaces and their professional/academic spaces.

For me, allowing students to use their home/community language was never an issue. My primary concern was that they were engaged in the lesson or reading. If they could re-tell Homer’s Odyssey using Spoken Soul, then there was no way I was going to “interrupt” that moment to correct their grammar. Doing so might have caused the student to withdraw completely for the rest of our time together. When a student is interrupted in that way, they become reluctant to participate for fear of rejection. Subsequently, discipline problems, classroom disruptions, and poor grades become an issue. Does an English teacher somehow become less of an educator if a student is permitted to tell a story in Black English? After the student has told the story, we applaud him for his re-telling of the story and address omissions or incorrect details. From there, we then ask the student to retell the story as he would to a professional audience. I have found this to be a most fitting way of teaching students to navigate between the two worlds they must function in. However, in her 1977 work, *Talkin’ and Testifyin’*, Geneva Smitherman asserts that this method of teaching students to navigate is not really necessary:

Yet when it comes to the Black English classroom, English teachers are working out of the same old bag of eradicationist (attempting to obliterate Black English), or more recently bidialectalist (attempting to teach Black students the skill and necessity of being versatile in both they dialect and “the Man’s”). Of course, when you get right down to the nitty gritty, it ain’t no essential difference between the two inasmuch as both bees operating on a difference equals deficit model; the latter is simply more sneaky about making this assertion. (Dig it: white middle class kids don’t have to be “versatile” in Black English.) If the two modes of
speech are presented to them as being equal, then the model is really not “difference equals deficit (Smitherman, 126).

Smitherman (1977) makes a valid point in that the eradicationist model is simply a better disguised version of the difference equals deficit model. While I agree that it should not be necessary for black students to be “versatile,” the reality is they must be in order to be successful in today’s world. Using the bidialectalist approach gives students the skills they need to navigate between the two worlds while also keeping their self-esteem intact. However, the challenge for educators who want to utilize the bidialectalist approach is figuring out how to incorporate it into classroom lessons and activities.

The goal of bidialectalism is preferred, but it is not easily translated into a teaching program. Such a program would emphasize the appropriateness of different dialects for different contexts-probably by including contexts where the vernacular dialect is more appropriate (e.g., talking with a peer about a problem assignment in biology), as well as those where the standard dialect might be more acceptable. (e.g., explaining a proof to the geometry class) (Wolfram 120).

A bidialectalist approach would better help teachers to prepare students for state mandated tests and to successfully navigate their way through the world’s that exist beyond their home community. When the educator is sincere in their use of this approach, it can also help to break down walls that exist between teacher and student. The student realizes that the teacher respects him/her as well as their culture and language. Trust is established, a relationship is formed, and then the teacher can focus on educating the student and not have to enter into a tug of war to educate the student.
1.3 Socioeconomics

The other issue that cannot be ignored when considering the African American child in the classroom is socioeconomic status. Language diversity does in fact exist within the African American community. Not all African American children speak Toya Wyatt (2001) asserts, “Although the findings of Kovac (1980) and Reveron (1978) suggest that family socioeconomic class can play a major role in the language paths that African American children take, it is important to realize that language differences still occur among African American children from the same socioeconomic background” (264-265). Smitherman (1989) in “A New Way of Talkin’ Language, Social Change, and Political Theory” writes about Black English as a function of social class. “Given that language usage reflects social network and solidarity, if US black English is indeed an emerging class sociolect, it points towards a linguistic index of shifting social relations and compels us to re-examine the traditional model of race relations in the US (102).

As I continue to reflect on my own classroom habits and teaching theories, I realize that I do not spend a great deal of time correcting students each time they use something other than mainstream English – especially when they are engaged in the class discussion, group work, or an individual assignment. Interrupting the student who is behaving in a positive manner to offer negative feedback about something largely unrelated to the content of their comments would discourage class participation and student engagement. Rickford and Rickford even tell us that students who are taught with the “Interrupting Approach” often withdraw from participation and have low test scores (176). Sadly, it is this approach that halts or prevents student participation and student engagement. Once this happens, discipline problems and failing grades become the norm. As educators, we know that, no matter what strategy we use, every single student might
not be reached. However, there are strategies (differentiation) that teachers can use to reach more of their students. Rickford and Rickford extend that notion:

Students taught with the “Black Artful Approach”—by teachers who…exposed children to Standard English distinctions, but who did not constantly interrupt or correct their Spoken soul-participated enthusiastically in the class room, and recorded higher scores on reading tests. This study confirms what we know from other studies: that negative and uninformed attitude toward children’s vernacular can be counterproductive, and even harm performance. (176)

Teacher attitudes have a significant impact on student-teacher relationships and, thus, student performance in the classroom. Successful teachers do not view Black English as problematic but as a part of their student’s culture. Therefore, teaching students to navigate between Black English and Standard English is just as crucial as teaching a student the elements of a short story or how to write a thesis statement.

In order to work with students effectively, it does not necessarily mean that teachers must become fluent in Black English, teach only works by African-American authors or infuse hip hop music into every lesson, but it does mean that they must find ways to engage their students. Typically, this comes via a culturally relevant curriculum. I do believe it is important for students to read works by African-American authors, but in order to be truly prepared for college and the global world in which we live, they must also be exposed to works that are a part of the more traditional literary canon. When I taught Romeo and Juliet to my students, they were asked to think of songs that they would play if they were to make a movie version of the play. The students were able to put any songs they wanted on the list as long as they could justify how it “fit.” Immediately, students were excited to read each Scene, and looked forward to narrowing down
their list and making a real soundtrack by the time we finished reading the play. Aside from providing instructions, a brief description (and examples) of movie soundtracks, and final project guidelines, this activity did not require a large amount of planning. However, it added a culturally relevant dimension to reading Shakespeare, increased student engagement, and better results on quizzes and the final test.

There is really no one clear cut formula that exists when it comes to successfully educating urban youth. However, there are certain elements that must be in place. So, the ultimate goal of this project is to make the case for a secondary, rhetorical pedagogy that embraces cultural relevance of Afrocentric language and rhetorical principles and black youth culture. In this dissertation, I will provide an overview of specific elements of Black culture including African American rhetorical and oral traditions, an overview of Black youth culture, an overview of Black English, and a sample curriculum that incorporates all of these elements. The discussion of African American rhetorical and oral traditions as well as Black English is necessary to be able to develop culturally relevant pedagogy. These discussions are being provided as a rationale for the curriculum and why it is necessary for teachers who will utilize the curriculum to also have the necessary background knowledge. The curriculum I create will be for the first semester of a 9th grade English Language Arts Literature class that not only incorporates the aforementioned elements, but also follows the Georgia Department of Education standards for 9th grade ELA. To address these issues, there are three research questions that will guide this project:

-What strategies can be used to help Georgia students maintain and increase cultural pride and meet or exceed state standards for 9th grade ELA?
-How do teacher attitudes and teacher knowledge shape/play a role in the success of urban students?

-How do culturally relevant curriculum and culturally relevant pedagogy contribute to the success of urban students?

I will use literature textbooks currently being used in some of Georgia’s 9th grade ELA classes as a guide for developing a revised curriculum to be used.

1.4 Review of Literature

1.4.1 Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Geneva Gay (2000), in her book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice*, discusses teachers’ responsibilities in the roles of cultural organizers, cultural mediators, and orchestrators of social contexts for learning. Her discussion of teachers as cultural organizers best sums up my assertions regarding culturally relevant pedagogy. She writes, “As cultural organizers, teachers must understand how culture operates in daily classroom dynamics, create learning atmospheres that radiate cultural and ethnic diversity, and facilitate high academic achievement for all students” (42). Gay also talks extensively about the Ebonics debate inspired by the Oakland school board’s resolution. While she, of course, addresses the controversy it sparked as well as the media’s role in misrepresenting the resolution, she also discusses research that has explored the effects of Ebonics on achievement. She concludes by suggesting that teachers should not focus so much on the linguistic structures of students but on discourse dynamics (topic centered, topic associative, topic chaining, etc.). In her conclusion of the section, she states:

Since communication is essential to both teaching and learning, it is imperative that it be a central part of instructional reforms designed to improve the school
performance of underachieving African, Latino, Native, Asian, and European American students. The more teachers know about the discourse styles of ethnically diverse students, the better they will be able to improve academic achievement. Change efforts should attend especially to discourse dynamics as opposed to linguistic structures. The reforms should be directed toward creating better agreement between the communication patterns of underachieving ethnically diverse students and those considered “normal” in schools. (108-109).

Gay argues that educators must understand the modes of discourse or rhetorical strategies typically used by African-American children. In many cases, once this happens, behaviors typically viewed as problematic can be embraced and used as a tool for instruction. For example, once an educator understands the call and response mode of discourse typically seen in the Black church, she might begin to better understand certain classroom dynamics and behaviors.

Tyrone Howard’s “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Ingredients for Critical Teacher Reflection,” focuses on ways new teachers and teachers-in-training can learn to reflect on not only the racial identities of their students but of their own racial identities as well. However, the larger question Howard asks focuses “on the correlation between race and low achieving students. “What, if anything, does race and culture have to do with the widespread underachievement of nonmainstream students? Thus, the need to rethink pedagogical practices is critical if underachieving student populations are to have improved chances for school success” (Howard 197). Howard makes the strong claim that race and culture have a direct impact on underperforming students and underperforming schools where minority students are the majority. However, it is not just the racial make-up and culture of the students that impact underachievement but the race and culture of the educators, as well.
Howard further confirms my own notion about teachers. Be they white, black, or of some other ethnic makeup, when working with inner city teens they must understand the world from which their students come. In most cases, students have the ability/capability to master concepts being taught. However, what is often missing from many classrooms is a good teacher-student relationship. McNulty and Quaglia contend that “rigor, relevance and relationships — together provide the hallmark for education today. The three are integrally connected; if one is missing in our teaching practices, we are not doing our best to prepare students for success in school and in life” (2000). As with all things in life, there should be balance. When the focus on relationship building is too heavy, rigor and relevance can also suffer. As a result, the Rigor/Relevance Framework, created by Dr. Willard “Bill” Daggett, is an excellent tool to ensure that there is balance in the classroom. The International Center for Leadership in Education gives a critical assessment:

The Rigor/Relevance Framework is a fresh approach to looking at curriculum standards and assessment. It is based on traditional elements of education yet encourages movement to application of knowledge instead of maintaining an exclusive focus on acquisition of knowledge. The Framework is easy to understand. With its simple, straightforward structure, it can serve as a bridge between school and the community. It offers a common language with which to express the notion of a more rigorous and relevant curriculum and encompasses much of what parents, business leaders, and community members want students to learn. The Framework is versatile; it can be used in the development of instruction and assessment. Likewise, teachers can use it to measure their progress
in adding rigor and relevance to instruction and to select appropriate instructional strategies to meet learner needs and higher achievement goals.

Although bell hooks’ writing focuses on the university classroom, her notion of “community building” is one that should also be considered in the secondary classroom, as well. Community building is about creating a “space” where students feel comfortable and safe. It is this type of environment that allows a student to flourish. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks writes, “It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice….To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition” (hooks 41).

1.4.2 *Culturally Relevant Curriculum*

In “Creating Culturally Responsive Curriculum: Making Race Matter,” Cheryl Curtis discloses the frustration she experienced while working with teachers in training. She indicates that her essay stems from, “student unwillingness to critically consider issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in the educational relationships that they hoped to establish in their future roles as teachers and human services workers” (Curtis 135). It is this unwillingness that manifests in the classroom particularly when working in schools and with students where race and class are prevalent issues. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks makes the following supporting statement:

If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society who are nonwhite is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers – on all levels, from elementary to university settings – we must acknowledge that our styles of teaching may need to change. Let’s face it: most
of us were taught in classrooms where styles of teachings reflected the notion of a single norm of thought and experience, which we were encouraged to believe was universal. This has been just as true for nonwhite teachers as for white teachers” (35).

Urban students come to the 9th grade classroom with many of the skills that teachers expect to introduce to them. They can analyze a text. They can develop and support an argument with minimal guidance. They understand concepts of theme, characterization, rhyme, rhythm, meter and tone. Most students display these skill sets almost every day when they talk about things that are relevant to them as teenagers—this is what I refer to as youth culture. To bridge this gap between youth culture and the culture of the classroom, teachers must learn about the interests of their students and find ways to incorporate them into the curriculum and value them in their classroom pedagogy. A classroom would not have to become a live version of MTV to incorporate youth culture in the pedagogy. The goal is to help students to understand that the texts they choose to access are really quite similar to the texts that they often reject as irrelevant. At its core, this approach to pedagogy believes that a rigorous multicultural curriculum should be a marriage of the student’s culture and canonical culture. (Duncan-Andrade 331).

1.4.3 African American Rhetoric

For many, rhetoric typically means the art of discourse or even the art of writing well and/or speaking well. Bizzell and Herzberg point out that “Henry Louis Gates combines rhetoric with sociolinguistic analyses of black discourse. For Gates, rhetoric means tropes. He analyzes the discourse form that black dialect speakers call “signifying,” treating it as the “master trope” of black rhetoric, a trope that embodies cultural meanings and represents a complex set of social interaction” (1545). While traditional forms of rhetoric and African American rhetoric both rely
heavily on audience characteristics, there is a primary difference between traditional or classical styles of rhetoric and African American rhetoric. As Gates indicates:

A distinct difference between black rhetoric and what we might call white rhetoric is the typical relationship between speaker and audience. In most white speech interactions, as in traditional classical rhetoric, the speaker speaks and the audience listens; in black speech interactions, the audience responds almost constantly, with set responses, encouragement, suggestions, and nonverbal signals. Indeed, black discourse encourages such participation (1546).

So, understanding such key features of African-American rhetoric can better help teachers of African American students to understand their students and certain behaviors that might often be misunderstood.

*Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations* is a collection of essays about a variety of subjects related to African American rhetoric. In an essay by Felicia Walker entitled, “An Afrocentric Rhetorical Analysis of Johnnie Cochran’s Closing Argument in the O.J. Simpson Trial,” Walker highlights the various African American stylistic devices used. Her ultimate purpose is to promote the use of a culture centered methodology. She writes, “Characteristics common to African American communication emerged in Cochran’s closing argument. Specifically, uncovered traits include rhythm, stylin’, narrative style, call and response, rappin’, and signifyin’. Overall, Cochran did exhibit features (or parts thereof) of African American communication in his closing argument. He creatively combined the use of these stylistic devices to deliver a successful argument” (Walker 261).
Geneva Smitherman (1977) categorizes African American modes of discourse into four categories. “The modes are (1) call-response, a series of spontaneous interactions between speaker and listener; (2) signification, the art of humorous put downs; (3) tonal semantics, the conveying of meanings in Black discourse through specifically ethnic kinds of voice rhythms and vocal inflections; and (4) narrative sequencing, the habitual use of stories to explain and/or persuade. “ Through a closer analysis of these modes and the settings in which they are most commonly used, teachers can better understand the learning styles of their students and how to incorporate these modes into lessons and classroom activities.

1.4.4 Black English

A discussion of Black English must first begin with a definition or solid foundation. Oftentimes, many don’t realize that Black English is in fact a language or language system just as Standard American English (SAE), Chinese, Spanish, etc. In her book *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, Lisa Green writes

African American English (AAE) is a variety that has a set phonological (system of sounds), morphological (system of structure of words and relationship among words), syntactic (system of sentence structure), semantic (system of meaning) and lexical (structural organization of vocabulary items and other informational patterns. So when speakers know AAE, they know a system of sounds, word and sentence structure, meaning and structural organization of vocabulary items and other information (1).

So, contrary to what many believe, when speakers know AAE, they know a language. It is this type of foundational knowledge that can help to make a significant difference in teacher attitudes.
However, understanding that Black English is in fact a language is only the beginning. Once that foundation has been established, it is then also necessary that culture must also be considered when thinking about Black English. In fact, Patricia Bizzell reminds us that:

A complete description of Black English cannot be limited to linguistic analysis. Language and culture are inseparable, and though it is common practice to forget the cultural forces at work in Standard English – that is, white English – it is impossible to forget, when examining the development of Black English, the often agonized relationship between white people and black people in the United States (1544).

It is certainly possible to incorporate Black English and African American modes of discourse into the English classroom. In *African American Literacies Unleashed: Vernacular English and the Composition Classroom*, Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner discuss the role of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the composition classroom. They call for teachers to go beyond the traditional definitions of what it means to be a good teacher and begin to truly engage students in the material. Then, their goal for the book is to say calling ourselves “progressive teachers” is not enough. If the status quo in our own classrooms is less than optimal, we need to do something about that, to change the status quo. We need to unlearn our own racism if that’s what’s involved. We need to remedy our knowledge deficits regarding AAVE. We need to transform our attitudes in order to transform our practice. This is not easy, but if we want to be successful teachers to linguistically diverse and/or African American students, we must begin taking these steps” (Ball and Ladner xvii).

In order to truly engage students and begin building relationships, it is necessary to first appreciate what they bring with them to the classroom – this includes their language. When stu-
dents feel as though they, and all they represent, are accepted and welcome in the classroom, the learning process is much easier. In, *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*, Lisa Delpit shows a correlation between the classroom and the larger school setting. “I propose that the negative responses to the children’s home language on the part of the adults around them insures that they will reject the school’s language and everything else the school has to offer” (47). Ultimately, I want to educate teachers about the best possible way to reach as many students as possible through effective teaching that both honors and respects economically disadvantaged African American students and their culture.

Though African American children from middle and upper middle class environments share many [   ] it may sound harsh to some, and, in many ways, can also be applied to many non-white educators. In his 1979 essay, James Baldwin writes about education and attitude:

> It is not the black child’s language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. 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 and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many children that way” (Baldwin 3).

Baldwin wrote this in 1979 under a very different set of circumstances and his assessment of the situation then was mostly accurate albeit a bit aggressive. However, the difference now, in the 21st century, is not that the black child’s experience is despised. It is simply not understood. While I largely agree with Baldwin’s position, I believe that both black and non-black teachers can be guilty of not respecting a child’s “experience.”
African American English, the “mother tongue,” has been inspiring other cultures since the first slaves arrived here in America. However, without even going quite that far back, James Baldwin, in his 1979 essay, “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” states perfectly:

Now, I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound. Jazz, for example is a very specific sexual term, as in jazz me, baby, but white people purified it into the Jazz Age. Sock it to me, which means, roughly, the same thing, has been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s descendants with no qualms or hesitations at all, along with let it all hang out and right on! Beat to his socks, which was once the black’s most total and despairing image of poverty, was transformed into a thing called the Beat Generation, which phenomenon was largely, composed of uptight, middle class white people, imitating poverty, trying to get down, to get with it, doing their thing, doing their despairing best to be funky, which we, the blacks, never dreamed of doing – we were funky, baby, like funk was going out of style. Now, no one can eat his cake, and have it, too, and it is late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more whipped than it is.

(Baldwin 2).

1.4.5 Urban Students/Urban Education

Oftentimes, when the words “urban student” are used minds immediately drift to gang members, young criminals, teen parents, kids who don’t care, and long list of other negative
stereotypes. However, as Rebecca Goldstein points out in *19 Urban Questions: Teaching in the City*, urban students are not different because they are economically disadvantaged or thought to be more likely to commit crime, but because “…of the politics (e.g., the division of social goods that people, groups, and communities have) that play out as a part of their daily lives” (47).

In her book, *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Lisa Delpit, writes a great deal about issues of race and power in the classroom. Although many of her examples come from the elementary classroom, the concepts can be applied to the secondary classroom and the college classroom as well. Delpit asserts that students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, but they must also be helped to acknowledge their own “expertness” as well (Delpit 45). The success, of course, requires a certain level of commitment and willingness on the part of the teacher. Delpit also goes on to suggest that in order for economically disadvantaged children and/or children of color to be properly educated, adults who share their culture must be included in the process. “Black parents, teachers of color, and members of poor communities must be allowed to fully participate in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children’s best interest. Good liberal intentions are not enough” (Delpit 45). I agree with Delpit on her point that parents and others who share the student’s culture must share in the education process for it to be truly effective. The reality is that parental involvement is not always an absolute and cannot always be a factor here. Oftentimes, students in Title I schools are in single parent families and the parent often works long hours to make ends meet. Others are homeless, in foster care, or being raised by grandparents or other extended family members. As a result, parental involvement can be a challenge in some cases. In spite of this, family and/or parental involvement is necessary and the school plays a significant role in fostering this relationship. Goldfarb suggests that the school’s willingness to
keep an open line of communication and encourage parental involvement can make a significant
difference. She asserts, “If we continue basing the need for family involvement in school on the
sole concern of improving students’ academic achievement, we are in danger of removing par-
ents from helping in problems to whose solutions they can contribute the most” (264). In es-
sence, parents and families must also be seen as stakeholders in their child’s education. Teachers
and schools, contrary to popular belief, simply cannot do it alone. It is also important to recog-
nize that aside from work schedules, transportation issues, and similar challenges, parents may
want to help their children and be involved, but may be reluctant or unsure about how to ap-
proach teachers and schools to find out how they can help. It is up to the school’s to create op-
portunities for parents and families who may not be sure about how to do this. It’s also important
that schools encourage and welcome family involvement. “As educators, we are not sufficiently
prepared to recognize and deal with the overwhelming influence that social, cultural, and linguist-
ic contexts have in the life of our children. We need families and communities to face the chal-
lenges of educating the next generation” (265).

1.4.6 Afrocentric Principles

There are many who do not understand the rationale for an Afrocentric curriculum, and
there are those who also believe that it is nothing more than reverse racism. However, in An
Afrocentric Manifesto: Towards an African Renaissance, Molefi Asante contends that an
Afrocentric curriculum is necessary to ensure that Africans and people of African descent are not
merely “guests” in the curriculum. “School curricula see Africans as guests; consequently there
is little modeling of events and personalities….Why should a little African child have to see her-
self as a guest when her ancestors are interwoven with the fabric of the nation?” (Asante 91). It is
known that one of the primary goals of an Afrocentric or African-centered education is to boost
the mo-rale and self-esteem of African American students. While this is extremely important, an African-centered curriculum must also produce more tangible results. In *African Centered Schooling in Theory and Practice*, Diane Pollard and Cheryl Ajirotutu warn that an Afrocentric education must produce some measurable achievement outcomes, and those outcomes must be identified and negotiated.

In this dissertation, I am making the case for a curriculum that blends several elements. Just one in isolation is inadequate as Ginwright points out in his analysis of reform attempts, “While Afrocentric reform provides us with the necessary critique of race, it rarely confronts class, gender, age, sexual orientation and so on. The multidimensional approach allows us to understand the ways in which black youth and their communities respond to oppression through the often unacknowledged strength, resilience, and resistance that emerges from alienation” (34). Unfortunately, an Afrocentric curriculum alone cannot provide black youth with all they need to be successful. It plays a significant role, but it is not effective by itself.

### 1.4.7 Popular Culture

Michael Eric Dyson, in *Know What I Mean: Reflections on Hip Hop*, writes about his thoughts on non-black folk and their ability to analyze black culture. Though Dyson’s comments are for a general African-American audience, his comments may also be applied to educators, both black and non-black, when considering the power they hold:

So I’m not saying that non-black folk can’t understand and interpret black culture. But there is something to be said for the dynamics of power, where non-blacks have been afforded the privilege to interpret and – given the racial politics of the nation – to legitimate or decertify black vernacular and classical culture in ways that have been denied to black folk. So, it’s
not simply a question of the mastery of a set of ideas associated with the interpretation of appraisal of black life and art. It’s also about the power to shape a lens through which this culture is interpreted, and is seen as legitimate, or viable, or desirable, or real, by the dominant culture (Dyson 4).

Dyson’s position is relevant here because it is keeping with the notion that teachers of black youth must see their culture as legitimate and as a necessary element of classroom instruction. Black youth culture, urban youth culture, or hip hop culture are, essentially, one in the same. If one is in search of a more concrete term, here, resistance rhetoric might be a good choice. However, it is necessary to set aside the usual negative connotation of resistance and think more in terms of identity or the search for an identity. Ginwright asserts a powerful supporting statement:

Black youth in urban communities struggle to “not get caught up” in complex systems of control and containment, and their identities are often constructed in resistance to such racist stereotypes and unjust public policies. Their struggle for identity is played out through the expression of new and revived cultural forms such as hip-hop culture, rap music, and various forms of political or religious nationalism that redefine, reassert, and constantly reestablish what it means to be urban and black (30).

While race is at the forefront of resistance rhetoric, when dealing with the youth of today, an examination of economic and social circumstances is also necessary.
1.5 Methodology

Drawing on theories set forth by Tyrone Howard (2010) in *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America’s Classroom* this project will show that race does matter and that it has everything to do with teaching. This does not mean teachers need to use slang or quote hip hop lyrics, but it means that teachers must understand that a lifetime, and even a generation of habits cannot and should not be undone in order to teach English/composition, or to teach any subject for that matter. Howard asks the question, “What, if anything, does race and culture have to do with the widespread underachievement of non-mainstream students? Thus the need to rethink pedagogical practices is critical if underachieving student populations are to have improved chances for school success. Teachers need to understand that racially diverse students frequently bring cultural capital to the classroom that is oftentimes drastically different from mainstream norms and worldviews” (Howard 197). Oftentimes, students are penalized when their academic skills are not up to par. However, it is, more often than not, not because the student is not “capable” of acquiring or demonstrating mastery of certain skills. Earnest Morrell discusses this in great detail in his article, “Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Popular Culture: Literacy Development Among Urban Youth,” where he asserts New Literacy theorists argue that social context and cultural diversity significantly affect the literacy process. Often, the failure of urban students to develop “academic” literacy skills stems not from a lack of intelligence but from the inaccessibility of the school curriculum to students who are not in the “dominant” or “mainstream” culture (72).

Because this project seeks to take a theoretical look at a practical problem, it will be guided by stasis theory, a rhetorical framework for argumentative analysis. The primary research
questions will be explored utilizing the four categories that guide stasis theory. In *The Everyday Writer*, Andrea Lunsford writes:

In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, rhetoricians defined a series of questions by which to examine legal cases. The questions would be posed in sequence, because each depended on the question(s) preceding it. Together, the questions helped determine the point of contention in an argument, the place where disputants could focus their energy, and hence what kind of an argument to make. A modern version of those questions might look like the following: 1) Did something happen?; 2) What is its nature?; 3) What is its quality?; 4) What actions should be taken?

Within this framework, the theoretical approach will establish gaps in the existing research. While research exists on all of the topics highlighted in the review of literature, there is limited research that looks at how these areas can intersect to better help urban students and their teachers. Secondly, I will provide a discussion of exactly how my project will help to fill in the gaps by making connections between my own project and the existing research. Lastly, I will show how the blending of my project and the existing research is what is needed to make improvements in 9th grade English programs throughout the state of Georgia. Though the focus is on 9th grade English, the approaches could be applied to any subject in any urban secondary school in the state. After completion of the dissertation, a more lengthy project will involve classroom observations, teacher interviews, student interviews, and an examination of classroom artifacts to further the ideas presented here. The ultimate goal of this project is to make the case
for moving towards a curriculum that functions at the transformation and social action levels while also providing a discussion of the role pedagogy plays in the process.

I will use stasis theory, a rhetorical framework for argumentative analysis to explain the problem and what steps should be taken to correct the problem. Within that framework, I will use the guiding principles of critical pedagogy and the primary suppositions of rhetorical pedagogy to show that pre-service teachers and experienced teachers can successfully teach “at risk” African American students and prepare them for state mandated tests. There is a great deal of existing research that explores strategies for working with “at risk” African American students or urban youth. However, there is limited, if any research, that suggests teaching teachers to use these pedagogical strategies would offer increased chances for student success and teacher effectiveness.

The framework of stasis theory is appropriate because it offers a strategic method for addressing the problem, discussing the nature of the problem, explaining the quality of the problem, and finally, stating what actions should be taken to correct the problem. Additionally, I will also discuss kairos as it relates to the rhetor-teacher. Kairos is about timing, but in the classroom is often more about recognizing the right timing than forcing it. However, there are times when a kairotic moment can be created for teaching. In an essay on the intersections of kairos and pedagogy, Mary Wendt writes:

Being aware of kairotic moments can help us get what we want and can achieve positive ends in the classroom. Creating kairos, on the other hand, must be done judiciously: kairos should only be created to help others, not to wield power or keep others suppressed. Taking advantage of those kairotic moments—whether organic or created—in the classroom
particularly, can help a teacher make the most suitable learning experience for everyone (3).

An effective teacher is always aware of kairos. The rhetor-teacher recognizes when students might be confused and is willing to stop and ask questions or clarify points. The rhetor-teacher recognizes when students want and need more, and is willing to accommodate that as well. Kairos is about being in the moment and recognizing when something more or something different is required and then providing it.

Critical pedagogy helps students to find their own voices, find their place in society, and challenge traditional notions of power in thoughtful, effective ways. Rhetorical pedagogy is appropriate because its primary suppositions align with Asante’s tenets of an Afrocentric curriculum and also offer solid strategies for working with urban students. The suppositions focus on the following: a. the notion that the ability to speak and write well are not based solely on independent talent, but theory and practice, b. repetition of a set of tasks leads to growth, communication takes place in a cultural context, and d. observation and analysis are imperative for effective communication.

This study will provide valuable insight into the current issues that exist for teachers of urban students and what can be done to meet these challenges head on in effective and positive ways. Furthermore, this project offers a new approach or contribution to the field that has not yet been fully explored. Rhetoric is power and is the central focus of any effective communication. As a result, educators must also recognize the importance of considering their audience when preparing lesson plans and classroom activities. Without audience consideration, chances of ineffective teaching and poorly prepared students are great. Therefore, it makes sense that a rhetorical pedagogy be at the core of working with urban students. The culminating
activity in this project will be sample assignments that align with Georgia’s Common Core Standards, for the first 9 weeks of a 9th grade ELA class in Georgia where the majority of the students are both African American and “at risk.

Below is a list of key terms mentioned throughout this chapter along with a brief definition of each.

1.6 Key Terms

African American rhetoric - Rhetoric is defined as the art of writing well or speaking well. African American Rhetoric typically refers, more frequently, to oral modes of discourse used by African Americans within the African American community.

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) - Another name for Ebonics or Black English

Afrocentric principles - Afrocentricity becomes a revolutionary idea because it studies ideas, concepts, events, personalities, and political and economic processes from a standpoint of black people as subjects and not as objects, basing all knowledge on the authentic interrogation of location. When black people view themselves as centered and central in their own history then they see themselves as agents, actors, and participants rather than as marginals on the periphery of political or economic experience. (Asante)

Black English – Everyday varieties of African American English spoken by African Americans

Black youth culture - The interests of African-American young adults such as the music they listen to, television programming, style of dress, and other elements of their daily lives.

Culturally relevant pedagogy - Teaching style (pedagogy) that recognizes and embraces the diversity and cultural background of the student.
**Culturally relevant curriculum** – Content that recognizes and embraces the diversity and cultural background of the student.

**Ebonics** – Coined by a group of African-American scholars led by clinical psychologist, Robert L. Williams, while at a conference, “Language and the Urban Child” in 1973. Ebonics derives its form from ebony (black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound). The term never really caught on (Smitherman 28).

**English Language Arts (ELA)** - In English Language Arts the strand development consists of reading, writing, conventions, and a strand for listening, speaking, and viewing. Although the Phase I process included a strand for research, that strand is incorporated in the reading and writing strands of the new document. The standards for viewing are new for Georgia, and they address the need for students to become discerning viewers of text. These standards are primarily concerned with media literacy.

**End of Course Tests (EOCT)** - The EOCT align with the Georgia curriculum standards and include assessment of specific content knowledge and skills. The assessments provide diagnostic information to help students identify strengths and areas of need in learning, therefore improving performance in all high school courses and on other assessments, such as the GHSGT. The EOCT also provide data to evaluate the effectiveness of classroom instruction at the school and system levels. (GADOE)

**Georgia Performance Standards (GPS)** - Performance standards provide clear expectations for instruction, assessment, and student work. They define the level of work that demonstrates achievement of the standards, enabling a teacher to know “how good is good enough.” Performance standards incorporate content standards, but expand upon them by providing suggested
tasks, sample student work, and teacher commentary on that work. (Georgiaperformancestandards.org)

**Rhetor-teacher** - A teacher who recognizes that he or she is an educator, but must also be a rhetorician to be truly effective.

**Stasis theory** - A rhetorical framework for argumentative analysis

**Title I school** - Title I, Part A was established to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards. The requirements for a school to be school wide Title I are: Not less than 40% of the children in the eligible school attendance area are from low-income families or not less than 40% of the children enrolled in the school are from low-income families. All children in a school wide program are considered to be Title I students. (www.thebsgrop.org)
2 WHY THESE TEACHERS BE TRIPPIN ON US?

2.1 Overview

Drawing on theories set forth by Tyrone Howard, this chapter will show that race does matter and that it has everything to do with teaching. This does not mean teachers need to use slang or quote hip hop lyrics, but it means that teachers must understand that a lifetime, and even a generation of habits cannot and should not be undone in order to teach English/composition, or to teach any subject for that matter. Howard asks the question, “What, if anything, does race and culture have to do with the widespread underachievement of nonmainstream students? Thus the need to rethink pedagogical practices is critical if underachieving student populations are to have improved chances for school success. Teachers need to understand that racially diverse students frequently bring cultural capital to the classroom that is oftentimes drastically different from mainstream norms and worldviews” (Howard 197). Oftentimes, students are penalized when their academic skills are not up to par. However, it is, more often than not, not because the student is not “capable” of acquiring or demonstrating mastery of certain skills. Earnest Morrell discusses this in great detail in his article, “Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Popular Culture: Literacy Development Among Urban Youth,” where he asserts New Literacy theorists argue that social context and cultural diversity significantly affect the literacy process. Often, the failure of urban students to develop “academic” literacy skills stems not from a lack of intelligence but from the inaccessibility of the school curriculum to students who are not in the “dominant” or “mainstream” culture. (72). In essence, the curriculum does not have to be all black, but it does need to be developed and presented in a way that recognizes that its audience is not from the dominant culture.
2.2 Curriculum Matters

Currently, textbooks used in Georgia’s high schools are selected from a list distributed by the Georgia Department of Education. According to the Georgia Department of Education’s website, The Department of Education releases an intent to bid each year and publishers are able to provide information about textbooks available for specific content areas and grade levels. The process requires that publishers submit the textbook, information about supplementary materials that will accompany the book, information about electronic access, as well as a detailed form that describes the ways in which the textbook’s content correlates with Georgia’s Common Core Standards. During the summer months, a committee of educators and school administrators review the books and they are also displayed for public viewing as well at school sites across the state. The committee prepares a list of recommended textbooks and it is then disseminated to school systems in January. However, what is not known is the ethnic diversity present on the selection committee who makes the recommendations. Ultimately, though, each district and/or school in the state then selects their textbooks from that list.

A close reading of several textbooks currently being used in Georgia schools will show that while they do introduce 9th graders to a variety of genres and key literary elements, they are not culturally relevant. Yes, students should be introduced to works that are a part of the traditional literary canon. However, this must be done in a way that makes them relevant to the students’ lives and experiences. Beyond that, however, students should also be introduced to literature written by African American writers. Unfortunately, reliance solely on textbooks won’t permit this. In Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Practice, and Research, Geneva Gay writes at length about the challenges textbooks pose. Though she addressed these challenges in 2000, her assertion still holds true 11 years later; there is progress, but some problems remain.
She writes, “textbooks continue to be flawed with respect to their treatment of ethnic and cultural diversity for several reasons” (130). In essence, they are flawed because across grade levels and subjects, not enough attention is given to people of color – and what does exist is given to African Americans. The ethnic content that is included is conservative and focuses primarily on positive interactions of racial groups. For the most part, controversial topics and people are avoided. The texts seem to focus on males, and middle class experiences that are much like mainstream America’s standards of behavior. Fourth, textbook discussions about ethnic groups and their concerns are not consistent across time, with contemporary issues being overshadowed by historical ones. (Gay 131) In her book, Gay looks at a study of fifth grade history textbooks conducted by Gordy and Pritchard that ultimately confirmed that textbooks gloss over pivotal moments in history such as the slave trade. They do not offer a thorough analysis or discussion of the time period, do not consider the involvement of other racial groups, and do not correlate these historical occurrences with present circumstances. Typically, English Language Arts textbooks do not even address certain pivotal moments in history. For example, the Prentice Hall Timeless Voices book used in some 9th grade ELA classes does not include slave narratives or any other writings from the time period. Those are not introduced until American Literature during the 11th grade. As the table below will show, the Timeless Voices book includes a sprinkling of works by a few African-American authors. However, if any connections are to be made to any significant moments in history such as the slave trade, the Harlem Renaissance, or The Civil Rights Movement, it is the teacher’s responsibility to make these connections, provide supplemental readings, and ensure correlation with state standards.

The Georgia Performance standards provide clear expectations for instruction, assessment and student work. They define the level of work that demonstrates achievement of
the standards, enabling a teacher to know “how good is good enough.” The performance standards isolate and identify the skills needed to use the knowledge and skills to problem-solve, reason, communicate, and make connections with other information. They also tell the teacher how to assess the extent to which the student knows the material or can manipulate and apply the information. The performance standard incorporates the content standard, which simply tells the teacher what a student is expected to know. Additionally, it adds to these concepts by providing three additional items: suggested tasks, sample student work, and teacher commentary on that work. The textbooks used are created to align with the recently changed Georgia Performance Standards for English Language Arts. However, the difficulty is that most of the textbooks on the list do not offer very many culturally relevant or high interest readings. Culturally relevant readings explore the culture of the student. They explore issues that, in this case, the marginalized African American student should know about their ancestors’ contributions, experiences, challenges, and interactions with other ethnic groups. In order to be culturally relevant and of significant to the student, the texts do not necessarily all have to be “hip hop centered.” However, the texts should be meaningful to the student, he or she should be able to make connections to his or her own life or to the times in which we now live. A sprinkling of “safe” isolated short stories, poems, and essays by African American authors really offers students no meaningful connection to any particular moment in history or the present. However, they do comfortably align with the middle class values and expectations many teachers and pre-service teachers have. As a result, it could be quite difficult for a teacher to fully embrace a culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom using only the textbook. However, using culturally relevant literature or making cultural connections to any literature used in the classroom is still not sufficient. It is a start, but it is not the end of the road. A culturally relevant classroom must also offer a safe space for the mar-
ginalized student to use the language of his or her culture, African American English, in ways that work with the teaching and learning experience. However, it is also important to note that a culturally relevant pedagogy does not need to be limited to the marginalized student. While African-American students from the middle-class, might possibly be more savvy in terms of code switching and home expectations govern, to some degree, classroom performance, a culturally relevant curriculum best serves all students who are a part of a marginalized group. Class becomes a more problematic issue when the educator (of any race) with middle class values, either explicit or implicit, allows those values (the pursuit of higher education, a traditional family structure, the pursuit of wealth, etc.) and expectations to be the primary foundation for the classroom.

The Prentice Hall Literature Book *Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes* (Gold Level) is currently being used in Muscogee County. The textbook aligns with Georgia State Standards and is divided into ten units. Each unit includes works from several different genres. However, for clarity purposes, it is best to look at the presence of African American writers or culturally relevant work via genre. The table below lists the genre and the works by African American writers found in the textbook.
### Table 1: Textbook Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short Stories</th>
<th>Drama</th>
<th>Folk Tales/Mythology</th>
<th>Nonfiction</th>
<th>Poetry</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>New Directions – Maya Angelou</td>
<td>“Dream Deferred” - Langston Hughes</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Blues Ain’t No Mockingbird</em> – Toni Cade Bambara</td>
<td><em>Go Deep to the Sewer</em> – Bill Cosby</td>
<td>“Dreams” – Langston Hughes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“On Summer” – Lorraine Hansberry</td>
<td>“Sympathy”- Paul Laurence Dunbar</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>from <em>Rosa Parks: My Story</em> – Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins</td>
<td>“Caged Bird” – Maya Angelou</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Arthur Ashe Remembered” – John McPhee</td>
<td>“Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” Ishmael Reed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I Have a Dream” – Martin Luther King Jr.</td>
<td>“Shoulders” – Naomi Shihab Nye</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Glory and Hope – Nelson Mandela</td>
<td>“Haiku Poems” – Richard Wright</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“Women” – Alice Walker</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Slam, Dunk, &amp; Hook” – Yusef Komunyakaa</td>
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</table>

### 2.2 Dispelling Myths

The curriculum used in Georgia’s secondary English Language Arts classes where the majority of the student body is African American and considered “at risk” is problematic because it is not culturally relevant, and nor is it high interest. The first primary difficulty with the content of the textbook above is that it does not offer even a reasonable representation of works by
African-American authors. Additionally, the non-fiction works primarily draw from the same lessons students have probably been hearing most of their lives. While Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King are certainly key figures in history, there are also many others who made significant contributions during the time period. What about the other men who were a part of the “Big Six?” The story of Malcolm X’s journey of teaching himself to read and write while incarcerated is a fascinating one. There is also the story of Daisy Bates a female newspaper publisher who published controversial stories and played an integral role in integration. It is probably fair to assume that even the most underexposed student is familiar with Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. However, there were so many other people who played an integral role in the movement. In fact, there were many other challenges and things happening within the Black community that helped to shape the Movement. While the entire textbook, particularly, in what is essentially a survey course, cannot focus on just one textbook, it can provide selections that offer a different perspective and/or a more thorough depiction of the time period. This also holds true for the poetry selections the Timeless Voices book offers. There are lots of other Harlem Renaissance poets besides just Langston Hughes – there’s Sterling Brown, Claude McKay and many, many others. What about poets such as June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni. Better yet, what about more current, but equally as relevant poets such as Saul Williams and J. Ivy from Def Poets?

Yes, it is true that the works currently in the textbook are in line with the middle class values mentioned earlier. It is also true that the writers suggested in the above paragraph also represent something very different from the traditional, middle-class values seen by the African American writers currently included in the text. They are frustrated, angry even, and have no interest in what W.E. B DuBois called “racial accommodation.” Pleasing the mainstream to keep
the peace is not what these writers represent. While they also do not represent violence, they do represent equality, independence, intelligence, self-respect, community pride, and critical thinking. Aren’t these the very skills marginalized African-American students must possess to be change agents and navigate this global world we live in? While it is important to select works that are age appropriate and classroom appropriate, it is still very possible to do this using works that encourage students to think critically and explore ideas from more than just one perspective. As it stands, some might argue, that the African American writers currently included do not present students with any other ideas beyond the same ones they are already regularly presented with. True growth and learning does not happen to its fullest capacity when all parties are comfortable. Yes, teachers must also be willing to explore ideas that challenge their own thinking and push them beyond their comfort zone. Continuing to play it safe will continue to provide underprepared students, low test scores, and failing schools. The biggest hurdle that the field of education must overcome is the willingness to accept when things are not working and do something different. This means that teachers, those who appoint the textbook selection committee members, and the committee members themselves must also be on board with working to find ways to expose all students to perspectives and world views that might be different or even challenge their own. After all, isn’t education really about teaching young people to consider multiple perspectives, think critically and then make their own decisions?

A high interest curriculum does not necessarily have to be a “Black” curriculum. However, it should consider the age, interests, and cultural background of the student. Teachers of urban students must commit themselves to take on the challenge of culturally relevant teaching. In her 1995 article “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Gloria Ladson – Billings defines culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy of opposi-
tion that must be committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment.” She moves on to offer a definition of culturally relevant pedagogy. She suggests that it rests on three criteria or propositions: “(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (Ladson–Billings 160). Perhaps this might sound like “more work” to some. However, doing the work necessary on the front end won’t guarantee 100% success but it will help to establish bonds with students, decrease behavior and classroom management challenges, and develop prepared students.

In order to better situate a discussion of African American English, it is first necessary to dispel a popular myth that exists about languages other than Standard American English. All too often, languages outside of Standard American English are thought to be nothing more than slang or incorrect English. Firstly, these terms will be defined using definitions provided by lexicographers and linguists. Furthermore, a comparative discussion which makes the distinctions between the two will be presented; upon completion, definitions of the term vernacular will be discussed. Within the presentation of the definitions, special attention will be placed on the particular language components that are involved in each of the terms. Because the terms and their respective definitions will be discussed in the context of the perception of the educator, the definitions of slang, dialect, and vernacular will be applied to a specific incident. The incident that will be the focus of this discussion is a conversation that takes place between a parent and a child. The conversation is as follows: “I ain’t got no homework today,” and the parent says, “Don’t use slang. Don’t they teach you better than that in school?” After laying out the definitions and their various components, the next step is to determine whether the statement made by the child in the conversation with his parent is slang or dialect and to determine whether
or not the term vernacular, as defined here, is also applicable. Definitions of the aforementioned terms will come from a variety of sources. They will come from various dictionaries as well as from well-known linguists.

2.3 Slang vs. Dialect

In order to better understand the aforementioned conversation between the parent and the child it is necessary to begin with a clear definition of slang. According to Webster’s New World College Dictionary, slang is “highly informal speech that is outside conventional or standard usage and consists both of coined words and phrases and of new or extended meanings attached to established terms.” So, this definition confirms that slang is ever changing and cannot, at least not technically, be traced to a specific language or ethnic group.

In African American English, Lisa Green provides readers with two key highlights about slang. Firstly, she points out that slang items can be divided into categories and that slang items can be added to the lexicon. She also highlights Labov’s three categories of slang: 1) those for labeling people, 2) those for painting people, activities and places positively or negatively, and 3) those for ways of spending leisure time focused on having fun (27). The phrase “ain’t got no” has been around since long before popular culture became hot and, most certainly before the Hip Hop, Punk, and other generations sprang up around us.

This point is further illustrated in Dumas’ and Lighter’s article “Is Slang a Word for Linguists?” In this article, they provide numerous definitions of slang along with an in-depth analysis of each. However, what is even more intriguing is their take on James Sledd’s 1965 essay “On Not Teaching English Usage.” In one portion of the essay, Sledd highlights the message educators are really sending when they warn students against using slang. Dumas and Lighter, after sharing an excerpt from Sledd’s article, move on to write, “Sledd has put his finger on the
most crucial feature of slang: it is used deliberately, in jest or in earnest, to flout a conventional social or semantic norm” (12). And so, based on the information provided, it can be concluded that the statement made by the young child is not slang.

In her article on dialect, Toohey, draws on a discussion of dialect by British linguist Trudgill. He points out that a definition of dialect is a bit fuzzy being that dialect refers not so much to a linguistic but to a social notion. For him, dialects are distinguished by grammatical differences. Toohey, however, moves on to point out that there are different types of dialect. For example, standard dialect is defined as that variety of a language that is considered appropriate for communication over a wide area, and is usually the mother tongues of the standard middle class. In “Dialect, Language, Nation,” Haugen suggests that dialect and language are, in fact, almost one in the same. “A “dialect” is then any one of the related norms that language refers to (single linguistic or group of related) comprised under the general name “language,” historically the result of either divergence or convergence.”

In “Democracy, Dialect, and the Power of Every Voice,” Lyman and Figgins continue this trend of treating dialect as a language, or suggesting that the terms are interchangeable. Within their article is a section on the basic principles of language instruction, and a portion of it reads, “Instruction in Standard English should emerge from teachers’ and students’ shared understanding and appreciation of the dialect of home and community. The objective should be for students to gain mastery in yet another dialect (Standard English), not to replace the language of home” (44). As seen in their suggestions about what should happen in the classroom, Lyman and Figgins, in an indirect manner, of sorts, imply that the distinction between language and dialect is not a major one.
The reason for highlighting the fact that these two words are seemingly used interchangeably at times is to further highlight that slang and dialect are two very different concepts. However, The Columbia Guide to Standard American English opts to provide a clear distinction between dialect and language, “Dialects differ from languages in that different dialects of a given language are usually mutually intelligible, albeit occasionally with some difficulty at first” (137). Toohey and her discussion of Trudgill contribute significantly to the ability to better situate the term and understand the variations that exist among the definitions and perceptions of the world. However, Trudgill seems to recognize that a dialect has its own unique and phonological system. At any rate, the conclusion is that the statement made by the young student is dialect.

2.4 The Vernacular

Lastly, it is necessary to determine whether or not the statement made by the young student is vernacular. According to A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage, “vernacular is the authentic, natural pattern of speech used by persons indigenous to a certain community” (539). The key word in this particular definition is the word indigenous. Immediately upon reading the word “indigenous” one could conclude or at least assume that vernacular might possibly be more closely connected to dialect than to slang. In her article “On Modern Vernaculars and B.J. Jackson,” Gwendolyn Wright provides a definition much like the dictionary definition shared here. However, her assessment of the information is more enlightening and helps bring further clarification to the question of whether the young student’s statement can be classified as vernacular. She writes, “Vernaculars deal with matters in the here-and-now, with daily life rather than with theoretical abstractions. These are decidedly the languages of the street and the home-used to barter for goods, joke with friends, comfort a child, praise a meal, taunt a foe, entice a lover” (477). Interestingly, again the trend of connecting the term directly with language
appears again. And so it is concluded that the statement of the young child may also be categorized or labeled as vernacular.

2.5 The Classroom

Now, that it has been determined that African-American English is in fact a dialect and not just slang or “bad English” it is necessary to understand how it is received in the classroom. All too often, educators of all ethnicities are guilty of not allowing students to use their home or community language, which in certain settings, particularly in inner city schools or Title I schools is often the primary form of communication for students. Language oppression is about not allowing students to utilize and embrace the languages of their home and/or community. Language oppression can exist in any capacity – it could be young, white children in an Appalachian community, it could be the Native American students Lisa Delpit writes about in Other People’s Children, it could be the first generation college students Mike Rose writes about in Lives on the Boundary, or it could be the students I taught who speak Black English. Language oppression is not just limited to Black English. Black English Vernacular thus represents a unique dialect with social, historical, and cultural roots. To equate this vernacular with slang, as though it were merely an unsystematic and casual form of communication, is not only scientifically inaccurate, but also psychologically denigrating to its speakers. In the long run, this dialect is perhaps best recognized as a system of communication which has legitimate roots but whose social utility is now defunct. To not recognize it as such will ironically only continue to put up barriers between middle class teachers and minority students. This in turn will further hamper academic learning and hinder the processes that enable a larger number of Blacks to become fully acculturated into American society. At the same time, the call for teachers to grasp the tangible relationship between Black English Vernacular and cognitive performance -- regardless of
how that teacher "re-education" manifests -- should not be misconstrued as pleas for classroom instruction in, or legitimization, of Ebonics. To be sure, this dialect is not the language of choice in education, commerce, industry, science, or any other domain of conventional American society. (Oubre)

In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks, speaks for many when she reflects on Adrienne Rich’s poem “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.” She writes, “Reflecting on A. Rich’s words, I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize” (168).

When teachers share cultural identity with their students, they are more likely to perceive students’ language use as appropriate and to support development of the academic language skills that count for success at school and in other mainstream institutions. When they are ethnically different, it becomes crucial for them to investigate the possibility that children’s classroom performance is rooted in community practice. In essence, “culturally relevant teaching requires that students maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence” (Billings 160). Cultural integrity truly requires integration of the student’s language in the classroom along with texts written by and about people from the student’s own ethnic group.

The second part of this argument is: secondary English education programs should help teachers to embrace and understand the language and culture of African American students as a tool for being more effective in the classroom. Beyond that, teachers who are already teaching should also be cognizant of strategies for successfully working with urban students. Of course, culturally relevant teaching is key to this success. “It requires that teachers attend to students’ academic needs, not merely make them “feel good.” The trick of culturally relevant teaching is
to get students to “choose” academic excellence” (Ladson–Billings 160). There is a direct correlation between teacher attitudes, teacher knowledge and student success. When analyzing reasons for student success, or the lack thereof, a variety of factors must be considered. One of the most important is teacher attitudes about language. Next would be teacher attitudes about culture – both their own and that of the students they teach.

Teacher attitudes about culture play a significant role in their success as an educator – particularly in cases where the student population is “at risk” or marginalized. Negative attitudes about culture can create a myriad of issues in the classroom and educators may not even realize the real reasons behind the difficulties they face. However, it is important to note that not all teachers are aware of the negative views they might have on their students’ culture; however, this lack of awareness does not change the impact on classroom success. Classroom success can be defined as a place where students are engaged, discipline problems are minimal, and the majority of the students are also passing the course and state mandated exams. While negative teacher attitudes do not only exist among white teachers, this group can often have a more unique set of challenges because of what is often a subconscious decision to not apply the term “culture” to the lives they lead. In “Teaching in Dangerous Times: Culturally Relevant Approaches to Teacher Assessment, Ladson-Billings addresses this in more detail. She claims,

...many middle-class White American teachers fail to associate the notion of culture with themselves. Instead, they believe that they are “just regular Americans” while people of color are the ones “with culture.” This notion of regularity serves a normalizing function that positions those who are “not regular” as “others.” Not recognizing that they too are cultural beings prevents these teachers from ever questioning taken-for-granted
assumptions about the nature of human thought, activity, and existence” (261).

This lack of cultural awareness on the teacher’s part (even when it is unintentional) immediately creates a complex class dynamic because a superior/inferior mindset that extends beyond just the student/teacher relationship. In *White Teachers, Diverse Classrooms*, Julie Landsman, devotes an entire chapter to issues surrounding White Teachers and White privilege in America. The chapter is entitled “Being White: Invisible Privileges of a New England Prep School Girl.” Landsman, early on, makes a similar point to the one Ladson – Billings makes about white teachers. She writes,

Many would like to couch the discussion of race in a litany of stories. Stories that allow us to shake our head and feel sympathy, sorrow or disapproval for the victims of race discrimination. We can feel comfortable when the discussion rests on the misfortune of others, and does not come back to our own place in the story, having to do with our experience, responsibility, complicity, and advantages as Whites in America” (15).

In essence, Ladson-Billings and Landsman make the same point. White teachers must acknowledge their own culture before they can effectively understand and appreciate the culture of the African American students they work with. It may not necessarily be a comfortable place for many; however, it will begin the process of better understanding their students.
2.6 Acknowledging Culture

While the discussion for the last few moments has been specifically about White teachers and Black students, the issue is really much bigger than Black and White. It is more of a cultural issue than a racial issue. Glasgow, in Making the Multicultural Connection, indicates that what a teacher really needs is not racial awareness as much as cultural context to better serve students (Glasgow 5). So, here is where it also becomes necessary to point out that it is not only White teachers who face challenges when working with African American students, the teachers can be from any race – including African American. Again, the challenges arise not from racial differences but from cultural differences. These, quite frankly, also exist within the African American community. “For an educator it is class background, sexual orientation, and racial and ethnic affiliations that must be understood. This moves the teacher beyond the ‘Black-White paradigm.’ This Black White paradigm racializes African Americans but not Whites. Teachers fail to see culture in their African American students and the huge range of ethnic diversity within their population” (Glasgow 5). It is also important to note that this failure to see or recognize culture at times is not just limited to teachers of any one race. Teachers of all races may be observed doing this.

So, then, what can be done to ensure that pre-service teachers have a foundation that involves not only a solid knowledge of the content area but that they are culturally responsive as well. However, are teacher education programs providing pre-service teachers with the tools necessary to become culturally responsive teachers or are they simply just moving them along? “…many teacher education programs have interpreted infusion narrowly to mean the sprinkling of disparate bits of information about diversity into the established curriculum, resulting in the superficial treatment of multicultural issues.” Many teacher education programs at mainstream
universities and Historically Black Colleges and Universities in Georgia offer courses such as Exploring Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Diversity in Educational Contexts. While the course description is intriguing, the difficulty is that the course itself is optional and students may opt to take Multicultural Education OR Critical Pedagogy instead. So, this means a student may well matriculate through an undergraduate or graduate level teacher education/certification program without having to take a course on diversity at all, or one course at the most. The typical response of teacher education programs to the growing diversity among K-12 students has been to add a course or two on multicultural education, bilingual education, or urban education but to leave the rest of the curriculum largely intact (Goodwin, 1997).

Although such courses play an important role in preparing teachers for diversity, this approach to curriculum reform does not go far enough. Because added courses are often optional, students can complete their teacher education program without receiving any preparation whatsoever in issues of diversity (20).

The challenges facing educators of African American children are numerous. However, there are solutions. For starters, teacher education programs should consider offering specialized programs for those who anticipate working with African American students in public schools. To truly have a chance at success, pre-service teachers really need more than just one or two isolated courses on diversity or multiculturalism. They must also realize that the foundation of culturally relevant instruction is the culture of the learner as well as the rhetorical modes of discourse used by the students they are teaching. When teachers understand and respect the culture of the students they are working with, it immediately breaks down communication barriers, empowers students, and make the educational process a much smoother one for all parties involved.
3 YOU KNOW WHAT IT IS: WORKING WITH RHETORICAL TRADITIONS

3.1 African-American Rhetoric

This chapter specifically addresses African American rhetoric and modes of discourse. Although the definition of African American rhetoric was mentioned in Chapter 1, its definition from Banks Race, Rhetoric and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground is reiterated here:

I define African American rhetoric as the set of traditions of discursive practices - verbal, visual, and electronic - used by individuals and groups of African Americans toward the ends of full participation in American society on their own terms. These traditions and practices have both public and private dimensions and embrace the communicative efforts directed at African Americans and at other groups within the society: hence, directly persuasive public address and less overtly persuasive day to day performances that contribute to the creation of individual and group identities are all viable subjects of African American rhetorical study (3).

Banks’ definition is comprehensive and offers a clear snapshot of African American rhetoric and all that it encompasses. While there are many other definitions, this one offered by Banks will serve as the standard that should be considered when preparing to teach urban students. However, in The Word at Work, Richard Wright offers insight that could and should function as an extended tag line to Banks’ definition. Wright insists, “In effect, to be different is to experience the world differently, which leads one to know the world differently, which leads one to think and feel differently and, ultimately, to talk differently. Much of African American rhetoric can be understood as a journey from being in the world to discourse about being and doing in the world, where the world is the primary means of forming, informing, and transforming
consciousness” (86). It is important that educators, of any group of students, recognize the key point that Wright makes here. Yes, it is true that the society we live in requires a certain degree of conformity to even have a chance at competitive careers and success as defined by the mainstream. However, what is important is that student’s’ differences cannot be ignored and there is not a one size fits all journey to success. Teachers of urban students must be cognizant of their students’ frames of reference when selecting content and preparing lessons to teach. And so, the challenge is to do just what Wright suggests – figure how best to help students move from simply existing in the world to thriving and making an impact on the world. A definition offered by Robert Glenn Howard serves as the bridge between African American rhetoric and a more standard definition of rhetoric without cultural nuances applied.

"…, rhetoric is not only to be found in political texts or formal speeches; nor is it only learned from the institutionally authorized texts of college debate courses. It also occurs in the everyday and informal discourse through which we construct our daily lives. It is not just something taught from some abstract "top" down. Instead, it is also, and perhaps first, some thing learned and carried forward in everyday social interaction. When rhetoric is conceived as "vernacular," it is seen as operating in everyday social discourse (173).

Howard’s definition offers both a standard definition of rhetoric and an analysis of its relationship with language that is probably not culture specific by design. However, it could quite easily be applied to any cultural group, and it is most certainly an assessment that accurately describes the relationship between AAVE and rhetoric. Furthermore, Howard’s definition helps to further solidify Black English as a language and not merely bad grammar. For many, further
convincing is not necessary. However, research that supports the position is always welcomed. In her article, “Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture,” Janice Hamlet addresses the African American oral tradition and its impact not just on African-American culture, but on American popular culture.

The African American influence on American popular culture has been among the most sweeping and influential rhetorical impacts this nation has ever seen. African American cultural expressions have been a way of resisting racial oppression by articulating experiences of resistance and struggle and articulating oppositional identities in highly creative and dynamic ways, beginning with the oral tradition from which all other cultural forms originated. Because of this dynamic, an understanding of the African and African American oral traditions is highly important for K-12 students to learn (6).

While this project is essentially arguing for the need for teachers to understand Black English and African American rhetoric, or the African American oral tradition, Hamlet makes another essential point. It is also necessary for students to learn these things as well. While they may speak Black English because it is all they know or inherently use African American modes of discourse, it is safe to say that many probably do not know the history or the origins of these very significant aspects of their culture. As a result, this still brings us back to the original assertion that teachers must have at least a fundamental understanding of these concepts. Yet, it is also important to note that obtaining and using this knowledge does not mean that every class must necessarily become an African American studies class. In her project, “Afrocentric Rhetoric Transcending Audiences and Contexts: A Case Study of Preacher and Politician Emanuel...
Cleaver II,” Shauntae Brown-White asserts, “…Afrocentric rhetoric must transcend barriers” (265). Using Afrocentric rhetoric as part of the foundation for developing a 9th grade English class does not mean that all of the content will be by or about people of African descent. However, it does mean that the lessons, assignments, discussions, and activities should be designed with the African-American students at the center. Brown-White’s study draws on Asante’s labeling of the people most refer to as African-Americans. He posits, “Africans in the United States cannot afford to forget that we did not change our origins simply by crossing the sea. We left Africa as Africans and arrived on the shores of the Americas as Africans. However, in the heads of many Africans we became something entirely different from what we were when we left…Only the African American has been corrupted in a historical linkage and ancestral connections (289).” Asante’s statement demonstrates that somewhere along the way a disconnect has taken place. Along with this disconnect, the African community in America lost its identity and its strength. It would require a bit of a digression to attempt to pinpoint when this shift happened and how it continues to manifest itself in our communities today. However, the classroom is a great place to begin to repair this disconnect, and John Ogbu’s article, “Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities: A Cultural-Ecological Theory of School Performance with Some Implications for Education” is a good starting point for exploring how the disconnect impacts the minority student in the classroom. The cultural-ecological theory, an explanation of minority school performance “considers the broad societal and school factors as well as the dynamics within the minority communities. Ecology is the "setting," "environment," or "world" of people (minorities), and "cultural," broadly, refers to the way people (in this case the minorities) see their world and behave in it” (158). So then, the question we as educators must ask ourselves is whether we consider both the ecolo-
gy and the cultural when thinking about lessons and activities for our classes – at any level. Ogbu’s theory has two primary parts:

One part is about the way the minorities are treated or mistreated in education in terms of educational policies, pedagogy, and returns for their investment or school credentials. Ogbu calls this the system. The second part is about the way the minorities perceive and respond to schooling as a consequence of their treatment. Minority responses are also affected by how and why a group became a minority. This second set of factors is designated as community forces (Ogbu n.d.b).

Ogbu’s theory places a heavy task upon educators, at least those who are truly concerned about ways to improve the educational system for at risk African-American students because he adds yet another layer to an already complex task. However, he is simply acting as an advocate for the student by suggesting that his or her life experiences and possible world view be considered when classroom planning is taking place. The framework each teacher develops for his or her secondary ELA classroom may vary somewhat. However, there are certain elements that should be a part of any framework for a class where at risk African American students are being taught to embrace and maintain their own cultural identity while also effectively interacting with the world around them.

In fact, two of the three arguments from Brown-White’s study on Eldridge Cleaver might be used as part of a framework for the secondary classroom. She proposes, “Afrocentric rhetoric, which focuses on viewing the world through the conceptual and cultural lenses of an African, has the ability to transcend political, racial, and other cultural barriers; (2) an African American rhetor can maintain his or her cultural integrity and appeal to others outside of his or her own cul-
ture” (265). Her first argument supports my earlier assertion that the African-American student should be at the center when conceptualizing lessons and other classroom activities. Beyond that, the goal is for students to leave the classroom being comfortable with their own culture while also being able to interact with other cultures without relinquishing their own cultural identity.

3.2 The Language Rhetoric Connection

In their introduction to the section on modern and postmodern rhetoric, Bizzell and Herzberg make the connection between language and rhetoric.

Rhetoric has grown to encompass a theory of language as a form of social behavior, of intention and interpretations the determinants of meaning, of the way that knowledge is created by argument, and of the way that ideology and power are extended through language….Enlarged as a theoretical resource, rhetoric has also expanded its grasp of the ways that women, people of color, and cultural or ethnic minorities use language to gain a hearing for themselves. In short, rhetoric has become a comprehensive theory of language as effective discourse (1183).

Though Bizzell and Herzberg’s wording almost seems to imply that rhetoric has done women and other minority groups a favor of some kind, the more important point they are making here is that it is virtually impossible to fully examine one without the other. In David Gold’s “Nothing Educates Us Like a Shock: The Integrated Rhetoric of Melvin B. Tolson,” he writes about the ways in which Tolson gracefully blended classical rhetoric, African American rhetoric, and African American modes of discourse into his classroom. He writes, “Tolson's rhetorical instruction
was grounded in two distinct traditions: the classical liberal arts tradition, with its emphasis on Latin and Greek, Socratic dialogue, and instruction in grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and African American religious oratory, with its easy accord between style and substance; emphasis on racial pride, community uplift, and political activism; and use of jeremiad.” Tolson’s blending of language and rhetoric again demonstrates how the two work in conjunction with one another. In order to truly explore communication styles, it is also necessary to consider the language used to communicate.

Further into their introduction, in the section entitled “Rhetorics of Gender, Race, and Culture in the Twentieth Century,” Bizzell and Herzberg offer a concise overview of what Henry Louis Gates has shown, “Black English and African American rhetoric have their own powerful tradition, and African American leaders have used it effectively even when communicating with people who are unfamiliar with it…Rhetoric has been a vital force in the African American community for centuries and now enriches the broader American rhetorical sense” (1201). This is yet another confirmation of the relationship between language and rhetoric. It is difficult to have a thorough discussion of one without the other, particularly when looking at Black English or African American rhetoric.

Of course, it could be argued that teachers just need to teach the content and make sure that it aligns with state standards. However, this task is not as easy as it sounds. Teachers also need to make sure they have a handle on classroom management and that students meet the minimum expectations on state mandated tests. However, working with today’s teenagers is much more complex than that. Moreover, working with urban students can add yet another layer—particularly when the teacher enters the classroom with preconceived notions about the students and middle class ideals that may not be applicable to the student population. In fact Campbell points
out that assuming or expecting a deficit because students do not consistently speak according to mainstream standards often means overlooking gifts and skills that the student already possesses. Kermit Campell asserts,

Po black students, like e’rybody else also need instruction in standard English, grammar and discourse. But students (of all racial and social backgrounds) need to also recognize the power of language, of rhetoric through the manipulation of linguistic codes, conventions, and styles. And you sho’ cain't get that from the sanitized approach to language in conventional pedagogical models. For all their shortcomings, hiphoppas could teach us a thing or two about the persuasive power of language. (138).

It seems that Campbell’s intended take away here might be that preconceived notions and assumptions can be dangerous territory. While many urban students may be lacking in some areas of standard English grammar, they are fully aware of the power of words. This understanding of the power of language and rhetoric is something that many students already have when they come to the classroom because it is what moves them through their day to day interactions with family and friends. It is also in the television shows and movies they watch and, most certainly, the music they listen to. It is, in some cases, the teacher who must determine how best to use his or her own understanding of the power of language and rhetoric.

In order to successfully teach any group of students, it is necessary to at least have a general understanding of their cultural norms. Understanding African-American rhetoric and African American modes of discourse is the first step in this process not necessarily just for White teachers, but for teachers of any race who might have a desire to establish better relationships
with the students they teach. Smitherman asserts, “If we are to understand the complexity and scope of black communication patterns, we must have a clear understanding of the oral tradition and the world view that undergirds that tradition (199). And so, one of the most important things to note is that, even today, it is the oral and not the written word that dominates the black community. “ (Smith). In fact, Smitherman further confirms this notion when she asserts

The crucial difference in American culture lies in the contrasting modes in which Black and White Americans have shaped that language – a written mode for whites, having come from a European, print-oriented culture; a spoken mode for blacks, having come from an African, orally-oriented background. As black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon describes it, to “talk like a book” is to “talk like the white man. (Smitherman 203)

Though Fanon’s notion still holds true today for many people, both young and old, urban students must still understand the role of code switching in today’s society. Yet, and still, in order to help students effectively navigate between their home/community language (Black English) and the language of the mainstream (Standard English) it is important for educators to understand the oral foundation of Black English.

In another article, “Testifyin, Sermonizin, and Signifyin: Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the African-American Verbal Tradition,” Smitherman in the midst of a discussion on African American Verbal Traditions digresses for a moment to write, “I am not simply referring to that frequently oversimplified issue about whether Black-English speaking students should b taught “standard English.” For the record, I don’t know of anybody – linguist or otherwise- who says they should not; the issue is how, when, and for what purposes such students should be taught
“the standard” (214). So, the issue, for sure, is not that students who speak Black English should not also be proficient in what Smitherman calls “the standard.” Instead, the suggestion here is that to effectively teach the standard and prepare students not just for success on Georgia’s End of Course Tests, but for the real world, a fundamental knowledge of their culture and thus the African American Verbal Tradition. In that same article, she goes on to write,

I am talking about something more fundamental than the grammar of BEV (Black English Vernacular) or the Black English pronunciation of words. The African American Verbal Tradition clashes with the European American tradition because there are different – and, yes, contradictory – cultural assumptions about what constitutes appropriate discourse, rhetorical strategies, and styles of speaking. While the African American linguistic style has been described as passionate, emotional and “hot” and the European as objective, detached, and “cold,” we are seriously oversimplifying if we assert that one tradition is superior. What is not oversimplification, however, is that African and European Americans have different attitudes about and responses to a speaker depending on whether she uses one style or the other (254).

Smitherman’s point serves to reinforce the argument that it is necessary for educators to understand the culture of the children they work with. Understanding their culture and cultural norms where discourse is concerned can greatly impact classroom success for all parties. What this means, then, it is that a solid understanding of how urban students communicate is necessary. Understanding that their style of communication is not merely “bad” English or thoughtless behavior and habits is integral to classroom success. Bizzell and Herzberg offer further confirmation of the notion that a connection exists between rhetoric and language that cannot be ignored.
…within the sociolinguistic analyses of Black English is a rhetorical analysis – not only of tropes and ritualized speech interactions but also of the range of speech and writing occasions, the intended ends of those forms of discourse, the appeals that speakers use to achieve those ends, and other features of language use that rhetorical theory can account for. (1545)

Understanding the African-American modes of discourse that many students use will help teachers to better understand student’s communication styles and help them begin to view some behaviors and habits as cultural behaviors instead of academic or social deficiencies.

3.3 African-American Modes of Discourse

One of the first steps on this journey is understanding African American modes of discourse and where and how they are typically used. From there, it becomes easier for those unfamiliar to understand how Black rhetoric plays out in the classroom - specifically the English classroom. While it can be difficult or almost impossible to fully understand all of the nuances of African American communication without “living it.” It is still important to understand the theoretical framework of African-American orality or modes of discourse. In their article, “African American Orality: Expanding Rhetoric,” Garner and Thomas write,

There are rhetorical positions, patterns, and modes of discourse that allow members of the African American community to act out their daily personal interactions. And there are cultural logics that lead participants to interact effortlessly and competently with each other as different communicative situations arise. There are also hidden assumptions underlying communication interaction in African American culture. (47)
Again is necessary to emphasize that it is impossible to understand every nuance of a culture’s communication patterns. In fact, African-American adults who are well versed in African-American English may not always understand certain verbal strategies, word choices, or other modes of discourse that occur amongst teenagers. However, what is most important is the teacher’s attitude and acknowledgment that “cultural logic” may be found within the speech interactions of African-American students. “In the black communities cited in published studies, there appear to be three main settings for speech interactions: (1) the church, where speaking includes both sermons and responses by congregants; (2) the street, where talk is an interaction between equals; and (3) the home, where talk is dominated by the mother. (Bizzell and Herzberg 1545). Understanding these settings and how speech events occur within them, will help many to better understand some of the speech interactions and behaviors exhibited in the classroom. For example, what might be perceived as speaking out of turn, may simply be a behavior rooted in the call and response mode of discourse typically seen in the black discourse. In her book Culturally Responsive Teaching, Geneva Gay discusses the middle class expectations that exist in the classroom. She writes, “In conventional classroom discourse students are expected to assume what Kochman (1985) calls a passive –receptive posture. They are told to listen quietly while the teachers talks and then respond in a prearranged stylized way” (90). However, for many students, this expectation conflicts with African-American modes of discourse that many students use in their day to day lives. Gay writes, “In contrast to the passive-receptive character of conventional classroom discourse some ethnic groups have communication styles that Kochman (1985) describes as participatory interactive” (91). In essence, this communication style can be seen in settings such as the black church where the speaker expects audience interaction and views it as affirmation of sorts that the audience is both listening and interested. Of course, there
is the very valid point that students should still be able to engage in “proper” classroom behaviors. However, in thinking about how to make that happen, it is also important to consider one other point Gay makes. “As is the case with other cultural behaviors they are likely to be more pronounced among individuals who strongly identify and affiliate with their ethnic groups and cultural heritages. For example, low-income and minimally educated members of ethnic groups are likely to manifest group cultural behaviors more thoroughly than those who are middle class and educated” (91). Yet again, though, this does not mean that all teachers should go about the business of fully understanding the call and response concept and then find a place for it in their classroom. In *African American Literacies Unleashed*, Ball and Ladner pose a question for writing teachers to consider, “How are they opening spaces in the interactive discourse of their classroom for speakers to sustain connections with one another and to provide ongoing feedback? (153). This is a wonderful question for teachers at all levels to consider. Is the classroom environment you create one that encourages discussions and idea sharing or is it stifling? And so, Ball and Ladner end the section by asserting, “That every teacher ultimately becomes adept at the use of call-and-response-style interaction is not the ultimate goal. The positive, participatory environment that can be engendered through call-response – that is the key. (153).

While African American modes of discourse or the African American Verbal Tradition as Smitherman calls it really needs no special validation beyond its mere existence, it is still important to note that it is rooted in what Smitherman calls in her piece, “How I Got Ovuh: African World View and Afro-American Oral Tradition,” “the traditional African world view.” In brief, that view refers to underlying thought patterns, belief sets, values, ways of looking at the world and the community of men and women that are shared by all traditional Africans (that is, those that haven’t been westernized) (200).
In *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, Lisa Green offers definitions of the primary verbal strategies used in African-American discourse. The table below presents several of the definitions and examples:

**Table 2: Verbal Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Strategy</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signifying</td>
<td>According to Smitherman (1977), “The verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles – that is, signifies on – the listener” 118)</td>
<td>“You think your stuff don’t stink.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing the dozens</td>
<td>According to H. Rap Brown (1972), “The dozens is a mean game because what you try to do is totally destroy somebody else with words…Signifying is more humane. Instead of coming down on somebody’s mother, you come down on them” (205-206).</td>
<td>“Your mother is so stupid, she thought a lawsuit was something you wear to court” (Smitherman 138).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapping</td>
<td>Term used for different types of casual talk – exchanges between a male and a female, in which the male tries to win the favors of a female as he delivers a compliment (in his estimation) by using verbal expertise or refers to casual talk in which someone provides another with information. (136)</td>
<td>“Girl, your feet must hurt because you’ve been running through my mind ALL day.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woofing</td>
<td>Boasting is used to intimidate an opponent, thus avoiding violent confrontation.</td>
<td>Muhammad Ali was a skilled woofer who bragged about his athletic prowess to his opponents (Green 136).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toasts</td>
<td>Usually poetic tributes to the grandeur of some character, and they are narrated in first person and usually feature a hero who is “fearless, defiant, openly rebellious, and full of braggadocio about his masculinity, sexuality, fighting ability, and general badness” (Smitherman 157).</td>
<td>Chaka Kahn’s “I’m Every Woman in she says, “I can read your thoughts right now, everyone from A to Z” (Green 137).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call and response</td>
<td>Traditional practice in which the minister makes a statement (call) and members of the congregation reply (response), indicating that they agree, understand, identify with or have heard the statement, whether it be an exhortation, instruction, or general information.</td>
<td>“Amen”; “Preach”; “Alright now”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4 Classical Rhetoric and the Urban Child

An understanding of African American rhetoric is integral to success when working with the African American child who does not necessarily fit the mold of the middle class that values the pursuit of higher education, a traditional family structure, the pursuit of wealth, and similar notions. Some educators have an inherent understanding of these cultural behaviors while others must make a more concentrated effort to understand African-American modes of discourse and other cultural behaviors that can be observed in the classroom. It is, however, important to note that an educator’s ethnicity does not automatically mean he or she can be immediately placed in one group or the other.

Considering some of the principles of classical rhetoric can help educators establish stronger relationships with their students – particularly urban students. However, it is also necessary to note that while educators should understand African American rhetoric and all that it encompasses and be able to teach the basics, they are not obligated or even expected to use African American modes of discourse when teaching. However, it may come naturally for some. If it does not, then it is fine to refrain from doing so. Instead, traditional rhetorical principles should be considered when teaching. “Traditional Greek rhetoric emphasizes persuasion and influence, while an oral-based perspective would emphasize judgment in decision making for the daily acts of living” (Garner 48). So, then, it is the principles of ancient rhetoric, both Greek and Roman that serve as a good standard for teaching practices in any classroom setting. They serve as a good standard because they explicate the foundational guidelines for speaking well, writing well and considering the audience in order to determine the most effective means of persuasion. Though originally used primarily in the court of law, rhetorical principles are now more commonly applied to any situation in which the speaker wants to reach an audience and move them
in some way. Thus, it would be helpful if educators were also aware of some of the principles of effective consideration. Teaching the standards is important, and it is also important that educators teach content they are reasonably comfortable with, but audience consideration should also be a key element in lesson planning and establishing the classroom atmosphere. After all, isn’t good teaching audience centered?

In *On the Good Life*, Roman orator and statesman, Cicero offers advice to the orator or public official on how to establish a positive reputation with the public. Considering the fact that it is much easier to focus on the business of teaching when students respect the teacher and are engaged in lectures and other class activities, they too should follow Cicero’s guide. He writes, “Now the truest loftiest sort of reputation can be obtained by inspiring three feelings in the public: (i) goodwill, (ii) confidence, (iii) respect of the kind which gets one promoted to high office.

i. goodwill – Goodwill may be won by doing someone a service or by showing that one would like to perform a service, even if one’s resources do not actually permit one to do so. For popular favor is profoundly influenced by a name and reputation for generosity beneficence, fair dealing, loyalty and all the other good qualities which are associated with an attractive and agreeable character.

ii. confidence. To win confidence a man must be considered intelligent and he must be regarded as just. We feel confidence in people we believe to be wiser than ourselves, and better judges of the future – people who seem capable of dealing with critical situations and making whatever decisions circumstances require. Justice is the same thing as goodness and the designation of a just man is bestowed upon the person whose character is untouched by any suspicion of dishonesty or unfair dealing. Goodness or justice is more effective than intelligence in inspiring trust.
iii. – People should admire us and deem us worthy of high honors.

In Quintilian’s *On the Teaching of Speaking and Writing*, he offers a list of best practices for teachers of rhetoric. In fact, this list really could serve as a litany of sorts for teachers of all content areas and academic levels. The list is as follows:

**Table 3: Quintilian's Best Practices**

| Let him adopt, then, above all things, the feelings of a parent toward his pupils, and consider that he succeeds to the place of those by whom the children were entrusted to him |
| Let him neither have vices in himself, nor tolerate them in others |
| Let his austerity not be stern, nor his affability too easy, lest dislike arise from the one, or contempt from the other. |
| Let him reply readily to those who put questions to him, and question of his own accord those who do not. |
| Let him be neither niggardly nor lavish in commending the exercises of his pupils |
| Let him not be harsh nor reproachful in amending what requires correction as doing so deters many young from their proposed course of study. |
| Let him speak much every day himself, for the edification of his pupils. |
| Let him discourse frequently on what is honorable and good, for the oftener he admonishes, the more seldom will he have to chastise. |
| Let him not be of an angry temper, and yet not a conniver at what ought to be corrected |
| Let him be plain in his mode of teaching, and patient of labor, but rather diligent in exacting tasks than fond of giving them of excessive length. |
| Let him reply readily to those who put questions to him and question of his own accord those who do not |

In terms of the most traditional and classical definition of rhetoric, it is impossible to not look to Aristotle since he presents the most commonly used definition of the word. In Book I of
Aristotle’s Rhetoric, he offers a definition of rhetoric, “Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” He points out that other arts can persuade or instruct about their own subject matter whereas rhetoric may be applied to any subject. In essence, rhetoric is about the art of speaking well and writing well. He writes, “But rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects.” For classroom teachers at any level, it can become quite easy to only focus on content and lose sight of how content is delivered or how relationships are built in the classroom. For the most part, it is safe to assume that every educator is already a subject matter expert (SME) in the content area, so that is not much of an issue. However, deciding upon the best or most effective way to deliver content and engage with urban students, or any student, may pose a bit more of a challenge for some. In, On Rhetoric, Aristotle informs readers of the oral modes of persuasion available to a speaker. In this case, the teacher or educator is the speaker and a combination of these modes is needed to be truly effective. “The first kind of persuasion furnished by the spoken word depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible” (Book I ). Aristotle’s analysis of the three types of persuasion available for oral communication helps to further establish the notion that thoughtful communication in the classroom can be instrumental when it comes to establishing productive student teacher relationships in the classroom.

In his essay, “The Future of African American Rhetoric,” Molefi Asante offers this idea to readers
The rhetoric of the twenty-first century will have three characteristics. It will be based on discourses on correctives, reconciliation, and challenges to the last vestiges of the doctrine of White supremacy. Enslavement, segregation, and political and economic oppression were meant to strip us of our sanity and to marginalize us forever. We have escaped both fates and are now poised to assert an ethical leadership that derives from our own subject place that is, seeing ourselves as agents in the world rather than objects or victims. This is the liberating, indeed liberalizing future that I see for African American rhetoric (35).

As educators, it is our responsibility to help African-American students understand the magnitude of the fates that have been escaped and also prepare them to be “agents” in their communities and the world at large. Furthermore, we must, through thoughtful lesson planning and positive relationships, equip students with the tools they need to be self-assured, proud of their cultural heritage yet also able to gracefully navigate mainstream society as agents of change.
4 BECUZ IT’S DAT FYE: SPOKEN SOUL REALLY DOES HAVE A PLACE IN THE CLASSROOM

4.1 Overview

For two years, I taught English to 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students at a Title I high school in Georgia with just under 1,000 students. We spent a great deal of time working on grammar and composition. Since most students seem to resist writing even more than they resist math and science, I often looked for interesting ways to incorporate writing into my lesson plans. At the time, we were still using the GPS Standards instead of the Common Core Standards that all states are now using. The GPS standards were Georgia’s previous way of measuring and assessing what students should know by the end of a specific course. They also offered teachers a bit more flexibility to select the standards they wanted to focus on whereas the Common Core Standards offer a more structured approach and require writing as a part of each unit plan. So, it would have been relatively easy to ignore writing intensive assignments, or at least limit them. Because my research focuses on working with secondary students, it is important to keep the Common Core Standards at the forefront of the discussion. Many teachers are often concerned that going beyond the textbook or infusing elements of hip hop culture or popular culture into the classroom would somehow make it difficult to align lessons with Common Core Standards. However, it is possible to have a high interest, culturally relevant curriculum that aligns with state standards.

In an attempt to get my 9th grade classes excited about writing, engaged in the class, and practice grammar and mechanics in the context of an essay, I tried to choose a topic that students would like. So, the class was given the following topic: “Who is the greatest rapper/singer/entertainer of our time?“ Sometimes, I often forgot that my students were a new gen-
eration, and their comments and views surprised me sometime, though it usually takes a lot for me to be surprised. At any rate, the students were eager to begin drafting essays based on the instructions they had been given, and by the end of class they were excitedly turning them in and looking forward to getting my feedback the next day. Admittedly, I was pleasantly surprised when I began to read the essays. I wanted to be a bit bothered by the fact that almost all of the 50 plus essays I received that day were about either Lil’ Wayne Gucci Mane. However, I reminded myself of what was important: they each wrote multiple page essays and they did it with a smile! As I was reading, I saw the following comments: “Lil’ Wayne is a musical genius, and his lyrics are fye.” “Lil’ Wayne is one of the greatest rappers of our time because almost all of his music is fi.” These are just two examples, but many of the papers had similar spellings of the word “fire.” Of all the essays that made this reference, maybe one student actually wrote the word fire out. The word fire or “fi”, as the students wrote it, means that something is great or really good, and sounds like hi-fi. As I was reading the papers, I immediately knew what the students meant, but was intrigued by the spelling of the word. So intrigued, that I asked them about it:

Me: Showing them the underlined word. What’s this?

Student # 1: Looks at me with a puzzled expression. It’s fi, Ms. Anderson.

Me: Well, yes, I know, but it’s not spelled correctly.

Student #2: Rolling her eyes. Yes it is, Ms. Anderson. You can’t say Lil’ Wayne’s lyrics are “fi-re.” And places extra emphasis on the “re-“ part of the work.

Me: With an amused expression, but still quite serious. “Yeah, but, you all can’t just make up a word in that way.”

Students 1 & 2: In unison and with incredulous looks on their faces. “Yes we can!”
At that point, I simply wrote the students a pass to their next class and told them I would see them the next day.

This short, very intense conversation had an enormous impact on me and it also spoke volumes about my own attitudes towards language use as well as the attitudes of the new generation of teenagers. This was further confirmed by the fact that of the 50 or so essays I read, in addition to being about Lil’ Wayne or Gucci Mane, at least 20, perhaps more, used some version of this word and most spelled it “fye.” At this moment, I also realized that I needed to do a better job of taking my student’s language into consideration in my classroom lessons. As Lisa Green points out, “…one of the barriers to success in some areas of education may be that the type of language AAE child speakers take into the classroom is different from mainstream English in systematic ways. In addition, not taking the child’s language into consideration as a rule-governed system may lead to problems that could result in academic failure” (Green 217). The point that consistently resurfaces is that the child’s language is not the problem as much as the attitudes about the child’s language.

What scared me the most about the aforementioned exchange is that future English teachers these students will encounter will probably not be as understanding about their use of the word “fye” in an essay – in spite of their seemingly logical explanation for creating and using the word. It is also important to note that the discussion of the word “fye” is about slang not dialect. Yet and still, what matters most is the teacher’s attitude and response to this. What I know for certain is that there are more teachers like the one’s Green discusses (those who do not take the child’s language into consideration) than there are those who do or who will take the time to understand the student’s perspective.
4.2 Background

The discussion of African American Language (Black English, Black Vernacular, Ebonics, or whatever other term one chooses to use to describe the form of communication used in African American communities all over the nation) is one that ebbs and flows. Unfortunately, it is often found that when the discussion is at its peak, those in the forefront are often uninformed and uneducated on the topic and rely solely or primarily on information that has come from various media outlets which are also misinformed. This can be seen in the media fall out during the 1996 Oakland Ebonics controversy which will be discussed later in this chapter. Instead of reporting on the underlying reasons for the 1996 controversy, the media, instead, took a much more sensationalized route. In Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English, Rickford and Rickford point out that even the sensationalized reporting was not the biggest mistake the media made. “Reporters committed their most grievous mistake…by excluding from their articles national evidence showing that black students were lagging perilously behind whites when it came to academic achievement” (191). This is important because the journalists, as Rickford and Rickford point out, dug their heels in and took the same position that many had then and still have now. “That many journalists refused to believe that language could be a central factor in the poor academic performance of many played a part” (192). Sadly, the same attitudes conveyed by the media typically also represent those of the mainstream.

As the conversations on African American Language begin to resurface, it is necessary to first address several key questions about the language before shaping opinions or speaking out on the matter. The first question that must be considered is: Is African American English a language? The second question is: Where did African American English come from? Becoming more informed about the history of African American English is also a way for students and
teachers to gain a better appreciation for different cultures and to work together to dispel myths and stereotypes. What are the pedagogical effects of African American English on education in the African American speech community? By becoming more informed about the pedagogical effects of African American English, educators are better equipped with ways to help students learn. In an attempt to seek answers to these questions, the works of scholars such as John Rickford, Russel Rickford, Geneva Smitherman, Lisa Green, and Kermit Campbell have been consulted. There are no quick answers or simple solutions to the aforementioned questions. However, actively searching for answers or research that might lead to answers is the only way to participate in the debate on African American English as a well-informed, knowledgeable individual.

4.3 Attitudes

Oftentimes, it is thought that students are incapable of learning because of race, class and other perceived barriers, such as dialectal differences. This happens most often in schools that are in poor communities, have a population that is primarily comprised of minority students, or a school that is labeled Title I or something similar. Within an environment like this, one of the biggest barriers between students and teachers is language. However, the language barrier is not as one would think. It is not between speakers of English and speakers of Spanish or between speakers of English and speakers of another foreign language, but between speakers of at least two different English dialects. The barrier exists between those, often students, who speak African American English and those who, often teachers, speak and expect Standard American English. However, the barrier is deeper than just the dialectal differences. The barrier really stems from the educators own preconceived notions about students who speak a language other than SAE and their unwillingness to use their student’s home/community language and use it as a tool
in the classroom. In their book *African American Literacies Unleashed: Vernacular English and the Composition Classroom*, Ball and Ladner remind readers that, “In our prior work together, we noted that teachers’ unconscious negative attitudes towards AAVE have been named as one barrier to academic achievement faced by African American students” (16). While, in many cases, it is fair to assume that teachers might not be intentional or even fully aware of their attitude on AAVE, it is still a matter that must be addressed. In *19 Urban Questions: Teaching In the City*, Steinberg and Kincheloe highlight some of the unique features of urban education. They, too, address the challenges that they have experienced with linguistic diversity in New York City’s public school system. “Because our teachers and educational leaders are generally white and middle class, they usually do not have the heritage or educational background to make positive use of such linguistic diversity, which tends to be seen as a problem rather than a unique opportunity” (7). However, teachers can be given the educational background or foundation they need to make positive use of linguistic diversity. However, their attitudes about the young people they work with is a much more personal challenge that they must work to address. Making the decision to learn more about the questions posed above is the first step towards a positive attitude regarding African American English and those who use it.

### 4.4 Language or Not

The first question to consider is whether or not African American English is a language. A starting point for that discussion is the definitions that exist. There are many titles and definitions for African American English, and many of the definitions posited by linguists and other scholars have similar themes. In “Introduction to Ebonics,” Smitherman defines Ebonics as, “a set of communication patterns and practices resulting from Africans’ appropriation and transformation of a foreign tongue during the African Holocaust” (20). In essence, the language de-
veloped during the African slave trade and the years of slavery that followed. In her article “Something to Shout About: AAVE as a Linguistic and Cultural Treasure,” Mary Zeigler offers a comprehensive definition of what she refers to as African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

AAVE is a system by which African Americans communicate. It is a medium for African American thought. African American writers use it as a “vehicle for literary expression” (ibid.). It is a social institution. AAVE is a persistent means by which the African American community maintains a cultural unity. As a language whose origin and development are synchronous with that of a country called America – colonial or postcolonial-AAVE is a “factor in nation building” (ibid). (169).

So then, it is very difficult to discuss a language or language system without also considering the people who use it on a daily basis.

There are those who feel as though terms such as *African American English* or *Black Vernacular* have a negative connotation. And perhaps they do, but only if the term Standard American English or something similar is viewed as being somehow better or on a higher level linguistically. According to Denise Murray, “That Standard American English is the prestige variety (as linguists would describe it) in the U.S. is a result of nonlinguistic forces such as wealth and political power not of inherent characteristics of SAE” (144). Murray points out what many do not know – Ebonics, or whatever one chooses to call it, is not sub-standard or linguistically inferior to mainstream English. Although many scholars feel that the most appropriate term for the language spoken by millions of people is Ebonics, even that word is given a negative connotation depending on the source consulted. When consulting Merriam Webster Online for a defi-
nition of Ebonics, there is only a link to Black English. Given that Black English most closely aligns with Standard English, it seems to be the most fitting descriptor.

The primary internal features of a language are vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. But before thinking about the vocabulary and the pronunciation, it is first necessary to understand what guides a language or the rules by which it operates. In *Spoken Soul, the Story of Black English*, Rickford and Rickford define rules by saying, “Not those that are seen in grammar books or learned and taught. Instead, conventional and systematic ways of using language. These come through exposure and experimentation” (Rickford). Experimentation is when words or phrases are either adopted or rejected by the members of a community. Either the word or phrases catches on and is eventually put into use by a significant portion of a community, or it does not catch on and is, for the most part, becomes obsolete.

However, it is necessary to reiterate that a less than positive position on linguistic diversity is not necessarily limited to white, middle class educators and administrators. It can also exist among those from ethnic-backgrounds similar to their students – in this case African-American. In essence, the attitude is problematic – no matter who holds it. In his book, *Language in the Inner City*, Labov addresses attitudes commonly held by many teachers. “Some teachers are reluctant to believe that there are systematic principles in nonstandard English which differ from those of standard English. They look upon every deviation from schoolroom English as inherently evil, and they attribute these mistakes to laziness, sloppiness, or the child’s natural disposition to be wrong” (4). In essence, the commonly held view is that the problem rests with the student. The result is that students are often incorrectly labeled as special education and placed accordingly. Therefore, it is necessary to know how to distinguish between a language difference
and a language disorder. In *Dialects in Schools and Communities*, Wolfram, Adger, and Christian identify the difference between the two.

The key consideration in distinguishing between a language difference and a disorder is the language norm of the student’s own speech community.

Individuals whose speech and language are not appropriate for the norms of their own speech communities are the ones who may be showing genuine disorders.

The most effective basis for discriminating dialect difference from the language disorder comes from an understanding of normal language variation and specific knowledge about local dialects (105).

Whether the attitudes are intentional or embedded in the subconscious, they still impact the teacher-student relationship as well as the learning process. A negative perspective about the way one speaks is also perceived as a negative attitude about the individual as well. The purpose here is to take a closer look at research that has been done on the use of AAE in the classroom and the best practices for implementing teaching strategies that consider AAE. In “Black English: So Good It’s Bad,” Smitherman also reminds us that “it is not the language in and of itself that prevents Black children from getting educated. It is what teachers, principals, schools, standardized tests and speech tests do to, with and against the language of some Black children that is a barrier to their education” (366). In essence, the problem does not rest with the student or his or her language.

In order to fully understand and connect with their students, teachers of African American children, or of any group of children, must first understand the child’s language. At the surface level, this means that the teacher must be able to comprehend what they child is saying. However, they must also understand that Black English is not a substandard form of English but
a language. *Language* may best be defined as a “patterned system of arbitrary signals.” (Labov) More specifically, language is the manner in which people within a certain group or community communicate with one another. Wolfram references Hymes’s definition of speech communities to clarify, “groups of people who share basic expectations about language use” (5). In order to better understand African American English, it is also necessary to understand the external influences on a language and the history.

### 4.5 The History

The second matter to be addressed is the origin of African American English. It may be said that African American English saw its beginnings during the 16th century with the arrival of slaves from Africa. Green writes, “Historical discussions about the origin of African American English often start at the point at which African slaves were thrust into a linguistic situation in which they had to learn English” (8). So, it was this arrival that prompted Africans from different areas to begin to find ways to communicate with one another. This information is important to know because it helps to challenge the perception that African American is just bad grammar or a careless manner of speaking instead of a language. “As in naturalistic, unschooled second-language learning everywhere, Africans arriving in America in the seventeenth century might have transferred words and other features from their native languages, and simplified or generalized features of the target language (132). The slaves coming from Africa spoke many different languages. As a result, many were not able to communicate with slave owners, etc. but they also were not able to communicate with one another. They maintained bits and pieces of their own languages and integrated it with the English that was also spoken on the plantations where they lived. In a discussion about the explosion of blacks and Africans in American colonies, Rickford and Rickford offer insight into language acquisition. “Blacks increasingly learned their English
not from whites, but from other blacks, who may have been speaking highly vernacular dialects themselves; this reflects the process of language acquisition and the influence of African languages (134). This is exactly how speech communities were formed. Additionally, this process of language acquisition can still be seen in the Black community today. Not only is it important to note that Black English is a language, but that it was created out of a need to be able to communicate with other individuals within the community – initially the enslaved community. Understanding where Black English comes from helps educators to better understand that judgment and arbitrary corrections will not help students learn to code switch effectively.

Rickford and Rickford also surmise that the domestic slave trade also contributed to the expansion of vernacular English. It was also during this time of expansion that Black English first takes its place as a point of resistance to the mainstream. Rickford and Rickford speculate that, “Blacks experiencing, witnessing, or even hearing about such cruelty would probably not have wanted to talk like their oppressors, and they would probably have become more determined to develop or maintain their own communicative and expressive styles” (139). Furthermore, Africans were not able to maintain their respective languages. Circumstances beyond their control immediately required them to learn English or find other ways to communicate with one another. John Baugh discusses this in “A Survey of Afro-American English:”

Black Americans were the only group to migrate to the United States who were not allowed to preserve their native language through transitional bilingual communities... In addition, slaves were separated from others who shared their language; this practice was instituted to reduce the likely hood of uprisings during the Atlantic crossing (see Dillard 26). The linguistic consequences of this unique history are reflected in the distinctive
characteristics that are preserved in modern BVE. Whereas every group that did not speak English upon their arrival in the United States tended to use their native language, say, for an average of three generations, slaves were forced to learn English immediately-without formal education and restricted access to standard English (345).

Though America is now far removed from slavery as it was known hundreds of years ago, many of the same attitudes and much of the same treatment of blacks can still be seen in the public school system today. Instead of receiving ESL services like many students who speak other languages, Black students are, in many instances, treated as if they are simply speaking a substandard form of mainstream English instead of a language with a history just as rich as Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic and other such languages. Today, speakers of Black English are unfairly judged for not using Standard English, yet still not given full access to standard English as a result of misconceptions and misunderstandings. In essence, hundreds of years later, African-American children, in some educational settings, are expected to immediately learn and use Standard American English without being given any rationale or context for doing so.

It was during the 18th century that the slave codes were put in place making it illegal to educate the slaves among other things. In her piece, “Introduction to Ebonics,” Smitherman discusses the Slave Codes in more detail. “The repressive Black Codes were designed to restrict the movements of the enslaved African population, to bring it under control, and to ensure that there would be a large pool of free slave labor. The Codes mandated that once a slave, you were a slave for life” (35). Along with this also came more severe treatment of slaves. The slave codes that were enacted also caused slave traders to begin to bring over smaller groups of Africans (35). The result of this is that slaves, although already quite aware that they were different, begin
to experience psychological distance and recognized that it was their language that allowed them
to create an invisible wall around themselves. “The linguistic consequence of this new set of
conditions would have been children born into slave communities in which African languages
were heard and used less and less. At the same time, there would have been an increase in the
use of the Africanized language (Pidgin/Creeole English) for communication and solidarity
among the enslaved. (Smitherman 35). This psychological distance and solidarity gave them a
“way out” or a manner by which to get away from the world that they were living in the midst of.
Not the world as we know it, but their smaller, less global world – the plantation on which they
lived. “The fact that Spoken Soul often marks the oppositional identity of blacks vis a vis whites
and “mainstream culture” is undoubtedly part of the reason for its vibrant existence to this day”
(Rickford 139). This statement by Rickford and Rickford further addresses the need for teachers
to understand the language and the culture of the students they teach. A classroom atmosphere of
judgment and negativity – even manifested in subtle ways, creates a difficult atmosphere for the
teacher and slows the teaching and learning process for all parties. Such an atmosphere simply
continues to perpetuate an “energy of resistance.” Acknowledging language differences and
their origins helps teachers to better understand their students, respect their cultural differences
and linguistic diversity and have a more effective classroom.

In order to truly attempt to answer to the question: “Where did African American English
come from? ” it is important to first work through a series of other questions. Did African Amer-
ican English come from an unsuccessful attempt to produce English, resulting in a “broken En-
lish” – the pre-linguistic Deficit Hypothesis? Did it result from the European settlers providing a
source of oral communication for immigrants who lacked or lost connection to their linguistic
and cultural heritage-the Anglicist Hypothesis? Or was it from the mixing of languages for
commercial and mercantile convenience – the Creolist Hypothesis? What internal components of present-day English justify any of these hypotheses? This analysis also includes a discussion of each of the aforementioned hypotheses. While there are those who, even today, believe that African American English developed from a failed attempt to produce English, this theory or Deficit Hypothesis is not accurate. One of the major problems with the Deficit Hypothesis is that it does not respect or even credit African American English as a language. Instead, it makes the claim that AAE is not based on a language of any kind and is nothing more than

Baugh & Smitherman’s The Shot Heard from Ann Arbor: Language Research and Public Policy in African America (2002) supports the argument that the Deficit Hypothesis problematic in that it fails to acknowledge African American English as a language. Moreover, although written in 2002, this article also supports the aforementioned assertion that, even today – there are those who still believe in the Deficit Hypothesis. The Judge in the King v. Ann Arbor matter ruled that “the Ann Arbor School District was guilty of failing to take the children’s language into account in the educational process, and thus the district had violated the children’s right to educational opportunity.” (Smitherman 11) Baugh and Smitherman discuss another hypothesis that, perhaps, more accurately describes the problem experienced in schools and classrooms today – the Divergence Hypothesis. Ultimately, this hypothesis suggests that African American language diverges from standard English as we know it. However, the problem with this hypothesis is that “If, as the divergence camp assumed, Black speech was indeed moving away from both White vernaculars and mainstream White speech, this situation could lead to the conclusion that Blacks were going backward instead of forward.” (Smitherman 2002) So again, yet more evidence that attitude is everything when it comes to the successful education of African-American students. The notion that Black English is “bad” because it diverged from Standard
American English and thus propelled blacks backward is unfortunate yet still prevalent in many schools and classrooms today.

A second, perhaps more believable, yet still unbalanced hypothesis is the Anglicist Hypothesis. According to Edward Rielly’s “Black English Vernacular,” “The Anglicist hypothesis suggests that interracial associations (with white children) permitted slaves to learn a version of English similar to but less correct than the English spoken by southern whites.” Reily goes on to inform readers that the Anglicist theory also implies that slaves, over time, lost their cultural and language heritage. This hypothesis, though suggesting that AAE has a language base, is still somewhat condescending in that it refuses to give African language even a portion of the credit for the origins of AAE.

The third possibility for the origins of African American English is the Africanist hypothesis. According to Dr. Mary Zeigler’s Migration and Motivation in the Development of African American Vernacular English, “Scholars taking an Africanist stand contend that the African American vernacular bears the vivid imprint of the African languages spoken by slaves who came to this country in waves from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries.” This hypothesis is ideal in that it both respects and gives credit to the African languages while also suggesting that African American English does in fact have a language based foundation. Additionally, this hypothesis can also be linked back to the earlier discussions of Baugh, Rickford and Rickford and Smitherman that show that African-American English developed as a result of slaves from different tribes being forced to learn English as best they could and try to communicate with others who were also doing the same thing.

And finally, there is the Creolist Hypothesis. This hypothesis works from the understanding that Creole was born from a need to “divide and conquer.” Riley (2005) writes, “…the pidg-
in became a creole: a language derived from the mixture of two or more languages that become the speakers’ first language.” (Riley) What is more important in Riley’s piece is his point that those who believe in the creole theory also believe that AAE resulted more so from decreolization. Green provides more insight into the Creolist Hypothesis. “One of the most hotly debated issues about the origin of AAE centers around the question of whether AAE started off as a creole such as Jamaican Creole and Gullah. The Creolist hypothesis has been offered as an explanation of the development of AAE and apparent patterns it shares with creole varieties of English and other dialects of English” (46). Green goes on to cite Rickford and Rickford and their conclusion that AAVE does contain traces of creole.

In many ways, one could find elements of present-day English to justify any one of these hypotheses or perhaps even a combination of them, not excluding the Deficit Hypothesis. Although there are those who may disagree, particularly those who are a strong proponent of only one of the aforementioned hypothesis, African American English stems from a combination of the Anglicist hypothesis, the Africanist Hypothesis, and the Creolist Hypothesis.

4.6 Pedagogical Effects

The final matter to consider is the pedagogical effects of African-American language on the education of the African American child. The 1979 Ann Arbor Case and the 1996 Oakland Ebonics debate are two significant events that address this matter directly. The Ann Arbor case shows what happened when teachers, schools, and school systems failed to acknowledge the language and culture of the children they were responsible for educating. The Oakland Ebonics debate tells the story of a school system that made a bold, innovative move towards improving the quality of education being provided to students. It also paints a clear picture of just how misinformed the nation was on African American English – then called Ebonics.
The July 12, 1979 Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board case was one that was highly publicized because it highlighted the fact that the school had failed to consider the children’s language in its attempts to educate them. As Ball and Ladner point out in their article, “Dispositions Toward Language: Teacher Constructs of Knowledge and the Ann Arbor Black English Case,” “This case focused on the language barriers created by teachers' unconscious negative attitudes toward students' uses of African American English and the negative effect these attitudes had on student learning” (470). Not only had the school failed to recognize the children’s language, but they had also penalized the children for their (the school’s) oversight. In her article, “What Go Round Come Round,” Smitherman

Their children had been placed in learning disability and speech pathology classes although these labels did not apply to them; they had been suspended and repeatedly retained at grade level with no intervention to redress the educational failures; and they were not learning how to read….the mothers’ intuition was corroborated by professional judgment: Their children were normal, intelligent kids who could learn properly if taught. (Smitherman).

Though Labov points out that the case never reached landmark status, these findings of the court made a huge statement and Ball and Ladner reiterate this in their 1997 article. Their assertion is, The case associated low educational achievement not with shortcomings within learners, but with inadequate, ineffective curricular and pedagogical routines.(471). In “The Black English Controversy: Implications from the Ann Arbor Case,” Yellin notes that the case reopens the different versus deficit debate and the question of the impact of teacher attitudes on student achievement reemerges (152). However, it is virtually impossible to ignore the impact of negative teacher attitudes in the classroom. Ball and Ladner reference a statement made by Judge
Charles Joiner in the 1979 Memorandum Opinion and Order about the case and the impact of teacher attitudes on learning. “In the Ann Arbor case, the Court ruled that the teachers’ unconscious but evident attitudes toward the African American English used by the plaintiff children constituted a language barrier that impeded the students' educational progress.

Like the recent Oakland School Board resolution on Ebonics, the “Objectivity and Commitment in Linguistic Science: The Case of the Black English Trial in Ann Arbor,” Labov further discusses the Ann Arbor Case and what Judge Joiner’s findings revealed. “The language barrier that did exist was in the form of unconscious negative attitudes formed by teachers towards children who spoke Black English, and the reactions of children to those attitudes” (193). As a result, the School Board had to submit a plan for training teachers to effectively teach speakers of Black English. “The plan submitted was for in-service training for teachers that would include twenty hours of instruction on the characteristics and history of Black English, methods for identifying speakers of the dialect, ways of distinguishing mistakes in reading from differences in pronunciation, and strategies for helping children switch from Black English to standard English” (Labov 193). As discussed in Smitherman and Baugh’s “The Shot Heard from Ann Arbor,” the long term effects of the Ann Arbor case and the Ebonics Debates would be that a linguistic precedent had now been set and the schools should begin moving towards using “Black Language” and “Black Experience” as tools for teaching basic English skills to students.

What happened in the Ann Arbor School District in 1979 can still be witnessed today, over thirty years later. Often, these attitudes manifest themselves through what Carolyn Hodges calls the culture of poverty.

In this model, the child possesses a culture of some kind, but that culture is pathogenic, as in the culture of poverty view. Low-income or minority children do
not achieve in school and in life, in this argument, because of deficiencies in their home environment: disorganization in their family structure; inadequate child-rearing patterns; undeveloped language use assumed to lead to deficient cognitive development; maladaptive values, including inability to defer impulse gratification; personal maladjustment; and low self-esteem (25).

Hodges concept of the culture of poverty speaks to both teacher attitudes as well as the pedagogical effects of the African American child’s language. In essence, it is the child’s fault that he does not achieve and there is essentially nothing that can be done about this. In the classroom, quite simply, this translates into low expectations for the student. Human nature is such that, quite often, when expectations are low, the outcome or results reflect that. When expectations are high, the results are as well. Additionally, it is also important to note the long term effects that unconscious or conscious teacher attitudes can have on a child. Asa Hillard addresses this in his 1983 article Psychological Factors Associated With Language in the Education of the African-American Child” and offers a list of places where a psychological impact may be made on the student.

They are: (1) the measurement of intellect, (2) the diagnosis of language, speech or hearing pathology, (3) the measurement of "reading" ability, and (4) educator attitudes toward language variations. Each of these areas is ripe for errors and malpractices which traumatize identity development and world-view development. Note that issue is not taken with the notion that it is desirable, useful, and necessary that all children become proficient in the lingua franca. Issue is only being taken with specific misuses of language in education (28).
Hillard’s comments make a powerful statement. Given the fact that children sometimes are in the presence of their teachers more than their parents if work schedules and the like are factored in, it is extremely important for educators to be aware of the impact that their opinions and notions about the students they teach and their culture can have.

While it is true that many students come to the classroom with a host of personal and environmental challenges that are beyond their control, they do not have to be further perpetuated and reinforced in the classroom. When teachers take on the challenge of working in what many call urban schools, it is important to note that the task requires much more than delivery of content in order to be effective. In her article, “Adapting TESL Approaches to the Teaching of Written Standard English as a Second Dialect to Speakers of American Black English Vernacular,” Carol Reed suggests that in order for the teaching of English as a Second Dialect to have a chance at being effective, a certain amount of “de-brainwashing” must happen for both student and teacher. “The stigma which American society attaches to identifiable black patterns of behavior must be openly and honestly confronted by both student and teacher, before the desired attitudinal changes can be effected which are necessary for productive classroom interaction” (290). Once student and teacher have addressed this matter, they may move on to focus on various TESL techniques that can also be used in an environment where students who speak Black Vernacular are being taught what we call Standard English (although the definitions and perceptions of this term tend to vary quite a bit).

The first mention of Black English, then called Ebonics, being recognized as a language came in 1996 during the Oakland Ebonics debate. In her 1998 piece, “‘Dat Teacher Be Hollin at Us’ : What is Ebonics?” Smitherman points out that the Oakland, California school board’s resolution “recognized Ebonics as the primary language of its African American students and com-
mitted the district to use this medium to teach literacy skills in the U.S. language of wider communication, that is Standard American English (SAE) (140). In “The Controversy Over Ebonics,” Steve Fox commends the Oakland Unified School District for bringing an important issue to the forefront – though they had no idea their actions would get attention nationwide. Ultimately, they believed that Ebonics should be used as a “bridge” for teaching standard English. Their resolution also woke up a discussion that had been sleeping for quite some time. As Fox points out, “The entire nation has engaged in a conversation about the importance of language proficiency in a way that it has never done before, and there is general agreement that without language proficiency a person cannot expect to succeed in the adult world. The Oakland school board deserves credit for raising the consciousness of America about a persistent and bedeviling problem (237). The discussions surrounding Ebonics and whether or not it is a language had been taking place long before the Oakland school board’s resolution in 1996. However, the Oakland school board can be credited with bringing the issue back to the forefront. In “Ebonics and Public Awareness: Who Knows? Who Cares?,” Sandra Barnes reiterates this notion, “The Oakland School Board’s 1996 resolution acknowledged the existence of Ebonics as a language, resolved to use it as a teaching tool, and once again catapulted the topic into public attention” (18). Perhaps something of this kind must happen again in order for the matter to again become a primary concern for the field of education.

Kermit Campbell is also one who supports the notion that AAVE must be used as a tool to enhance learning. “…denigrating Ebonics or eradicating black vernacular speech is not the way to give Ebonics speaking youths the English language education they need to succeed in school or life, at least not if it’s important to us to maintain a healthy respect for our integrity as a diverse and democratic nation.” (Campbell) Campbell’s statement serves to reinforce the notion
that teacher attitudes about a student’s language and culture have a direct impact on classroom performance. Dismissing these things or implying that the student’s language and culture is somehow wrong or incorrect really does nothing to help educate the student and prepare him or her to function in a global society. How can we teach a student to appreciate other cultures and respect diversity when their own language and culture is not respected? So what we are all left to contend with as parents, educators, and African-Americans is how can we ensure that our children are able to have the tools needed to be successful in “mainstream America” while also maintaining a healthy appreciation of their rich culture and heritage. Actually, let us go beyond the notion of appreciation and say that we must instill a sense of pride in our young people and provide them with the knowledge to explain where the roots of the Black Vernacular and help others to understand that it goes back centuries and is much more than just an incorrect, or sub-standard form of English. In fact, it is a language of its own and its speakers deserve and must receive the same respect that speakers of Spanish, Vietnamese, Mandarin, French or any other language receive. In order for this to happen, we must make sure that educators, parents, and others in leadership roles are also well versed on the origins of African American English and its rich traditions.

After teaching high school English to African American students who were primarily considered at risk, my experiences and concerns about Ebonics are very different. I do know that many of the experiences I have had would almost certainly be the same at any school, with students from just about any economic group. In fact, the students are much like the students Fordham describes in her article “Dissin’ “The Standard”: Ebonics as Guerilla Warfare at Capital High (2008).” Capital High is a predominantly African-American high school in Washington, D.C. Guerilla is a term that means “little war” in Spanish. In essence, the students at Capital
High never make a full on confrontation with teachers or their failed attempts at forcing them into using Standard English. Instead, through minor day to day behaviors and tactics, the students avoid conforming and instead most make the conscious choice to continue using Black English. She first points out that students who use the standard English that the curriculum requires are the exception to the rule while the norm is the student who resists the requirement. She also writes, “Thus, dissin’ the standard is at the core of the guerilla warfare at the school and is fundamentally revealed in both the students’ refusal to discontinue their use of Ebonics as the language of communication while at or in school and their wholesale avoidance of the standard dialect in most other contexts” (273). Further down in her article, still also seemingly speaking about the students I grew to love at my own school, Fordham discusses the students in a particular English class at Capital High. “… students were carefully taught and were able to demonstrate on exams and other measures their mastery of the rules, they chose not to appear to know them in their conversations with each other“(274). As is with the case of the Capital High students, many of my students are able to demonstrate mastery of concepts taught, but appear to embrace their language as a form of identity. So much so, that they even find the most ingenious ways to incorporate it into their essay writing and conversations with me. My concern is that they do not seem to know, or maybe to care, about when speaking in this manner is “acceptable” and when it is not.

As I continue to reflect on my own classroom habits and teaching theories, I realize that I do not spend a great deal of time correcting students each time they use something other than mainstream English – especially when they are engaged in the class discussion, group work, or an individual assignment. It just seems that interrupting the student who is behaving in a positive manner to offer negative feedback about something largely unrelated to the content of their
comments would discourage class participation and student engagement – something we are working diligently on as a school with or WOW program (Working on the Work). Rickford and Rickford even tell us that students who are taught with the “Interrupting Approach” often withdraw from participation and have low test scores (176). But more importantly, they write

…Students taught with the “Black Artful Approach” by teachers who…exposed children to Standard English distinctions, but who did not constantly interrupt or correct their Spoken soul, participated enthusiastically in the classroom, and recorded higher scores on reading tests. This study confirms what we know from other studies: that negative and uninformed attitudes toward children’s vernacular can be counterproductive, and even harm performance (176).

In essence, a constant focus on corrections, particularly when they require interrupting the child, does not work as it really only serves to shut the child down and discourage participation. In retrospect, I’ve always used what Rickford and Rickford describe as the “Black Artful Approach.” However, I will also admit, that it was largely by accident and more a function of my personality than any sort of plan. Yet and still, if we stop and think about it for a moment, it is really rather rude to interrupt someone while they are speaking anyway. It has the same effect in a student teacher situation that it would in any other scenario in that the person on the receiving end usually feels uncomfortable and is often reluctant to volunteer ideas or thoughts again. For me, the vernacular not just of black youth today, but of all youth, since much of it overlaps, is not problematic. Doing so ultimately manifests itself as judgment and will typically not illicit the response(s) a teacher would want. Instead, we must give students opportunities to practice navigating between their home/community language and the language they will be expected to use in their professional lives. In addition, they must also understand why this is necessary.
Teachers of English in any environment must be aware of, understand, and knowledgeably accept and incorporate the language of the community in which they teach. Randomized grammar corrections in the classroom would not be enough to truly help students learn mainstream English and how to distinguish the difference. Instead, it is necessary for the teacher to embrace the student’s language and also learn effective methods of helping them understand the differences between Ebonics and mainstream English and why it is sometimes necessary to use mainstream English in many settings. We often refer to our students as consumers. In many ways, this is very true. Just as retail stores like to make sure that consumers are well informed about store promotions, store inventory, and other pertinent details, it is also necessary that our students be well-informed. And in many cases, this involves the teacher also acting as salesperson by helping the student “buy into” the importance of when and where it is appropriate to use Ebonics/Spoken Soul. Perhaps this all seems quite ambitious, but it is not impossible. However, it will take a collective effort from teachers, students, administrators, and parents for a progressively positive change to begin. But a positive change can begin with teachers, the teachers of English language arts.
5 OH YOU FANCY, HUH?

STRATEGIES FOR FORGING AHEAD IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

3.5 Overview

As this study of best practices for teaching secondary English to “at-risk” students draws to a close, Georgia is transitioning from the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) to the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGS) to establish a more consistent and rigorous curriculum for students nationwide. According to GeorgiaStandards.org:

Georgia joined with 47 other states well over a year ago to develop a set of core standards for K-12 in English language arts and mathematics. On June 2, the Common Core State Standards were released. These standards provide a consistent framework to prepare students for success in college and/or the 21st century workplace. These standards represent a common sense next step from the Georgia Performance Standards.

The intended result is consistency across states, a more rigorous curriculum, and students who are college ready and/or also well-prepared to function in a global society. However, it is quite possible that these more rigorous standards might widen the achievement gap or increase what Ladson-Billings calls the educational debt in her 2006 article, “From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools,’’ she suggests that term achievement gap, “moves us toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem” (4). Instead, it is important to view the inequalities and disparities present in the educational system as a debt of sorts. She uses America national deficit and national debt matters as the framework for her concept of educational debt. Within her framing of educational debt, she points out that even when the country has had a balanced budget, the debt still existed.
She posits that the ever widening and closing achievement gap is the result of the multi-faceted education debt. She writes, “I am arguing that the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt” (5). In essence, racial discrimination within education can be seen as far back as the days of slavery, funding disparities among schools are not a new development, the absence of Blacks and Hispanics in the political arena leaves their voices out of key decisions, and the country’s moral debt to historically marginalized people all contribute to the achievement gap. Steps towards a more long term solution “…the cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, poor health care, and poor government services create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind” (10).

Ladson-Billings makes a valid point in that we have to look at the big picture to get to the root of the problem. However, the reality is that preparing the students before us now to function in a global world is the most immediate way to begin to break these cycles. We can begin by equipping African-American students with the tools they need to look critically at the world around them and find their place in it. Critical pedagogy and rhetorical pedagogy might can serve as a solid starting point for this.

The guiding principles of critical pedagogy and the primary suppositions of rhetorical pedagogy should be used to teach “at risk” African-American students and prepare them for state mandated tests. Critical pedagogy helps students to find their own voices, find their place in society, and challenge traditional notions of power in thoughtful, effective ways. Rhetorical pedagogy is appropriate because its primary suppositions align with Asante’s (1993) tenets of an Afrocentric curriculum and also offer solid strategies for working with urban students. The suppositions of rhetorical pedagogy focus on the notion that the ability to speak and write well are not based solely on independent talent. Instead, the ability to speak and write well are rooted in
theory and practice with the understanding that repetition of a set of tasks leads to growth. Additionally, good communication takes place in a cultural context and observation and analysis are imperative for effective communication.

Additionally, it is also now necessary to revisit the three questions that guided this project. The first question posed at the start this study was: What strategies can be used to help Georgia students maintain and increase cultural pride and meet or exceed state standards for the 9th grade English Language Arts End of Course Test? There are most certainly a host of strategies and approaches that can be used to accomplish these goals. In addition to several approaches already discussed such as taking the child’s language into consideration in the classroom, concepts such as Afrocentricity, critical pedagogy, and rhetorical pedagogy might also be instrumental in producing high achieving students.

### 3.6 Afrocentricity

In “Cultural Wars and the Attack on Multiculturalism: An Afrocentric Critique,” Teasley and Tyson define *Afrocentricity* as, “central mission of Afrocentrists is to ethically and scientifically reconstruct African history and cultural practices as a way of empowering Black people to claim and regain control of their own lives and future” (395). Afrocentricity is a unique approach in that the student is the center instead of the content. As Asante informs us, “Afrocentricity is a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person.” In essence, students should, no matter the discipline, see themselves as the subject and not the object (Asante 1991). In a rather harsh attack on Afrocentricity, entitled “The Afrocentric Hustle,” Stanley Crouch (1995) writes,

> Dismissing objectivity as "culturally determined," Afrocentrists also ignore educated consensus, since education is seen as no more than "Eurocentric
indoctrination.” They achieve a unified vision not of scholarship but of polemics, maintaining that Western history is an unrelenting cultural war in which the removal of African peoples from the grand stage of history is the goal of an intellectual shadow government. (78).

Most would probably agree that the average textbook does not necessarily paint a full, clear picture of many significant events in history. However, Crouch’s claim suggests that proponents of Afrocentricity believe there is a conspiracy theory at work or a more calculated plan. However, I would have to take another perspective and venture to say that textbooks simply reflect the beliefs, values and experiences of those who write them more so than a calculated goal of “trick-ing” the black student. Yes, many public school textbook (and educators of varying ethnicities) represent heroification at its finest. In his 2007 work, Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, James Loewen defines heroification as, “…a degenerative process (much like calcification) that makes people over into heroes. Through this process, our educational media turn flesh-and-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest (11). In essence, textbooks do not give the whole story. They paint less than perfect people as “saviors” and do not fully depict the struggles and obstacles of marginalized groups. However, Afrocentrists do not seek to reduce the entire educational system to nothing more than “Eurocentric indoctrination” as Crouch puts it. Instead, the goal is to put the African-American child at the center, to give them the details and perspectives that textbooks often omit. This enables them to have a more accurate world view and make better, more well-informed decisions.

A closer look at Asante’s tenets will show that they could essentially be the foundation for any school looking to produce well-rounded, critical thinkers. However, when working with
the “at-risk” African-American student, the tenets are especially important in that one of the primary goals is to always keep the student’s culture at the forefront of all that takes place within the school and the classroom. In his article, “Learner-Centered Teacher-Student Relationships Are Effective: A Meta-Analysis,” Jeffrey White discusses Carl Rogers concept of client-centered therapy which eventually spread to education, nursing and other industries with the student, the patient, etc. being at the center. “Rogers's theory of education has as its goal the facilitation of the whole and fully functioning person, who is a citizen and leader in a democratic society (114). What White (and Rogers) advocate, learner-centered teaching, is simply another way of explaining the concept of centricity. Instead of the educator being at the center, the focus is on the student and the education of the whole child.

For example, in education, centricity refers to a perspective that involves locating students within the context of their own cultural references so that they can relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives. Although centricity is a concept that can be applied to any culture, Asante’s Tents of the Centered School as presented in his 1994 document “Toward the Centered School in Urban Areas” offer a glimpse into how the notion of centricity can be applied to the African-American student. The centrist paradigm is supported by research showing that the most productive method of teaching any student is to place his or her group within the center of the context of knowledge (Asante, 1990). Most would argue that a student-centered approach to teaching is ideal; however, this approach is particularly important when working with African-American students. Asante’s Tenets paint a vivid picture of what the “centered school” should look like.
Table 4: Asante's Tenets of the Centered School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Basic Tenets of the Centered School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. At the centered school the student’s culture must be taken into account in every subject and at every grade level. Where there are a multiplicity of cultures then the teacher must seek to demonstrate during the school term that she or he has an interest in centering the students of many cultures in the subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A centered school seeks to create lessons, scopes, and sequences, that reflect an authentic voice concept. Centering shall be the centerpiece of the classroom process and it shall be pursued by seeking all ways to attach the student to history concepts, mythology, science, mathematics, nature, motifs, and personalities that pervade the lessons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A centered school operates on the principle of scientific generation where the school principal is a generator for the building and the teacher is a generator for the classroom. A generator is one who energized those who are directly connected to him or her. Thus, the principal in a centered school must energize the faculty and the teacher must energize the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A centered school is a positive school where the environment itself reflects the centeredness of the students. The school is clean, it is brightly painted, it is environmentally centered to reflect the student population, and it is filled with color images, posters, and slogans of achievement. Each classroom is an invitation to learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A centered classroom is a laboratory for creative discussion, discourse, debate and critical thinking. The idea is to make every significant concept live by discussion. In such a classroom the teacher corrects false information and irrational views with a sensitivity that embraces discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A centered school’s discipline is based on respect for knowledge in both the bringer of knowledge and the seeker of knowledge. This means that the students are taught to respect themselves, the search for knowledge, the teacher and the other students. But discipline is based on knowledge and the willingness of the teacher to listen to and to accept questions from every student. The good teacher is always able to say, “I do not know the answer at this time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. A centered school celebrates the culture of the students. Teachers feel comfortable wearing the fashions of the student’s cultures, presenting speakers and performers from the culture, and infusing their lessons with illustrations from the culture. A student in such a school understands the historical role his or her people have played in world events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. A centered school involves the parents in the process of centering the students. However, it may be necessary to center the parents before they understand how the center their children. At public meetings, possibly held at the school, the principal or designee should review the ideas behind the centered school. A brief history of the Afrocentric school concept, with its applicability to centered schools, might be necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. A centered school is high achieving school where principal, teachers, and students meet regularly (at least once a month) to re-pledge themselves to academic and professional excellence. A high achieving school always has an academic and a cultural goal. The academic goal is to succeed in being the best school possible on the basis of the credentials of the students. In addition, the high achieving school seeks to undergird all subjects with the cultural component.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. A centered school asks the question: Who are my students: In answering this question the centered school seeks to apply principles of learning styles, relational attributes, personality, and aesthetic sense to the issues of achievement, discipline, and environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These tenets offer specific strategies for placing the student at the center. However, it is important to note that though much of Asante’s work focuses on Afrocentricity, no specific ethnicity is referenced in the tenets. In fact, this is emphasized by leading with a tenet that insists
teachers place the student’s culture at the center even where there are multiple cultures present in the classroom. While this study focuses specifically on working with “at risk” African American students, the tenets offer a starting point for student or learner centered approach with any cultural group.

In his 1994 piece, “Afrocentricity: A Cornerstone of Critical Pedagogy,” George Dei offers an explanation of Afrocentricity that essentially serves as an overview for Asante’s Tenets. Dei asserts,

Afrocentricity as an alternative, non-exclusionary intellectual paradigm for educating black youth’s requires a pedagogical approach that centers the black student in the discussion and analysis of the events that have shaped human development. Black youths must be encouraged to see the world through the eyes of their African ancestry (19).

At the center of Afrocentricity is the culture of the student. However, it is also important to clarify that this approach is not intended to bash other races or promote racial intolerance of any other ethnic group. Instead, it is intended to put the student at the center instead of on the margin. Asante (1991) believes that by putting the student at the center, “teachers provide students opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view” (171). Textbooks typically present what is often called a Eurocentric world view that places black students on the margins instead of at the center and without proper knowledge, teachers of all races, often unintentionally, continue to perpetuate the perspectives set forth in textbooks. However, moving beyond the textbook and placing the student at the center can be done gracefully; in fact, it should be done gracefully. Dei (1994) asserts, “The classroom pedagogy of the Afrocentric teacher must not marginalize nor degrade other groups’ perspectives, histories, cul-
tures and traditions. Afrocentricity should not be the African version of Eurocentricity” (19).

Instead, the Afrocentric approach promotes a multicultural approach to education. In “The Afrocentric Idea in Education,” Asante writes,

> The multicultural approach holds that although European culture is the majority culture in the United States, that is not sufficient reason for it to be imposed on diverse student populations as "universal” effort. Without a multicultural education, students remain essentially ignorant of the contributions of a major portion of the world's people (172).

Here, Asante’s statement further challenges Crouch’s assertion that Afrocentric education is primarily focused on bashing Eurocentric culture. Instead, Asante is asserting that European culture should not be presented to diverse groups of students, or any group of students, as though it is the center of all things. Instead, students should receive a multicultural education, one that accurately depicts the contributions, obstacles, and challenges of all groups.

In Asante’s piece, “Toward the Centered School in Urban Areas” he offers the aforementioned Tenets of the Centered School that may be used with students of any ethnicity to put them at the center of the teaching and learning process. However, along with the Tenets, Asante presents what he calls The Afrocentric Creed which has been developed specifically for African-American students.

**Table 5: The Afrocentric Creed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Afrocentric Creed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have faith in myself I have faith in my teachers I will accept my duties and responsibilities I respect others and seek their respect I have self-respect I have self-control I can learn if I study hard I will learn because I will study hard I love myself, and loving myself, I will be myself and know myself I am the one who is talking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Afrocentric Creed is a mantra that could, quite arguably, be effective in any setting with young people from virtually any background. However, it also, in a subtle way, helps the student to trust not only the teacher but himself or herself as well. As with any relationship, be it romantic or otherwise, trust is at the core of it. A daily mantra like the Afrocentric Creed begins to instill values and expectations for the student that will encourage and promote self-regulatory behaviors that will ultimately lead to improved academic achievement.

At the heart of the student-centered school are high expectations, mutual respect, and balance. In essence, the tenets could really be used in any educational setting. However, they would be particularly useful when working with student population currently being discussed. They simply show that emphasis on the child’s culture is necessary but a focus on high academic achievement and community-building are also necessary in order to educate the whole child. Furthermore, community-building also begin to slowly reduce the educational debt Ladson-Billings speaks of.

The Afrocentric paradigm, according to Asante, is a revolutionary shift in thinking proposed as a *constructural* adjustment to black disorientation, de-centeredness, and lack of agency. Just as with the Tenets of the Centered School, the Principles of Afrocentric Curriculum could easily be used in any educational setting. They are not intended to serve as a guide for “teaching blackness” or advocating the disregard for European culture or any other culture. Instead, they are to serve as a guide for helping educators to be cognizant of placing their students and their culture at the center. The Principles also show how it is possible to do this in every core subject area and beyond.
### Table 6: Asante's Principles for Afrocentric Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Curriculum Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>YOU AND YOUR COMMUNITY</strong></td>
<td>To explore with the students their sense of self, identity, and their relationship to the community in which they live. Students should be introduced to ideas of the person in family, in neighborhood, in organizations, and city, state, nation, and the world.</td>
<td>Health, Drug Education, Physiology, Human Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WELLNESS AND BIOLOGY</strong></td>
<td>To explore the importance of physical attitudes and habits that promote wellness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TRADITION AND INNOVATION</strong></td>
<td>To explore preservation and generation as powerful instruments of the interplay of change and continuity in life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CREATION AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION</strong></td>
<td>To explore the multiple ways humans have expressed their innermost thoughts through the material and performing media.</td>
<td>Music and Dance, Drawing, Painting, and Sculpture, Poetry and Rap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LOCATION IN TIME AND SPACE</strong></td>
<td>To explore chronology, geography, and mathematical concepts to unlock interpretation and analytical skills.</td>
<td>Mathematics and Geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION</strong></td>
<td>To explore the principles of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.</td>
<td>Economics and Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POWER AND AUTHORITY</strong></td>
<td>To explore the attaining and use of power and authority to effect the common will.</td>
<td>Civics, Social Studies, History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE</strong></td>
<td>To explore the intricate interplay of human attitudes with science and technology for the improvement of society.</td>
<td>Science at all grades and study skills in grades 4-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCES</strong></td>
<td>To explore through historical and social situations the varied ways human beings have handled choices and consequences.</td>
<td>Art, Literature, Architecture, and Social Studies at 9-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOCIETY AND THE WORLD</strong></td>
<td>To explore the relevant social skills, values and behaviors that promote multicultural maturity for a non-racist, non-sexist, non-hegemonic, and diverse world.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In essence, the principles prepare students to be well-rounded members of society who are not only academically prepared, but also prepared to understand the importance of community building and making the world around them a better place.
In “Constructing an Authentic Self: The Challenges and Promise of African-Centered Pedagogy,” Merry and New write, “African centered pedagogy aims to reenculturate Black children into a set of habits, dispositions, and behaviors – in short, an identity- that centers them on a firm understanding of who they are” (11). In essence, the student must be at the center of the lesson instead of an object resting on the margins. For Merry and New (2008), the result is “…a learner who comes to interpret the world through a cultural understanding that has been constructed within, about, and for his or her own community thereby creating greater self-esteem and higher academic achievement” (11). Doing so, not only gives students a realistic world view, but it improves their own cultural pride while also helping them to value and respect cultures different from their own.

3.7 Critical Pedagogy

As indicated earlier, critical pedagogy helps students to find their own voices and places in society as well as learn to challenge traditionally held notions of power in thoughtful ways. In “Popular Media, Critical Pedagogy, and Inner City Youth,” Leard and Lashua offer their own definition of critical pedagogy that is particularly relevant when considering the “at risk” or marginalized student. “Critical pedagogy provides a way of seeing an unjust social order and revealing how this injustice has caused problems in the lives of young people who live in impoverished conditions” (260). However, this approach still requires a clear structure or plan in order to be successful. In “Critical Pedagogy and Classroom Practices,” Braa and Calero discuss the necessary components of a successful critical pedagogy. “Any serious application of critical pedagogy must take steps to facilitate greater dialogue, critique, counter hegemony and praxis. These core elements of critical pedagogy are generally lacking in the traditional classroom” (359). Yet and still, with conscious effort, they may be easily integrated into the classroom.
Essentially, critical pedagogy is much like Afrocentric pedagogy in that it places the student at the center; however, it also places more emphasis on the imbalance of power that exists as a result of cultural differences. Still though, this pedagogical approach is not intended to incite anger, but to push towards critical reflection and strategies for moving beyond this imbalance of power. In *Dreaming of Democracy*, Ann George writes at length about critical pedagogy Dedicated to the emancipatory imperatives of self-empowerment and social transformation, critical pedagogy engages students in an analysis of the unequal power relations that produce and are produced by cultural practices and institutions (including schools) and it aims to help students develop the tools that will enable them to challenge this inequality (92).

Critical pedagogy is a tool for helping all students to look at the world through a critical lens and find out how they can best begin to make a difference.

Leard and Lasuhua (2006) paint a vivid picture of the facilitator who embraces critical pedagogy when they cite the work of Mostern (1994) as quoted in Grossberg (1994), “The critical pedagogue is always someone who teachers from where the student is, rather than from where the teacher is at. This does not mean that the teacher denies his or her pedagogical intentions or specific expertise, but merely that s/he respects the myriad expertise of the students that s/he does not share.

In *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools*, Andrade and Morrell review the work of several critical pedagogues. They spend a fair amount of time discussing Paulo Friere, likely the originator of critical pedagogy. They assert that praxis is the foundation for Friere’s notion of critical pedagogy. “It is the process by which teachers and students commit to education that leads to action and reflection on that ac-
tion. The five stages of the process are 1) Identify a problem, 2) Analyze the problem 3) Create a plan of action to address the problem, 4) Implement the plan of action 5) Analyze and evaluate the action” (24). This plan encourages students to become change agents in their communities. The process also helps them to understand that, “complex problems require complex solutions that must be revisited, revised, and re-implemented to reach a full solution” (25). The process encourages critical thinking and also increases student engagement since the student takes an active role in his or her learning process.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks makes the case for what she calls “engaged pedagogy” because it requires teachers to also do a significant amount of self-reflection. “When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. (21). In essence, the teacher must also be willing to also evolve and be open to new ideas and ways of thinking.

The other two questions posed at the beginning of this project were: 2) How do culturally relevant curriculum and culturally relevant pedagogy contribute to the success of urban students? And 3) How do teacher attitudes and teacher knowledge shape and/or play a role in the success of African-American students? As indicated very early on, it is careful to note that teacher attitudes have a larger impact on student achievement than a teacher’s ethnicity. The goal, here, is not to suggest that only African-American teachers or only African-American teachers from low socio economic backgrounds are best equipped to teach African-American students. In fact, to make an assumption or assertion of that kind would be a grave mistake because generational differences that transcend all racial divides are also a key factor for consideration when working
with secondary students. Of course, it is understood that prior experiences and attitudes on matters of race can certainly impact a teacher’s attitude about a particular population of students. However, the main goal is to point out that in order to produce high achieving students who would otherwise be labeled as at risk due to race, economics, language, etc. teachers (of any race) must be willing to create an atmosphere that fully embraces the student’s culture and all of its nuances. It is impossible to embrace the student without embracing the student’s cultural background. Because one of the primary goals of rhetoric is audience consideration, using its guiding principles may help teachers of all backgrounds work on their approach to teaching.

### 3.8 Rhetor Teacher

What is meant by the term *rhetor-teacher*? A rhetor-teacher is just the right blend of teacher and rhetorician. It is largely understood that the role of a teacher is to educate students and prepare them to move successfully through this global society we now live in. To do so successfully, it is important to always look closely at the rhetorical situation. Typically used for writing and speaking situations, the rhetorical situation requires the writer to consider the audience and prepare from there. In his article, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Lloyd Bitzer offers clarification about rhetoric and the role of the rhetor:

> In order to clarify rhetoric-as-essentially-related-to-situation, we should acknowledge a viewpoint that is commonplace but fundamental: a work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by
bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change. In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive. (4)

Here Bitzer captures the essence of this entire study. His statement pulls together the essence of the role of teacher attitudes, rhetorical pedagogy, critical pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, and Afrocentricity. At the heart of it all is the goal of preparing students to become critical thinkers and produce the action or change in the world Bitzer mentions. The rhetor–teacher has the power to prepare students of all races to be change agents in their neighborhoods, communities, and the world at large. However, the reality is that a one-size-fits-all approach is not the way to achieve this goal. In his essay “Rhetorical Pedagogy,” William Covino writes, “We might say that a rhetorical pedagogy consists in encouraging writing that is not restricted to self-expression or the acontextual generation of syntactic structures or the formulaic obedience to rules, but instead keeps in view the skills and contingencies that attend a variety of institutions and circumstances. (37). In essence, rhetorical pedagogy seeks to strike a balance between self-expression through writing and the more formulaic aspects of writing such as grammar and punctuation. Carter G. Woodson’s (1933) _The Miseducation of the Negro_ largely centers around the problem of “Negro education” and “Negro educators.” However, his assertions about what is necessary to teach what he calls “the Negro child” are applicable today and could be applied by teachers of any ethnic background. He poses this question: But can you expect teachers to revolutionize the social order for the good of the community? (94) Again, in keeping with the principles of Afrocentricity, critical pedagogy, and rhetoric, the answer to this question is a resounding YES! This is absolutely the expectation not just for teachers of African-American children but for teachers of all children, of all age groups, from all walks of life. Woodson does,
though, speak specifically about what is required to educate the African-American student and his proposed course of action is still most fitting and relevant many, many years later. He writes,

To educate the Negro we must find out exactly what his background is, what he is today, what his possibilities are, and how to begin with him as he is and make him a better individual of the kind that he is. Instead of cramming the Negro’s mind with what others have shown that they can do, we should develop his latent powers that he may perform in society a part of which others are not capable. In this effort to imitate, however, these “educated people” are sincere. They hope to make the Negro conform quickly to the standard of the whites and thus remove the pretext for the barriers between the races. They do not realize, however, that even if the Negroes do successfully imitate the whites, nothing new has thereby been accomplished. You simply have a larger number of persons doing what others have been doing. The unusual gifts of the race have not thereby been developed, and an unwilling world, therefore, continues to wonder what the Negro is good for. (4-5)

Closing this study with Carter Woodson’s concerns at the forefront seems fitting. They are the summation of all that has been said. He offers a very detailed discussion of why a one size fits all approach will not work for educating the at-risk African American child. It’s not about reiterating what the textbooks offer or teaching the student to emulate what others have already done. Instead it is about creating a learning atmosphere that inspires the student and encourages the student to strive for his or her highest potential. Academic achievement and test scores are a reality; however, when the environment is right and students are given the tools to find themselves and explore their gifts and talents, content delivery and mastery becomes almost
effortless. No matter the student population, the teacher, the neighborhood, the school, at the heart of any teacher’s definition of success is their attitude about the student and their high expectations and standards for the student.

There is still much work to be done. Again, as Ladson-Billings reminds us, the “educational debt” is at the core of the disparities seen in America’s educational system today - particularly where the education of African-American students is concerned. While there is not one specific solution for improvement, positive teacher attitudes, high expectations, audience consideration, and culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum are key changing the face of the educational system not just for African-American students but for all students. A starting point for addressing the challenges might realistically begin in teacher-education programs and continue on as they move into the classroom in the form of professional development, collaborative teaching, and other school wide strategies geared towards keeping the student at the center of the teaching and learning process.

3.9 The Future

I have thought a great deal about my next steps for this project and how it might help to address current concerns with our educational system here in Georgia. I envision this dissertation ultimately becoming a resource for teachers of secondary English – particularly pre-service teachers enrolled in teacher education programs. The resource will also include a supplemental text with lesson plans and readings that are culturally relevant and beyond the scope of what current textbooks offer. Ultimately, this project will serve as a reminder of what the Oakland Unified School District did years ago as well as the ideas set forth by Smitherman, Rickford and Rickford, and Molefi Asante. The Tenets of the Centered School and the other Afrocentric
guidelines set forth by Asante in the mid-90s offer at least a partial solution to addressing what Ladson-Billings calls the educational debt seen in America today.

Additionally, there is also a desperate need to move administrators and teachers beyond the notion of needing to “teach to the test.” This approach really does not give students long terms skills and understanding of content, nor does it give or enhance critical thinking skills. Content is absolutely of the utmost importance. However, teaching content should not come at the expense of everything else. This dissertation seeks to show that an understanding and true appreciation of the student’s culture and the student’s language will better help teachers to rely more on Bitzer’s elements of the rhetorical situation to prepare lessons that are rigorous, aligned with standards, and culturally relevant. When teachers begin to make a conscious effort to do this, instead of focusing only on the test, the result will be a more productive classroom atmosphere, well-rounded students, and significant increases in student achievement.
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