

AN AFRICAN CENTERED APPROACH TO ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF  
LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

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## **ABSTRACT**

For many minority children, the classroom is a space in which language and culture often awkwardly and harmfully collides. Schools often maintain a culture that is misaligned with the culture of their students, which is seen as an incompatibility between home and school, and is often used by educators to justify this mismatch within the classroom. This incompatibility is clearly displayed by the misinterpreted interactions that often occur within the classroom between teachers and students, often surrounding the differing assumptions about appropriate ways of using language within the classroom (Villegas, 1988, p.4). The purpose of this paper is to explore the intersections of language and culture for African-American children within education. I begin by outlining what we currently know about language development and how it manifests itself in the classroom setting. Secondly I provide a short overview of the history of language in education and its relationship to cultural perceptions of standard versus non-standard English and identity formation. Lastly, I offer African-Centered and Culturally Relevant education as responses to the current challenges that surround language and culture within many traditional classrooms and as a means of reform.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“What we talk about; how we talk about it; what we see, attend to, or ignore; how we think; and what we think about are influenced by our culture...[and] help to shape, define, and perpetuate our culture”* (Porter and Samovar, 1991).

Asa Hilliard states, “Language is rooted in and is an aspect of culture. Culture is nothing, more, nor less, than the shared ways that groups of people have created to use and define their environment” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 89). For this reason, culture undergirds all that we do in education. It is infused in areas such as curriculum and instruction, in assessing performance and even in the administration of a school. Culture also plays a part in each of our daily lives, guiding us to view the world through our own cultural lens. In this context, culture is defined as “a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give meaning to our own lives as well as the lives of others” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). While we may not be aware of it, culture determines how we think about things in *our* world. It also determines how we teach and how we learn. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand that education is not merely an educational process, but a sociocultural process as well (Gay, 2000).

This paper will explore the intersections of language and culture for African-American children within education. I begin by outlining what we currently know about language development and how it manifests itself in the classroom setting. I believe that understanding what we already know about language development and literacy is critical to understanding how culture and language interact within the space of the classroom. Secondly I provide a short overview of the history of language in education and its relationship to cultural perceptions of standard versus non-standard English and identity

formation. Lastly, I offer African-Centered and Culturally Relevant education as responses to the current challenges that surround language and culture within many traditional classrooms and as a means of reform.

## CHAPTER 1

### CONTEXTUALIZING THE CHALLENGES

A great divide exists within America's classrooms between the statements and actual practice. What is commonly said to be the goal of education for all children is often diametrically opposed to the schooling that many children receive. This divide is perpetuated by factors such as the inequitable distribution of resources within schools, leading to poor facilities and lower quality teachers in underresourced areas—elements that individually and collectively lead to the continuous deterioration of the education provided to many of our nation's most overlooked children (Anyon, 1997). A large number of these children come from home environments that also lack the necessary resources to fully provide for the whole child for a variety of reasons (Anyon, 1997). These families are often forced to focus on issues of safety, or worrying when lights will be turned off, all while working multiple jobs just to put food on the table. Given this plight, one can understand how issues of education often take a backseat to the reality of these more prominent means of survival. However, this should not lead us to believe that just because these individuals are forced to focus on these external forces they do not want or deserve the best education for their children.

Unfortunately, research has often highlighted the negative effects of African American culture on literacy and education. Gadsden asserts, "...many of the studies reinforced images of a community that devalued education and hard work to achieve it" (Gadsden, 1994, p. 246). However, as progressive consumers of knowledge, we must follow the lead of V.J. Harris (1990) who utilizes historical and contemporary inquiry in

asserting that literacy and education have historically been connected with the uplift of Black people both academically and within their culture and community.

It is incumbent upon all of us to take responsibility for educating the future generations of our country. This moral obligation should not be dependent upon race, class or family background, but should be a central part of American culture.

Unfortunately, we have seen that these factors often limit who receives an education and the quality to which it is given. Boykin (1994) shares this perspective insisting, “There has always been a profound and inescapable cultural fabric of the schooling process in America.” But, this “cultural fabric” is primarily of European and middle class origins, so deeply ingrained in the structures, ethos and programs, and etiquette of schools that it is considered simply the “normal” and “right” thing to do” (as cited in Gay, 2000, p. 9). This begs the following questions: how is this ‘normal’ or ‘right’ when we are leaving out the diverse cultural perspectives and practices of contributing members of our country?

While we have the presence of mind to know and internalize the effects that these social issues can pose to the achievement and success of our children, we fall short in taking these issues into account in the classroom. We choose not to recognize the immense strength it must take to remain attentive while lacking basic needs such as food, sleep, and proper health care. Proven by the current state of education, it is clear that we cannot leave the education of these children exclusively to those who currently hold positions of power within the system. When schools are designed, failing to account for the community in which they educate, children among the non-dominant group are often attacked for their language and word choice, their response to correction and their

misbehaviors. This often leads to an educational track that is limited and a mindset that is harmful to their continued growth as students and people. The dominant society's values and codes, which pervade the education system, aid in this process. In the forward to Mwalimu J. Shujaa's (1994) book, *Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies*, Madhubuti and Brooks (1993) state, "Too many of our children are trapped in urban school systems that have been 'programmed' for failure; and, all too often, the answer to what is to be done to correct this injustice is left in the very hands of those most responsible for the problem" (as cited in Shujaa, 1994, p. 1). In order to truly change the life trajectory of these children, a systemic transformation is necessary—one that accounts for the cultural diversity and histories of our children and their families. In order to fulfill our responsibility to both the culture and history of racial minorities we must further examine the incompatibility that occurs for many African American children in schools.

For many minority children, the classroom is a space in which language and culture sometimes awkwardly and harmfully collide. Schools often maintain a culture that is misaligned with the culture of their students, this is seen as an incompatibility between home and school, and is often used by educators to justify the lack of achievement within the classroom. This incompatibility is clearly displayed by the misinterpreted interactions that often occur within the classroom between teachers and students, often surrounding the differing assumptions about appropriate ways of using language within the classroom (Villegas, 1988, p.4).

These pervading schooling ideologies seen in classrooms perpetuate the codes of dominant society. Bourdieu (1984) refers to this as his *theory of reproduction*—

seemingly ensuring a specific class the ability to pass on its privileges to the next generation (Wallace & Wolf, 2006, p. 114). Schools themselves, “systematically reproduce the broad-scale inequalities that define America” (Fine & Weis, 2003, p. 4). Clearly the structure of schools and its influential culture are issues we can no longer ignore.

Bourdieu (1984) furthers the argument of the reproduction of social position by discussing that what is necessary for educational success engages a whole set of cultured behaviors or rules that are determined by the field or space in which the social world is viewed. This field is characterized by a set of values and practices, which forces people to be inside or outside by following a specific set of rules. African American children often lack knowledge of this set of rules when they enter the classroom, which has been learned by middle and upper class children and is expected by many teachers. These culturally related behaviors include attitudes about education and the ability to succeed within the structures of the institution. Bourdieu (1984) recognizes these behaviors as cultural capital, which is provided by children’s parents. Students who possess this cultural capital experience reinforcement by the teacher in both her actions and language, which makes it an effective source of power within the classroom and among one’s peers who do not possess it. Therefore, those from privileged homes have a set of knowledge that makes the education system comfortable and familiar. Consequently, those who have learned this behavior are able to succeed within the structures of society, while lower class groups often do not (as cited in Wallace & Wolf, 2006, pp. 113-114).

Additionally, Lareau and Horvat (1999) assert that there are variations in the ways in which “institutional actors legitimate or rebuff efforts by individuals to access

these resources,” directing them to three critical points of illumination (p.38). These points include<sup>1</sup>:

- The value of capital depends heavily on the social setting (or field)
- There is an important difference between the possession and activation of capital or resources
- Reproduction is jagged and uneven and continually negotiated by social actors

Like Bourdieu (1984), Lareau and Horvat (1999) recognize that reproduction only benefits certain groups of students. They extend this complex picture in exploring these theoretical issues and highlighting not class, but race as a mediator of class in shaping family and school relationships. They suggest that it is harder for black parents than white parents to “comply with the institutional standards of schools” (Lareau and Horvat, 1999, p. 38). While Lareau and Horvat (1999) recognize that social class influences how black and white parents negotiate their relationships with schools, “for blacks race plays an important role independent of social class, in framing the terms of their relationship” (p.38).

In order to construct these interactions, Lareau and Horvat (1999) use the example of a card game. Depending on the rules of the game, which they deem as the *field of interaction*, the cards (or *capital*) have different values. The way in which individuals play their cards is primarily dependent on their knowledge of the rules of the game and their ability to activate their capital, based on the skills they possess. This idea supports the privileging that occurs within the school setting for white families and the inability to activate one’s capital for black families, independent of their social class.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Lareau and Horvat (1999)

While we strive to achieve not only equal, but also quality education for all students, it is imperative that we look through a more comprehensive lens in order to address these issues. From a larger perspective, “we cannot eliminate the achievement gap and attain greater educational excellence simply by looking for solutions and strategies solely *within* the educational system (Anyon, 1997). As Anyon asserts, we must look outside the system and at the history of education and the systemic and structural constraints in order to formulate questions that will direct our reform efforts. The questions that we might ask are, what means of education will truly provide our black and minority children with awareness and self-empowerment? What will help to guide us to not only provide children with a quality academic environment, but also address the need for a social and cultural component of schooling as well begin to foster conversation around the challenges that currently exist for black and brown children within the education system. I believe that literacy and language are not only critical spaces within the classroom, but they are also spaces in which this transformation can begin to occur.

Currently, our system not only fails to provide many African-American children with the necessary academic means for achievement, it also fails to recognize their cultural and social needs. This failure is ever present through language, in which an “incompatibility exists among use and type between teacher and student” (Villegas, 1988). It often places them within an environment that chooses not to listen to them or validate their cultural perspective (Murrell, 2002; Shujaa, 1994). Without the means to advocate for themselves within this educational space, minority children and their teachers are left out of the conversation and seemingly silenced by the predetermined

power structure present within our nation's schools. Carol D. Lee, asks, "What manner of education will mold the African personality to thrive in a culture that demeaned its character, denied its existence and coordinated in its destruction?" (Shujaa,1994). This is the question that must be asked in order to address the glaring inequalities that exist within our nation's schools and recognize the cultural components that are ever present within the teaching and learning process. This sociocultural process about which Gay (2000) speaks often begins with the interactive process of language and communication.

## CHAPTER 2

### LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

The glaring inequalities that exist within America's public schools greatly affect the development of language and communication. As a crucial component of a child's literacy development we must focus on language (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). The sociocultural nature of education necessitates culture to be placed alongside language within the classroom. As educators, it is important that we understand the interplay that exists between these two areas. As we know, language and communication are at the heart of teaching and as Gay (2000) puts forth, "communication is key to helping shape the future of our students." With this said, communication cannot exist without culture and, in turn, culture cannot be known without communication. This idea places great attention on the effect these two areas can have on the education of minority students who are predominantly taught by white teachers (Gay, 2000). Furthermore, the impact that communication and language have on minority students within the classroom is too important to not begin a difficult conversation and begin to transform what Delpit (1998) terms the "culture of power"<sup>2</sup> within our system of education. I will speak to this culture further when addressing interactions that occur within the classroom. Before we address the cultural incongruence in respect to language, it is important to understand how language development occurs and what it looks like in the classroom.

#### ***Language Development: What We Already Know***

In order to understand the implications of language on culture, I begin with a review of the literature on language. Language is a tool that when coupled with

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Delpit (1988) asserts that "There are codes or rules for participating in power" and this is what she calls a "culture of power." The rules within this culture of power are "a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power" (p.25)

individual confidence, empowers individuals to speak up for themselves, build relationships with others, and express their ideas about any topic that they choose. It is also a “rule-governed, meaningful communication system” (Honig, 2007). Language can be used for many different purposes, whether it is positive or negative, descriptive, or vague, allowing people to communicate how they feel, in their own way. The ability to communicate and express oneself is a skill that can be both powerful and frightening for children. While they gain the ability to express themselves, within the classroom, this expression may be judged and critiqued by both their teacher and their peers (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). However, as broad as the world of language can be, it should not deter educators from maintaining a clear focus on its importance within the classroom. The critical nature of language and communication makes it incumbent upon educators to further their knowledge to understand the implications of language on the lives of children and how it can potentially affect the learning process in both negative and positive ways.

Language and communication are very important throughout a child’s life, but each is even more critical in supporting the foundations of language during a child’s earliest years. The development of language is crucial to a child’s literacy development, which includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As children get older, they learn the various aspects that make up language. This includes phonology, syntax, semantics, morphology, and pragmatics. Each of these is juxtaposed among the “intricacies and nuances of language and conversation children grasp over time” (Honig, 2007). Various studies demonstrate that even in the youngest grades, children in poverty enter school with smaller vocabularies than their middle class peers (Hart & Risley, 1995; Kirkland &

Patterson, 2005). It is, therefore, understood that the amount of oral language that children have is highly correlated to their success or struggles in school (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). Therefore, emergent literacy practices place great importance on the development of oral language, setting the foundation for early reading. “The continued development of oral language skills throughout elementary school is related to continued success in decoding and comprehension” (Wasik, 2009). A strong focus on these skills during the early years will help to support academic achievement.

### ***When Does Language Development Begin?***

Knowing that the earliest years are the most critical for language, it is important to discuss when development actually begins. Kirkland and Patterson (2005) state, “the most intensive period of speech and language development for humans is during the first three years of life” (p. 391). Therefore, a child’s home is the first place they begin to learn new concepts and it is also where the language development and socialization process begins. As children enter school, “they bring diverse levels of language acquisition to the learning process” (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005, p. 391). In kindergarten children may know as many as five thousand words, but this number is disproportionately affected by a child’s home life. As found by Hart and Risley (1995), although teachers are able to use vocabulary introduction to add to the breadth of a child’s vocabulary, the vocabularies of children often reflects those of their parents. “By the time the children were 3 years old, trends in amount of talk, vocabulary growth, and style of interaction were well established and clearly suggested widening gaps to come” (Hart & Risley, 1995). These widening gaps are clearly divided along racial and class lines. Hart and Risley state that:

*We saw increasing disparity between the extremes--the fast vocabulary growth of the professors' children and the slow vocabulary growth of the Turner House children. The gap seemed to foreshadow the findings from other studies that in high school many children from families in poverty lack the vocabulary used in advanced textbooks (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. 25).*

Hart and Risley's (1995) study demonstrates a problematic reality; children are seemingly handed their fate even before they have entered the classroom. As Bourdieu (1984) and Lareau and Horvat (1999) address in their discussions of cultural capital, the children at Turner House, lack the cultural capital necessary to access and activate this learning prior to entering the school setting. While Hart and Risley specifically deal with social class, Lareau and Horvat (1999) also recognize that there is a contributing component of race as well. While language patterns and vocabularies are dependent on a child's family background and often by race, it is critical to understand why these disparities exist. We know that children benefit from adults talking with them, but often the presence of talk does not exist at the same rate in all homes, so what activities are occurring in some homes, which produce greater access to talk and communication? Hart and Risley (1995) found that children from families in poverty are not exposed to nearly the same amount of books as children in middle and upper class families. Reading is one of the most important things that parents can do for their children. This time exposes the child to new vocabulary, but more importantly gives the child and parent an opportunity to have a conversation (Gunning, 2005, p. 2). These conversations provide children with information, while also helping to build their knowledge base. Being exposed to this new information, children seek to ask why, exposing them to further knowledge, a larger vocabulary and more conversations. These conversations are important in regards to both their quantity and quality (Wasik, 2009). Recognizing that this is a critical piece of both

language and vocabulary development it is important to understand some of the factors that limit high poverty families from providing their children with the necessary exposure to conversation.

In high poverty families, these conversations are far less prevalent and limited by the vocabulary of the family members themselves. These children may hear as few as 500 words in an hour of family life, while their wealthier counterparts are exposed to 3,000 words in an hour. By the time children reach the classroom, these deficiencies are exponential. “By the age of four, some children have heard more than 50 million words, while others have heard just 10 million words” (Gunning, 2005, p. 3). With varying diversity of language among students within classrooms, it is critical for teachers to have an understanding of how to implement and create an environment that continues to support language development for all groups of children, regardless of their current vocabularies. But as Hart and Risley (1995) argue, teachers cannot effectively change the quantity of words, only the quality. Studies by Wasik, Bond and Hindeman suggest otherwise. Wasik, Bond and Hindman (2006) found that children from high poverty families can “show significant increases in the size of their vocabularies if they have the appropriate opportunities to learn” (p. 70). While Hart and Risley (1995) recognize the deficiencies that exist among children from high-poverty homes, Wasik, Bond and Hindman’s (2006) study contributes to the literature surrounding vocabulary development. They argue that time in the classroom “can be used to effectively implement methods that result in increased language and literacy skills.” Further, the way teachers talk to their students during book reading, as well as outside of it can affect literacy development. Strategies such as “providing feedback, asking descriptive

questions and using active listening are positively related to children's outcome language measures" (Wasik, Bond & Hindeman, 2006, p.70). These strategies will be further elaborated in the next section.

### ***Oral Language Development in the Classroom***

Language development begins at home, but this process must continue when children enter the classroom. As addressed in the study by Hart and Risley (1995) there are differences in oral language for children in high-poverty families. Therefore I ask, how is oral language development supported and what differences exist for minority and low-income children who come from homes, which may not align with the schooling environment which they are being educated? Oral language means communicating with other people. In the classroom, this does not merely mean teaching children to speak, but also supporting their development in communicating effectively. Speech and language encompass not only talking, but also the process of thinking, knowledge, and skills (Gunning, 2005). Because children bring very different language patterns and diverse levels to the classroom, teachers face many challenges in order to meet the individual needs of each learner in their classroom. Furthermore, children's early language skills vary depending on the exposure that they have had to language. With the great diversity that exists within America's classrooms, teachers need to be qualified to address all areas of language. Currently children across the country are struggling to live up to the standards set by both the federal government and their local districts. In order to address these struggles it is important that teachers be prepared to support their students' growth and development in the areas of literacy and language and understanding the role culture plays in the process of literacy development. In order to make this happen "current and

prospective teachers need to know more about language” (Fillmore & Snow, 2000, p. 5).

With this said, I continue my discussion by exploring what we know works pedagogically and instructionally for children, with the understanding that we must also integrate a discussion of the cultural dissonance that may exist in utilizing these practices.

In the classroom, there are both explicit and implicit ways in which teachers are able to address children’s language needs. However, conflicting messages regarding methodology have limited the opportunities for using authentic, contextualized language experiences. These contextualized language experiences are critical. Hall (1987) found that oral language emerges in children when the following conditions are present (as cited in Kirkland and Patterson, 2005, p. 391):

*(a) children are the major constructors of language; (b) parent, teachers, and caregivers serve as facilitators, not transmitters, of language development; (c) language is embedded in the context of the daily life of the child; (d) children construct language in their pursuit of meaning and comprehension related to their world and print (e) the conditions for developing language are identical to those for learning about the world; (f) social interaction is foundational to language development; (g) children understand the functions of language as they use it to clarify information about themselves and others; and (h) language is learned in a child-initiated, holistic manner.*

These conditions put forth by Hall represent the need for authentic language opportunities within the classroom. Unfortunately, due to the constraints of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the emphasis on standardized testing, teachers are being forced to neglect authentic approaches to language development often ignoring them altogether (Menken, 2008).

Another limit of oral language in the classroom is that it is often used by teachers and very rarely by students. Teachers frequently use language for “business talk,” making sure that children have the information that they need to complete a task.

Therefore, children do not have the opportunity to be the “major constructors of language” (Hall, 1987) with their teacher or their peers. In many primary classrooms conversations between the teacher and child or the child and their peers do not occur. There are three reasons for this (1) teachers do not typically make time to talk with children (2) talking is not built into the curriculum and (3) quiet classrooms equal “good” classrooms (Wasik, 2009). In an environment that is dominated by their teacher, children do not receive the number of opportunities they need to develop strong oral language skills.

Secondly, there is an assumption that is based on the fact that children start learning and using oral language long before they begin school. Therefore, many teachers and educators assume that the primary learning tasks for children in school are reading and writing, which are usually seen as the two major aspects of literacy. This is problematic given that studies highlight that the amount of talk is related to socioeconomic status (Hart and Risley, 1995). With the assumption that children come equipped with oral language, teachers may not address many of the deficits that are present for their students or cultivate an environment that integrates high levels of conversation among students and with teachers.

### ***Creating Opportunities for Language Development in the Classroom***

*“Adults clarify and extend children’s ideas and provide additional information and advanced vocabulary, which lift children’s thinking to higher-levels”* (Raines and Isbell, 1994).

While Hart and Risley (1995) assert, a teacher cannot change the quality or quantity of language that the child has previously received, they do have the opportunity

to increase the quality and quantity of talk in the classroom. According to Dickinson (2001), this opportunity is not often taken advantage of within many preschool classrooms. He explains that several trends apparent within the classroom which demonstrate this lack of both time and quality of conversation (p.227)<sup>3</sup>:

- Individual children have relatively few extended conversations with other children or with adults during the course of the day.
- During free play, children tend to engage in complex play with other children and are less likely to engage in such play when they are talking with adults.
- Conversations that occur between children and adults only occasionally deal with topics that draw on decontextualized language skills, and conversational topics change frequently.
- Children’s language growth is supported by interactions with adults, including the time spent in large-group teacher led activities. Some evidence suggests that children’s language growth may be undermined by extensive time spent talking with peers.

While we know that various areas (group time, book reading, free play) of a child’s day that are beneficial to providing children the opportunity for conversation, it has been found that “children’s language growth was strongly associated with the amount of time that they spent talking with and listening to adults,” while most beneficial talk was “talk that communicated information and was not used to control children’s behavior”, this is what Dickinson refers to as decontextualized language (Dickinson, 2001, p.224). As we know from Hart and Risley (1995), the number of words the parents spoke highly correlates to the vocabularies of their children. With great variance between children from professional homes and children from high-poverty homes, children from high-poverty homes are not receiving the extensive time “talking with and listening to

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<sup>3</sup> Dickinson (2001), p.227

adults” (Dickinson, 2001, p.224). Therefore, as educators it is imperative that we are providing this opportunity for students.

In order to expose children to this decontextualized language, it is important that teachers create an environment that promotes opportunities for thoughtful conversation. Print rich classrooms, which include student work, are necessary. In order for children to utilize this print, it is important that they be given simple tasks, and prompted by picture cues that build upon the vocabulary that they are being taught. These tasks may include a sign-in sheet, marking lunch choices, or following a daily schedule (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). There are also strategies that increase children’s opportunity to talk in the classroom. These include, but are not limited to asking open-ended questions, modeling rich language, providing meaningful feedback, expanding children’s language and asking questions that allow the child to “fill-in” missing information (Wasik, 2009). These strategies are often used during group time and as Dickinson found, central to this time is using it for instructional purposes, as well as providing linguistically rich experiences which include the use of varied words and rare words (Dickinson, 2001, p. 248). As Smith and Dickinson (1994) find in their study on language opportunities and environments, teachers must become aware of the types of talk necessary for promoting language and literacy development within the classroom allowing them to encourage these environments within their classrooms (p. 362).

As children are exposed to different skills, it is also important that they are receiving meaningful feedback. Often teachers provide children with feedback using phrases such as, *good job, nice work*. These phrases are termed, empty phrases, they do not tell the child explicitly what you like (Wasik, 2009). Providing the children with a

descriptive phrase that allows them to understand what you are referring to is integral to their language development. Phrases such as, *I like the way you used orange to highlight the sun's rays*, communicates to the child exactly what you like and why. Furthermore, it provides the child with the opportunity to hear vocabulary words that they may not have known previously or had in their expressive vocabulary.

In order to expand children's language it is important that the teacher not only model for the child, but also expand on the child's own words. This strategy affirms what the child says, while still providing the child with exposure to greater vocabulary. Often times children refer to things using words such as *them, it, that*. When a child identifies something using these words the teacher must expand on this statement. This may look like this:

**Child says:** *I want that.*

**Teacher says:** *You want to play with the red truck in the sandbox.*

By expanding the child's statement, you are demonstrating that you understand what the child needs, while still modeling how to use language that is more descriptive. While it is necessary for the teacher to demonstrate the use of a more descriptive statement using the child's words, it is also important that it be modeled by the teacher. In order for children to use an expanded and more mature vocabulary, they must be given examples of language. It is very important that teachers speak in an explicit way providing the child specific directions or a detailed image of what the teacher is saying. This can be demonstrated in the directions that the teacher gives: *Please get the scissors and cut out the flowers* or when the teacher is explaining parts of a story: *The villain, the bad guy in the story, was evil and tried to harm the children* (Wasik, 2009). This descriptive

language continues to model for the children, allowing them to gain a broader vocabulary and more expanded and descriptive language skills.

### ***Book Reading***

Read alouds and book reading are a huge part of the early childhood classroom and should be a part of all classrooms. Book reading helps to expand a child's vocabulary and to develop a child's greater grasp of language skills. The benefits of reading books are far reaching and provide instruction and practice in various areas of literacy, in fact reading books is one of the best ways to develop a student's emergent literacy. Reading books to children is considered one of the most important ways to develop language, often times providing the context for language experiences (Wasik, 2009). It further provides children with decontextualized language or language that is used to "convey novel information to audiences who are at a distance from the speaker and who may share only limited amounts of background information with the speaker" (Wasik, 2009).

Additionally, literature provides children with a model for language, facilitating dialogue between the child and teacher. Like a child's vocabulary, exposure to books is often times dependent on family background. Research demonstrates that children in high-poverty homes receive far less exposure to and time with books prior to enrolling in school. Teal and Adams' research (see Table 1 in appendix) clearly demonstrates this disparity.

As the data from Teal and Adams shows, children in middle-class families receive many more hours of book reading than children in high-poverty families. This reality makes the presence of books and more specifically the reading of books a critical

component within the classroom. Teachers must strive to make up the gap that exists in book exposure, but also the skills children gain from book reading.

It is important that children are exposed to a variety of books, both in content and type, as they support different areas of language development. Wordless books also are beneficial to language development. When children are encouraged to add to stories in which there are no words, they have the autonomy and creative ability to add their own touch. This activity stimulates language using pictures as the context. The use of books helps to expose children to a variety of skills. These activities will help to nurture a child's language development and support other areas of literacy development as well.

Wasik and Bond (2001) also assert that teachers must not only provide opportunities for book reading, but also multiple opportunities to interact with the vocabulary that is introduced during book reading. They found that children who had “multiple opportunities to interact with vocabulary words learned more book-related vocabulary compared with children who were exposed to just books” (p.5). These interactions included introducing target vocabulary before the reading, using objects to represent the vocabulary, asking open-ended questions and providing children with opportunities to talk and to be heard (Wasik and Bond, 2001, p. 245). This interactive process of book reading provides the children with opportunities to learn the vocabulary in a meaningful context. The addition of the extension activities in this study also allowed for increased connections between the story, the activity and the children's lives, as well as providing extended time for dialogue and conversation. This is in line with the idea that opportunities for quality dialogue are crucial to the development of language, as well as the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy in which storytelling is seen as a tool

to “help make the abstractions more concrete, diverse facts more understandable, and arise interest in learning...” (Gay, 2000, p.3). While this can be done explicitly by the teacher through asking open-ended questions, utilizing practices such as show and tell, and practicing book-reading techniques such as dialogic reading, it is important that the teacher provide the student with the ability to connect to the text or activity, as demonstrated by Wasik and Bond (2001).

Too often, questions are asked of children during a read-aloud or other activity that requires merely one-word answers. “The key to developing language is to pose questions that elicit a more elaborated response and to provide support through prompts or reading that helps students formulate a response” (Gunning, 2005). In order to seek a more detailed answer and work on developing a child’s oral language, it is important that the teacher ask open-ended questions rather than closed questions. These types of questions may include: *What do we know about the main character? Why do the three boys go back to the school?* These questions provide the children with the opportunity to give a more elaborated response. Though this strategy is important, the teacher must also be aware that children are often tentative in providing more elaborate answers and may need to be prompted by being given the opportunity to express themselves in greater detail. Some of these prompts include: *Can you tell me more about that? Would you explain what you mean?* Within a supportive and comfortable environment, children will be willing to express themselves more fully and engage in a more detailed conversation between both their teacher and their peers.

*Show and Tell* serves as a wonderful language building activity, enabling children to describe items that they have chosen and that are their own. Children become

excited about sharing the personal item with their classmates and often times brings out more detailed descriptions of an object than normally received from a child. In addition to providing an opportunity for language, this activity provides a link between home and school, and may solicit further discussions about a child's home culture.

Dialogic reading is a practice that can be done during a book reading with a child. The teacher or adult "helps the child become the teller of the story, while the adult listens and questions the child" (Whitehurst et al., 1994). This practice is beneficial because the child becomes an active participant in the storytelling process. During this process, the PEER technique is used. This technique is a systematic process, which, prompts the child to say something about the book, evaluates the child's response, expands the child's response by rephrasing and adding information to it, and repeating the prompt to make sure the child has learned from the expansion. Data shows that children in dialogic reading intervention groups performed better on phonemic awareness and alphabet tasks and somewhat on vocabulary tasks (Whitehurst et al, 1994).

Each strategy discussed elicits a greater number of opportunities for children to talk within the classroom. It is also important teachers think about the way they structure their classroom, utilizing grouping strategies to enhance language instruction. As children acquire language, it is important that they have the opportunity to work in small groups to address specific skills, as well as providing them with opportunities for conversation with their peers. Conversation circles or conversation stations provide children with this opportunity inside the classroom. Recognition that specific strategies may benefit African American children is asserted by Gay (2000), "Educators need to organize their conceptions and experiences in working with students of color into

meaningful ‘tales of important happenings,’ as much as individuals need to do so with their personal encounters” (p.3). When implemented purposefully, each strategy discussed provides for these specific and individual experiences that African American children bring to the classroom.

***How does culture fit in to the pedagogy?***

While we recognize the pertinence of these strategies being used as instructional best practices within the classroom, why then are opportunities for language and literacy limited in many preschool classrooms (Dickinson, 2001; Dickinson and Tabors, 2001)? Fillmore and Snow (2000) suggest that in order for teachers to be effective in the classroom a course on language and culture is necessary. With coursework that focuses on this component of language, teachers will be more understanding and knowledgeable of the diversity that exists among children in their classroom, as well as why some children may be more apprehensive about speaking in the classroom or “what children learn when they acquire a language and culture.” Wasik, Bond and Hindman (2006) also assert that training should be intensive and in addition teachers should be trained in why they should be doing these things. For example, they found that “Having the knowledge about why conversation and book reading strategies are important influenced teachers to change their behaviors” (Wasik, Bond & Hindman, 2006, p. 72).

Even with proper training, educators must recognize the importance of acceptance within their classroom. The persistent cultural challenges within the classroom are often a result of the many dialects and languages that children bring. With the ever-growing cultural diversity that exists within America’s schools, teachers are faced with an array of diverse language students, but dialect differences are not always as

accepted within the classroom. Dialect differences are found in all countries and are often times distinguished as “changes in phoneme pronunciation” (Honig, 2007). In many classrooms in which the teacher speaks what would be considered Standard English, these dialect differences are looked upon negatively and as something that needs to be fixed. Furthermore, the acquisition and development of one’s native language is an authentic process; in contrast, the successful acquisition of a second form of a language is a much more rote learning experience. Within schools, a strong focus is placed on changing a child’s language form, often a very unsuccessful practice. Teachers focus heavily on correction and an effective filter is raised by the child. The children are being forced to go through a conscious learning process to attain the standard language with little success (Delpit, 1995). Children must have the opportunity to make mistakes and feel comfortable in the environment in which they are learning the language. This cannot occur when they are being forced to apply rules while trying to formulate a thought, in addition to being continually corrected by their teacher after each word. The absence of cultural knowledge of their students by teachers can cause problems within the classroom. Risko and Walker-Dalhouse assert that, “children whose language, ethnicity, and race are not represented by the school’s dominant culture to experience varying levels of achievement and persistent gaps in reading achievement” (2007, p. 98).

An increased focus on oral language development is essential in classrooms and particularly in inner-city classrooms serving minority and high-poverty students. It is clear that there is a direct correlation between exposure to words and books and later success within school. It is imperative that a multi-layered focus be used in support of

early literacy development, which not only includes print and print based activities, but rich opportunities for oral language development as well (Dickinson, 2001).

As educators look at best practices they must also recognize the diversity that exists among their students, the language patterns that they bring with them and the responsiveness needed to effectively support all children within their classroom. It is important that teachers utilize what children do bring to the classroom, accessing their funds of knowledge (Moll, 2001) while supporting their development through further exposure and authentic learning experiences.

An understanding of the development of language only begins the conversations that are necessary in supporting language development within the classroom. As stated previously, this conversation involves not only pedagogical and instructional strategies, but issues of historical significance as well. Teachers must have an understanding of the history of language within public schools—its role, various policy decisions that surround language and the values that have been placed on it, which greatly shape their classrooms today.

Having presented information on the literature surrounding the development of language, I now present a short overview of the history of language in education. Providing this context, as well as a short discussion of its current effects, I will then begin to frame the integration of African centered and culturally relevant education as a part of the transformation of the literacy classroom.

### CHAPTER 3

#### HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In 1917, during National Speech Week, the National Council of Teachers of English created a pledge for school students to recite. The speech stated,

*I love the United States of America. I love my country's flag. I love my country's language. I promise:*

1. *That I will not dishonor my country's speech by leaving off the last syllable of words.*
2. *That I will say a good American "yes" and "no" in place of an Indian grunt "un-hum" and "nup-um" or a foreign "ya" or "yeh" and "nope."*
3. *That I will do my best to improve American speech by avoiding loud rough tones, by enunciating distinctly, and by speaking pleasantly, clearly, and sincerely.*
4. *That I will learn to articulate correctly as many words as possible during the year.* (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002)

Created by the National Council of Teachers of English, this pledge highlights the limited view of American culture, and the cultural fabric that is entrenched within the education system. Throughout the history of education in the United States, schooling has been a complex battlefield of inequality and mediocrity for many minorities. The debates surrounding racial inequality present deeply rooted cultural issues within America's schools. These racial injustices were more specific than just skin color, they often attacked language practices and value systems of racial minorities as well. These public conversations about language particularly affected second language learners and African American students. While current and historical conversations have affected various minority groups, for the purpose of this paper I will be focusing on issues surrounding specifically African Americans.

The 1954 the historic *Brown v. Board* serves as a historic case, dealing with equitable resources. Although not labeled as language policies, scholars such as Menken

(2008) and Scott et al (2008) argue that it imposed Federal measures, which substantiate what is “proper” or “correct,” limiting the educational access and achievement of speakers of non-standard English.

A serendipitous result of the various movements of the 1960s (civil rights, women’s rights, and Native American rights) was heightened attention towards the high propensity of academic failures of African American children (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty demanded solutions, while educational scholars came to the conclusion that the children’s “inferior language” was the cause of their learning problem. Although there was very little research to support this claim, this information was presented to the public in various articles, essays, and speeches. The public presentation of this information reasserted that African American children had a “miniscule vocabulary, were nonverbal, had no substantive communicative exchanges with their parents, and were crushed by the noise and confusion in their homes” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. XXI). Like many other presentations of presumed *facts* about African Americans the continual assertion, although lacking strong empirical data acquired the status of truth among both the general public and educational community.

As a response to these deficiencies that children from poor African American homes were said to have demonstrated, in 1965 the Office of Economic Opportunity initiated Project Head Start. As a component of the War on Poverty, this program offered low income families of preschool children a comprehensive program to not only combat skill deficiencies, but to also address the areas of social, emotional, nutritional and psychological needs. What began as an eight-week summer program was transformed to full day and full year programming providing services to children from birth to age four

(National Head Start Association). Ultimately, this program was created in order to lessen the “culturally and linguistically deprived” homes of poor children, providing both the children and their families with a comprehensive system of support (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. xxi).

The “*King Case*,” also known as the “Black English” case, became the next major public issue surrounding education and language. In 1979, parents from the Green Road Housing project in Detroit sued the school system for not educating their children. The issue was specifically focused around teaching their children to read. While all but one of the plaintiffs’ claims were dismissed, the one that was not forced the lawsuit to go to trial utilizing the statement, “No state shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex or national origin by...the failure to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs” (Smitherman, 1981). This assertion supported the plaintiff’s case and the judge ruled in their favor. It was determined that the teachers had not taken into account the children’s language in their instruction and therefore had failed to teach them appropriately (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. xxiii). While the judge made suggestions to the district about providing the teachers with “knowledge about the children,” the media went crazy suggesting that the judge was equating Black slang and improper English with a true language”(Smitherman, 1981, p. 48).

The continued lack of understanding and knowledge was similarly seen during the 1996 and 1997 Ebonics controversy. Members of the discussion were not prepared to deal with the vast array of issues raised surrounding not only language, but culture and race as well. The Oakland School District put forth a proposal that named the language

form spoken by many of its African American students “Ebonics.” This proposal provided the language form with an identified name, as well as a declaration as a distinct language. With this proposal, it was recommended that teachers be trained in elements of Ebonics, as well as African American culture (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). While the goal of this proposal aimed at creating instruction for African American students that would help them to excel in learning standard English, the school district hoped to receive funding for second language acquisition programming.

On the surface, the Ebonics debate in Oakland takes into account cultural recognition of the African-American language system. Grounded in their African based origins, people felt as though it should be applied in appreciating student’s language skills (Gay, 2000, p. 82). Inevitably, this debate, which pitted African-Americans against European Americans, lost steam due to the media sensationalism.

The Abbott mandate (2005) also speaks to the equity in educational opportunity. A Supreme Court decision that ordered that education funding in the poorer urban and rural districts is assured at the same level of funding as the property-rich districts. It was ruled that the funding could not be dependent on the ability of local school districts to tax, but that instead funding must be guaranteed by the state. The decision also ordered that the level of funding must also provide for the special education needs of the poorer urban and rural districts to redress disadvantages. The Abbott Decision promises resources for children in high-need communities starting at pre-school through the high school level (Center for Children and Childhood Studies, 2005).

While one’s culture is very important as Porter and Samovar (1991) assert in their quote, it is intertwined with our language and how we see things, we as educators must

also prepare our children for what is expected of them by mainstream society. Until the “culture of power” is eliminated it is necessary that education not only provides children with the skills and tools to succeed academically, but also to navigate through society. Being culturally aware and culturally responsive seemingly also means that we must prepare our students for the “culture of power” that they will experience both within education, as well as in larger society. This means that teachers should be providing students with the rules of this culture (Delpit, 1995), allowing them both the access and power necessary to navigate society. Therefore, with this responsibility, can one promote Ebonics and still promote equal access for these children? From the literature on language development (Hart and Risley, 2003; Dickinson, 2001) we know that low-income, minority children often lack the necessary resources (books, conversations, vocabulary) held by their middle and upper class white peers. I believe that within classrooms and by the teacher, there must be an understanding of the hybridity or multiple sources of language that exists among the diverse groups of children who enter the classroom each day. We must not dichotomize language in a way that standardizes one and marginalizes another. Instead, as educators and role models for these children we must take seriously the responsibility that we have to both develop their oral language in a way that allows them to succeed within academia, as well as educate them in understanding their other forms of language as well. With this said, we must be overly aware of the way in which this is done and how it is framed within the classroom.

These historical debates provide the context for the current state of language and language policy that exists within our schools today. Even with the various historical debates over linguistics, literacy and policy reform, there seems to be little light shed on

solving the problems that surround the cultural disconnect that is present for African American children in America's schools. Furthermore, with this knowledge and our history, educators must recognize the implications that language can have on teaching and learning and be aware of its presence within the classroom. Therefore, I expand my discussion by exploring language and student identity. The present cultural dissonance that exists for many African American children in schools (Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2000) necessitates a discussion of the role it plays in instruction and its possible effects on student achievement.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

*“What do you lose when you lose your language? [You pay] the price for it in one way or another... What does the country lose when it loses individuals who are comfortable with themselves, cultures that are authentic to themselves, the capacity to pursue sensitivity and some kind of recognition that one has a purpose in life? What is lost to a country that encourages people to lose their direction in life?” (Joshua Fishman)*

For many children, the way in which they communicate is linked to their cultural understanding of language. The practices and stylistic choices that they make when speaking are learned through authentic experiences with conversation among their family and peers and within their own cultural group. Now imagine entering a space where the notion of culture is vastly different than your own. For many African American children (and other racial minorities), the educational setting pits their own understanding of self with that of what is seemingly right and proper, what depicts dominant society.

Subsequently, these children struggle to achieve at high levels.

*Children whose language, ethnicity, and race are not represented by the school’s dominant culture experience varying levels of achievement and persistent gaps in reading achievement and disproportionately higher dropout rates in U.S. high schools (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007).*

Risko and Walker-Dalhouse’s (2007) study sets the framework for the importance that language plays within classrooms on student identity. Children all over the world learn to speak the language of their cultural group at about the age of two. This occurs through exposure to their family and community. Delpit asserts that our language “embraces us long before we are defined by any other medium of identity” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). While it has long been known that our skin color helps us to negotiate our world, our language and how we speak is equally important to how people perceive us. As a result,

language defines who we are long before we enter the classroom and is harshly critiqued when we do. This first encounter with the outside world solidifies a harsh collide between what one has believed to be who they are and the world's outside reality. In a setting that forces one to juxtapose their own culture and identity with that of the rest of the world, it consequently seeks to cause harm and pain to our nation's minority children.

According to O'Loughlin (1995), students "are storied human beings interpreting their lives through their ethnicity, gender, class and culture." They live their lives as narratives that reflect their upbringing. "Rather than possessing one voice, students construct multiple perspectives on their emerging identities as a result of the social and economic communities." The vastly different perspective children experience between home and school contribute to their personal story, but also constructs a disconnected understanding of one's self. Therefore it is important for teachers to help provide a connected pedagogy for these children.

Not only are children with varying language practices faced with the harsh reality of a cognitive mismatch, the larger conversation surrounding their language poses concern as well. Within many educational conversations, both the culture and language of racial minorities are labeled negatively, and both are categorized as deficits possessed by the students. The language that these children acquired at home and have used extensively among their family and peers is vastly different than what they are expected to use outside the home and more specifically in the classroom. This difference in language is seen as a deficiency that must be *corrected*. But to refer to the language that most African American's speak as "nonstandard English" is to mislead people. It demonstrates that it is merely a variation of English, but like English, the language

spoken by African Americans is a fusion of languages based on their histories and experiences. It is a part of their culture and the experiences of their community.

The deficit perspective often used in viewing racial minorities carries a “ ‘blame the victim’ orientation, and supporters look upon Blacks and other minority groups as not only culturally but also intellectually inferior” (Ford, 1996). The child is recognized for their limitations rather than their strengths. According to these theories or perspectives, ‘different’ is equated with deficient or inferior (Milner, 2006). The deficiency perspective placed on many minority students becomes problematic and often hinders the success of the child in the educational setting, and consequently causing problems for them as they try to solidify their own cultural identity.

In this discussion of language and identity, it becomes clear that students’ identity development is closely linked to their self-esteem within the classroom. This is perpetuated by deficit thinking by members of the educational community, specifically students’ teachers.

### ***Self-Esteem Development and African-American Education***

While a quality education necessitates quality instruction, in recognizing that education is not only an educational process, but also a sociocultural process, a child’s social and emotional well being must also be addressed. In the process of identity formation one also is cultivating a system of beliefs about themselves and their abilities, this is known as self-esteem. “Self-Esteem is the conviction that one is competent to live and worthy of living. It is the sum total of the view an individual has of himself or herself”(Jones-Wilson et al., 1996, p. 406). This self-esteem can be affected by educational beliefs about children within the classroom. While African-American

children tend to have high levels of global self-esteem, empirical studies over time show that young African-American children develop lower academic self-esteem within classrooms compared to that of their white counterparts (Jones-Wilson et al., 1996). Global self-esteem, which is generalized feelings of self-worth which are not specific to a particular situation is generally high among African American children, while domain specific self-esteem, which in this case relates to how students see themselves in the academic space are often lower (Jones-Wilson, et al., 1996).

Too often goals are set, the words are spoken and the culture or environment of the school and classroom are in direct contradiction to the way the teachers feel about their students. Like all children, “African American children’s awareness and perceptions of who and what they are result from the interaction with their environment and how they are viewed by others” (Jones-Wilson et al., 1996). Many African American children must also internalize the perceptions of dominant culture. First they must learn and internalize the cultural norms and values of their own culture, and then they must also incorporate the values of the dominant culture. As stated previously, these values are often in conflict with African-American values and blatantly devalue those who are non-white. According to Gay (2000), some of the most harmful actions occur in the communication practices that occur in the classroom. “The attitudes and behavior patterns that have the most important effect upon children...[are] those involved in communication.” This communication includes verbal and nonverbal, direct and tacit, literal and symbolic, formal and informal, grammatical and discourse components (p.78 ). Seemingly some are quick to create a linear relationship between the low self-esteem found in African American children and their racial attitudes, but a considerable number

of studies demonstrate that this is not the case. From these studies it was found that “the children’s feelings of self-worth were not related to their assessment of their ethnic group” (Jones-Wilson et al., 1996, p. 406) and this relationship is not linear. The issue of self-esteem is often related to the beliefs about African American children and their abilities in the classroom. Negative feelings towards their abilities and worth projected by their teachers causes these children to believe that they are worth less and unable to achieve at high levels.

These feelings projected by teachers manifest themselves in what is known as the self-fulfilling prophecy. The self-fulfilling prophecy refers to “the dynamic whereby teacher’s beliefs about the expectations of students’ academic performance and overall behavior influence their treatment of the students” (Jones-Wilson et al., 1996). Often the students’ response to the teacher is congruent with the treatment that they receive, confirming the teacher’s beliefs and expectations. Conversely, students are less likely to succeed if the teacher expects them to fail. Therefore messaging within the classroom is very important. The self-fulfilling prophecy supports this claim in that how teachers think about their students can be very detrimental. Often, African American children are seen as problems in the classroom. They are identified as “at-risk,” a behavior problem and at worst savages. Their position within the classroom becomes stagnant, and they are no longer expected to learn, but seen as bodies needing to be managed and maintained (Murrell, 2002). Unfortunately, this pedagogical response is often rewarded in schools (Haberman, 1991). The apathetic attitude toward African American children in the classroom seemingly allows them to fail. Ladson-Billings asserts, “No demands are being made for them to perform at the same levels as their peers”(Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p.

20). Therefore, as asserted by Ladson-Billings (1994), both the conversations that are had, as well as the ones that are not can pose problems for the student.

While the practices that substantiate language supremacy are harmful to our African American children, they also pose problems for children who are members of the dominant society. In suppressing the language practices and patterns of African American children, their self-esteem is damaged, but there is a more severe problem in creating a notion of language supremacy for the children of the dominant culture as well. White children are provided with a limited background of culture, language and consciousness of a more comprehensive worldview. It is necessary for all children to have an understanding of cultural differences.

### ***The Power of Caring***

The way in which teachers talk about the relationships they have with their students, as well as how they talk to and with their students, either demonstrates a genuineness or a disconnect between them. As demonstrated by the previous discussion about self-esteem, teachers play a large role in cultivating the success or failure of their students. Those who demonstrate care and concern for their students will inevitably receive more from them in all areas. With high expectations and a mindset that failure is not an option, they do whatever is necessary for *all* of their students to succeed. Caring is part of a multidimensional process, which incorporates responsiveness and is “contingent on understanding people in context” (Gay, 2000). This ethos of caring addresses issues of self-esteem and the self-fulfilling prophecy that occurs in education. In order for teachers to develop this ethos it is important that teachers recognize their attitudes and behaviors that inhibit student achievement. As previously stated by Milner (2006), “teachers must

choose to proceed through an interrogation of their own beliefs about their students in order to broaden and transform their scope of thinking.”

Historically, and still today language represents a critical component of the education of students both in the classroom and outside of it. Garcia (2009) states, “language is both the *medium* through which school subjects are taught and is also an important *subject* studied in school” (Garcia, 2009). Within society and more specifically in school students are quickly made aware of the power that exists among different language and dialect choices. The assertion of hierarchal positions among languages and the power that each of them possess, forces educators and students to make a choices. These choices include not only the language that they use and promote, but also how and if they support the negotiation of the diversity of language practices that students bring to the educational setting. With teachers often choosing the dominant discourse from which to teach and view their students. These choices help to solidify definitions of success and failure for the students (Barlett, 2007). For many African American children they are more familiar with the definitions of failure due to the views mapped on to them by their teachers. Teachers must recognize the power that they hold, not only in showing care and concern for their students, but also providing them with the tools to be successful academically and in navigating society.

Thus far, I have outlined the literature that exists on language development and some of the pedagogical best practices that exist for developing language and literacy within the classroom. As well, I have provided a history of the presence of language in education and the effects that it can pose to identity in the classroom. I now turn to a practical approach within current reform, which strives to address both the cultural and

academic needs of African American children, while also providing students with the tools to navigate larger dominant society.

## CHAPTER 5

### FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

*“The culture that receives them will either nurture and develop the genius in them or silence their minds before they reach the age of six.”* Haki R. Madhubuti (Cultural Work: Planting New Trees with New Seeds)

Educational research and the view from many public school classrooms demonstrate that within America’s schools African American children are achieving disproportionately below their white peers (Jackson and Davis, 2000). In reading, only 12% of African American fourth graders are reaching proficiency and an alarming 61% have failed to meet even the basic level (African American Achievement in America, 2003). This translates into African American high school graduates having “math and reading skills that are the same as those of 8<sup>th</sup> grade White students” (African American Achievement in America, 2003). While it is often thought that this discrepancy is dependent upon the quality of the school, the reality is whether they attend inner city schools or suburban schools, African American students often suffer academically (Kunjufu, 2002, pp. 3-5).

Too often, systemic reforms focus solely on the disproportionately poor academic performance of certain students of color, or blame their families and social class backgrounds. Others believe that we should merely utilize the hypothesis that students who are “involuntary minorities” bring to schooling an oppositional identity and oppositional cultural frame of reference in response to racism” but this is seemingly too simplistic (Ogbu, 1998). These forms of reasoning do not help to support the transformation of these disparities, I believe they merely blur the lines of *what* needs to be addressed and *how* it can be changed.

While test scores of African American children have increased with the implementation of various reforms, they are still below the state and national average (African American Achievement in America, 2003). Milner (2006) argues, “It is not students of color who are falling behind or failing. It is our schools and teachers who are falling behind and failing our students.” As a society we continually focus on the students whom are failing, but as Milner asserts, we must recognize that structural and human agents are failing these students. Often, the thinking, pedagogy and decisions made around curriculum contribute to the failure of many of our minority children.

In order to address this discrepancy the educational community must not focus solely on test scores, but look at the larger framework of schooling (Anyon, 1997). While we understand a lot about educational practice and the process in which children learn, we have failed as an educational community to truly interrogate the literature and the practice of educating minority children. The importance of language development on success in school places an emphasis on the need for both quality curricular choices, as well as the use of a more positive pedagogical framework around diverse cultures and languages.

With this perspective, we must look towards education as a means of transformation and empowerment African American children. We must further take into account the differing experiences that students bring to the classroom and nurture their innate abilities and talents that they bring. As educators, we must recognize that in order to transform our system and achieve educational equity it is necessary for us to broaden our frame of reference and perspectives about the world. Conversations should be focused around questions such as: Does the current system of education truly meet *all* the

needs of *all* children? Are we educating African American children or just providing them with a space for schooling? And furthermore, can this system of schooling be restructured in order to provide a more meaningful idea of education for specifically African American children, but also all children? With our conversations predicated around these questions we will be able to better address the reality that exists, as well as the blatant connection culture has to the success and achievement of African American children in school.

While there have been many attempts to fix our education system— including most recently *No Child Left Behind*—to address a structural and cultural mismatch such as the current system of education with a testing system, falls short of supporting the achievement and empowerment of our African American children. The conversations must not simply be focused on what currently is, but also on what *should be* in the educational experience specifically for African American children (Murrell, 2002, p. 17). This focus helps one to understand not only what is necessary for the achievement of African American children, but also the breadth and depth of what education should encompass. So then, where do we look for quality options for meeting the needs of our African American children? Here I offer a practical approach to addressing these challenges through the implementation of African Centered Pedagogy in public school classrooms. As an option for possible school reform and a means of cultural modeling, utilizing these pedagogical practices can begin to address not only the issues of language within the classroom, but also the importance of providing African American children with a more holistic educational experience

In the current system of education, minority children and more specifically African American children are often disconnected from the culture and practices of their classroom and school. In response to this disconnect progressive educators have attempted to provide curriculum and pedagogy reforms such as African Centered Education (ACE) or Culturally Relevant Education (CRE) (Gay, 2000; Murrell Jr, 2002). Some researchers believe that in order to reverse this trend of low achievement among African American and minority children, it is *essential* that all teachers implement culturally responsive instruction within their classrooms (Council of Great City Schools, 2007). While African Centered Education and Culturally Relevant Education have similar goals, the focus on African culture and principles in ACE remains a distinct difference between the two. In addition to addressing the cognitive language deficits that African American children possess when entering a classroom, providing children with a culturally responsive environment supports a more holistic approach to educating children. In order to do this educators and leaders must gain a more comprehensive worldview of what African American children need and deserve as a member of the American education system.

Frameworks within African Centered pedagogy help to support this transformation for both teachers and their students by utilizing the African cultural virtues of Ma'at (truth, justice, order, reciprocity and balance) and epistemologies of learning and achievement, as well as historical traditions of literacy for freedom. These virtues guide individuals in how to live their life and within schools serve as the character-building piece of the curriculum (Murrell, 2002). There remains a focus not only on academic achievement, but also the recognition and necessity for a social,

cultural and historical context. Murrell presents six points, which undergird the framework of this pedagogy (see Table 2 in appendix).

These six points highlight the goals of African Centered Pedagogy for both the teacher and their students. In contrast to the current system of education, the pedagogy focuses on children as learners of not only academic instruction, but also their history and their world around them. It recognizes the need for teachers to not only serve as masters of pedagogy of teaching and learning, but also that of a cultural awareness and knowledge. African Centered pedagogy supports being “educationally responsive for the *what is*” (Murrell, 2002, p. 17).

Murrell begins his book with the quote, “Education is the practice of assisting people to find agency in, and responsibility for, the struggle for freedom” (Murrell, 2002, p. ix). While some people are uncomfortable with the discussion of ethnically specific learning styles, stating that “not everyone within an ethnic group learns like that,” characteristics of learning styles are “pedagogically promising to the extent that they illuminate patterns of cultural values and behaviors that influence how children learn” (Gay, 2000, p. 147). Utilizing a culturally responsive and African-centered pedagogy is beneficial in addressing the various components of the American schooling experience—social, cultural, and historical—and the disconnection that exists between African American heritage and dominant society. Furthermore, various literatures on intrapersonal development for African American children assert, “the child’s academic and personal development occurs most fruitfully in settings that ally with the family and draw on community strengths” (Murrell, 2002). African-centered pedagogy hopes to merge what African American children need and the teaching practices that currently

pervade the education system. In order to do this, members of this system must be open to understanding, gaining greater knowledge, and changing what currently is and has been throughout history.

***Why not multicultural education?***

I am putting forth a conversation that surrounds multicultural education. While it has contributed much to the educational literature, critiques of its use in practice and its goals necessitate further discussion. Multicultural education has numerous definitions proposed by educators, researchers and scholars, but the National Association for Multicultural Education (2003) defines multicultural education as a “philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity...it affirms our need to prepare students for their responsibilities in an interdependent world...it values cultural differences”(Definition, 2003). Multicultural Education became part of the linguistic mantra of providing all students with a more culturally conscious perspective. Schools across the country began providing their children with curriculum focused on multicultural standards, forms of thinking and practices within the classroom. While multicultural education has been very influential within the movement towards providing equitable education to all students as Murrell asserts, “...the development of African-centered pedagogy is an implicit critique of multicultural education” (Murrell, 2002, p. xx). While multicultural education can bring symbols of diversity to the classroom, it often does not address many of the cultural issues that are present within the classroom for African American children. In theory, multicultural education should be providing students with a more diverse perspective, but it often lacks in practice.

In looking specifically at multicultural literacy there are currently many children's books created to support multicultural pedagogical teaching. While these books are created for a variety of ethnic and cultural groups Murrell asks, "Who is Multicultural children's literature really for?" The literature is written in order to expand one's understanding of differences and other's cultures, but these are often not the predominant needs of African American children (Murrell, 2002, p. xx). While this literature may help to benefit white children gain a more comprehensive view of the world and prepare them for the diversity that exists within our society, it does not do the same for African American children. So then how do we incorporate this idea into the fabric of American schooling? How do we use the plethora of multicultural literature to educate all members of society? And how do we utilize what we know about implementation to change the practices currently occurring?

Furthermore, the changing ideologies of multiculturalism have moved towards a paradigm of "pluralism." In this form differentness is omitted and in the case of African American children, their culture and background are illegitimated (Shujaa, 1994). Seemingly, the implementation of multicultural education comes with an agenda, focusing on diversity, but diminishing the important identity work that can occur for African American children in respect to meaningful literacy learning. As research has shown, many African American children need a connected pedagogy. For this reason, the choice for many educators is clear in choosing to implement African-centered education as a means of attaining a connected pedagogy. While it is not to say that an African-centered way of teaching is a "fix-all" in education, it can present for both teachers and

students a new way of learning that helps to support the core of the African value system and further, supports many of the pedagogical best practices of quality teaching.

With an understanding of how the goals of multicultural education can be different than culturally relevant and African centered education, I now move towards offering a practical approach to addressing cultural dissonance in literacy and language development.

### ***The benefits of African centered education on literacy and language development***

While we often discuss literacy in terms of reading and writing, in the field and throughout our world there are various conceptions of literacy. Not unlike other aspects of our society, what literacy is defined by differs based on “a person’s opportunities available for access to literacy [and] has historically had cultural and community specific meanings” (Gadsden, 1994). As a guide in the process of attaining literacy skills teachers must recognize it’s meaning within the educational realm, as well as within and among various cultures. In order to address the cultural understandings of literacy members of the educational community working with African American children have “sought to find theories of positive and empowering pedagogy, rather than a step by step book of language practices”(Gay, 2000). African Centered and Culturally Relevant Education help to solidify an educational environment that is both positive and empowering for students in their acquisition of both language and literacy.

Dandy (1991) asserts “Teachers have the power to shape the future, if they communicate with their students, but those who cannot communicate are powerless” (p.10). Too often for children, teachers choose not to communicate, or understand, or to build on a child’s experiences—with the goal of imploring education to be a

transformative process. Teaching and learning are rooted in and dependent upon a common language between the teacher and the student. Within many traditional schools this common language is missing. Teachers are not choosing to make connections with their students, eliminating both conversation and the opportunity for meaningful learning experiences. But teachers sadly do not recognize the power that they have in the classroom and how this “culture of power” (Delpit, 1995) that exists must be addressed and understood by both teachers and students. Similar to the literature on language development and culture (Wasik and Bond, 2001, Moll, 2001), ACE and CRE recognize this need for contextualized and connected learning.

African American children enter school and are quickly exposed to an outside world, one in which is often vastly different than their own. This mismatch continues to pervade their educational experience and sometime between the first and fourth grade, many African American children begin to disengage and have little enthusiasm for school— “They gradually give up expecting school to make sense in the context of their lives.” And those African American students who are socialized in a culturally mainstream middle class context, although better adapted to the school setting, “too many children adapt to schooling as an experience of routine without meaning, and activity without manifest purpose (Murrell, 2002, p. 8-9). The institution of schooling is pervaded by middle class behaviors that often conflict with many African American students and their families. Some of these things include: homework, expectations for having resources in their homes, conflict resolution styles and communication styles. Each of these differences places African American children and their families further outside of the system of education. Some even believe that, “Schooling is a process to perpetuate

and maintain the society's existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements" (Shujaa, 1994). This reality for our African American children makes it necessary to seek a solution to the disengagement and mismatch that occurs for African American children across the country. Delpit (1995) asserts, "the onus is on the teacher to help these students transition into navigating through dominant culture in ways that allows them to succeed and simultaneously, change the system" (p. 83).

Guided by the Murrell's six points, African Centered Education (ACE) provides educators with a pedagogical approach that supports the growth of African American children not only educationally, but also as human beings forced to navigate through a society seemingly outside their own. Through this portion of the paper I will examine how African Centered and Culturally Relevant Education support specifically the development of language by placing African American children in a more positive and contextualized environment.

With a focus on language and literacy it is important to acknowledge the role language plays within our lives, especially within the classroom. As a rule governing system, language presents us with not only a cultural identity, but can also cause strife and hardship for those whom do not fit the mold of dominant culture. Dandy (1991) proposes that, "the language that many African Americans speak is all too often degraded or simply dismissed by individuals both inside and outside the racial group as being uneducated, illiterate, undignified or simply non-standard." With a lack of proficiency in communication demonstrated by the students and the lack of understanding or acceptance by teachers of different cultural communication styles of, the academic performance of

students is often misdiagnosed. “Students may know much more than they are able to communicate or they may be communicating much more than their teachers are able to discern” (Gay, 2000, p. 78).

Gay (2000) asserts, “Communication is the quintessential way in which humans make meaningful connections with each other” (p.25). Therefore, unlike many traditional public schools, ACE views the educational experience as an interactive process that is integral to the cultural experience of its students. This interactive process occurs not only between the *mwaliimu* and *mwanafunzi*---teacher and student---it also “includes the active involvement of the family, the school as a community focal point, and the community itself (Shujaa, 1994, p. 326). Solidifying this interactive process allows there to be a vital exchange of information, mutual learning and inspiration for both the teacher and student. This interactive process is supported by various studies on language and literacy (Whitehurst et al., 1994; Wasik and Bond, 2001) as a means of development. This conversation is expanded in the next section.

Communication is not only a tool to build meaningful connections; it also serves as an indispensable resource in facilitating knowing and accessing knowledge (Gay, 2000, p. 80). ACE and CRE utilize and build on this concept. As seen in instructional best practices of reading, the interactive nature of ACE provides children with a dialogical education. This term used by Freire (1970) means that, “the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world...[it is] the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized” (Shujaa, 1994, pp. 329-330). Dialogue that occurs within the classroom between the *mwaliimu* and the *mwanafunzi* assumes a cultural and

ideological context. This helps to present the students with the historical aspect of education, while engaging the students in an examination of the information, supporting the growth of the students as critical thinkers who are able to understand the structures and systems of larger society. Like dialogic reading, where in which the teacher “helps the child become the teller of the story”, the dialogic educational process supports the student as an integral part of their own learning in conjunction with the teacher who helps to challenge their thinking. Furthermore, the continuous exchange and dialogue that occurs utilizing a framework of dialogic education supports the students need for opportunities to have conversations in order to support their oral language development.

### ***Critical Literacy—Literacy Learning for African American Children***

With the recognition of a cultural disconnect present within America’s classrooms it is critical that we determine the necessary pedagogical practices to attain higher levels of achievement and more specifically literacy achievement among minority students. Therefore, it is imperative to seek a technique and view of literacy that will help African American children connect with the academic content that they are being taught. Critical literacy incorporates a connected pedagogy and can be infused into the practices of African Centered or Culturally Relevant Education. Texts are read, “in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships” and highlights the text as a “vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society” (LEARN NC, 2007).

This instructional strategy utilizes “the knowledge and literacy practices students learn in their homes and communities” (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007). Furthermore,

the use of critical literacy values the student's contribution to the classroom and provides them with opportunities to actively construct knowledge. Freire (1970) provides an example of how critical literacy is developed in an educational context. He proposes a system in which students become more socially aware through critique of multiple forms of injustice. But he asserts, that this awareness cannot be achieved if students are not given the opportunity to explore and construct knowledge. Too often the current educational model depicts what Freire describes as the "banking concept of education." Children are seen as 'containers' for which are to be 'filled' by their teacher (Freire, 1970). In this structure, the students do not think authentically or are the student's own funds of knowledge valued.

In opposition to the banking model, teachers who utilize a critical literacy model value their student's perspectives, creating experiences and opportunities for them to actively construct knowledge. Schools become spaces where students interrogate social conditions by discussing issues significant to their lives. Teachers serve as facilitators of conversations, similarly to African Centered pedagogy's interactive relationship between the *mwalimu* and *mwanafunzi*. "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other" (LEARN NC, 2007). Using critical pedagogical methods, allows teachers to create spaces where they can be learn, while the students can also become teachers (Freire, 1970). This provides a context for everyone to construct and interrogate theories of knowledge.

The current national concern over the 'achievement gap' rightly focuses attention on Black achievement. While this is the right problem to focus on, as we

continue to close the gap through focusing on performance on high stakes standardized achievement test we will continue to pursue the wrong response. There is more to the problem, and there is more to supporting the cultural integrity of African American children, which is currently missing from traditional schooling. While there is not just one answer to eliminating the achievement gap, we must recognize the sociocultural issues that surround academic success for African American children and opportunities we have to address them.

It is clear that an increased focus on language and communication is essential in classrooms and, particularly, in inner-city classrooms serving minority and high-poverty students. The direct correlation between a child's home life and school, as determined by their success is critical to this conversation. While this can be addressed at various levels, Fillmore and Snow (2000) assert the importance of language development in the classroom by addressing issues of teacher access and knowledge of both language and culture. They state, "...they must receive systematic and intensive preparation in educational linguistics" (Fillmore & Snow, 2000). With coursework that focuses on components of language teachers may be more understanding of the diversity that exists among children in their classroom, as well as why some children may be more apprehensive about speaking in the classroom or "what children learn when they acquire a language and culture"(Fillmore & Snow, 2000). With the acknowledgement of necessary teacher preparation Fillmore and Snow begin the conversation of a much-needed shift in both practice and pedagogy within the American classroom.

The Critical Literacy model (LEARN NC, 2007) is necessary in order to achieve this transformative educational experience. African Centered and Culturally Relevant

education seek to provide schools with a pedagogical approach to providing this empowering space for children as well. Utilizing these frameworks, which provide African American children with a more comprehensive approach to education, may help to move towards addressing the cultural mismatch that currently exists within our education system.

As educators look at best practices they must recognize the diversity that exists among their students, the language patterns that they bring with them and the responsiveness needed to effectively support all children within their classroom. It is important that teachers utilize what children do bring to the classroom, accessing their funds of knowledge, while supporting their development through further exposure and more authentic learning experiences. As demonstrated by ACE and CRE, pedagogy focused around a more holistic perspective utilizes these experiences and looks at the students from an assets based perspective. Literacy itself is a cultural practice and each of our children bring with them different practices and experiences. Taking this stance helps to recognize the differences that children have, rather than seeing them as deficits as so many have for so long.

## CHAPTER 6

### FURTHER THOUGHTS

As a society, it is imperative that we are not content with the education that children are currently receiving. With the emphasis on standardized testing and the outward attacks on low performance, it is important that best practices are not put on the back burner for quick fixes. Many of the current techniques used represent educators, districts and parents' lack of knowledge in making informed decisions about literacy practices and cultural knowledge, two areas that are inextricably linked in the classroom (Gay, 2000).

While the socialization process that occurs during the transition from home to school can be detrimental for African American children, it does not need to be for the child or their family. Even with vast differences that exist between home and school it is imperative that the teachers support this process. The teachers must demonstrate both an understanding of and responsiveness to the needs of each of their students, taking in to account the cultural impetus that is behind many of these differences.

While some believe that it is important that we train teachers with specific techniques for teaching the African American child, it is also important that teachers begin to transform their thinking about others and the world. Their orientation toward language and cultural linguistics must be dramatically improved. If an African American child is seen as language deficient, the behavior of the teacher greatly affects the child's success in the classroom, not the difference in language. Delpit & Dowdy (2002) assert "It is this teaching behavior and not the language of the child, no matter how different, that creates the problems for learners." It is essential that one's cognition and mindset are

formatted to support the process, which strives to address the cultural issues surrounding language within the classroom and the ability for minority children to succeed. Quality teaching itself will account for the differentiated elements necessary to meet the needs of all students and further take into account the importance of meaningful versus objectivist learning, but cognitive understanding of the way in which culture plays a role in children's education forces educators to think about their actions (Murrell, 2002).

This cognitive understanding will not only support the teachers, but will also support their ability to begin to empower their students, making education the transformative experience that it should be (Murrell, 2002; Shujaa, 1994). Accounting for the culture of its students and allowing African American children access into the culture of the school are two integral areas that schools must focus on. How are these two things working together and if they are not, what needs to happen in order for them to do so? With this understanding the school and its teachers are able to then make a conscious choice about how they are choosing to recognize culture among their students and their families (Shujaa, 1994).

While I have offered African Centered and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as a means of reform, the present reality is that a large majority of children (both white and minority) attend traditional public schools. During recent years there have been various educational frameworks, which have strived to elevate the achievement of African American students. These frameworks which include, *learning communities* or *communities of learning*, *teaching for understanding*, *situated learning theory* and *cultural and racial identity development* like the culturally Relevant and African Centered Pedagogy while a starting point will not be sufficient without the transformation

of societal structures within and outside of education (Murrell, 2002, p.xi). As educators and scholars it is necessary that we continue to engage in research that will benefit the transformation of education for black and brown children. Through this paper I have tried to demonstrate that while language development and communication are an integral component to the success of African American children in school, they cannot be looked at as merely an instructional issue. They must be recognized as a necessity for daily life, and deeply embedded in both historical and cultural aspects of society.

As I continue to think about my future research, I am deeply pulled towards further study of the implications of home and school and the incompatibility that exists for many minority families. While this paper largely addresses the disconnect between African American children and their schooling experiences in regards to language and literacy, other minority groups experience many of the same barriers. While education often serves as a means of upward mobility or a belief in its possibility, for many minority groups the education system defines their positionality in reference to dominant society and the norms of language use within the space of schooling. Even with efforts to address the diversity that exists within public schools, there still seems to be structural issues embedded within the education system, which maintain the hierarchal structures within society, defining a legitimate or specific language. Therefore, although we are able to identify gaps in language long before students enter school (Hart and Risley, 1995), even with the appropriate instructional practices, how do we create spaces in which minority children can and will break down the larger structural barriers in society while still holding on to their cultural language practices? Further, how do we then provide children with a connected pedagogy in the classroom?

Bourdieu (1991) saw education as “a key site for social and cultural reproduction and for the imposition of a particular symbolic order.” By many accounts this is what we see in the processes of education today. Dominant languages and cultures are solidified and schools serve as the space for access to these linguistic resources. But, even within this space of access there still exists educational choices that determine whom has access based on “structures, programs, practices or materials” being used (Martin-Jones, 2007, p. 175). It is important that we continue to look at the current structures and systems that are present within schooling that reinforce a dominant discourse, with no recognition of others that are brought to the classroom. We must seek to create a system of education in which language is valued as a means of further education and expansion rather than as a means of assimilation.

As an educational community, we must not only focus on the specifics of teaching literacy, but also the larger goal of educating the whole child. We must not forget that the current system of schooling has continually failed to meet the needs of disproportionate numbers of minority children throughout history. In doing this it is necessary that we are cognizant of the sociocultural process that occurs in attaining language, as well as in developing literacy practices and how this effects not only the development of language for minority children, but also how we think about it in the classroom.

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**APPENDIX****TABLES**

Table 1

Teal and Adams Data

<b>Middle-Class Families</b>	<b>High-Poverty Families</b>
1700 hours of book reading by the time they reach first grade.	25 hours of book reading by the time they reach first grade.
1000 hours of literacy related activities such as watching Sesame Street or playing with magnetic letters.	200 hours of literacy related activities such as watching Sesame Street or playing with magnetic letters.

Table 2

## Afrocentric Centered Pedagogy's 6 Principles (Murrell, 2002)

<i>African-centered Pedagogy</i>	
1.	Accomplished teachers of African American children create the intellectual environment and cultural community in their classrooms that systematically provide the social, intellectual, and cultural tools for rich and worthwhile learning and development.
2.	Accomplished teachers of African American children, to create this <i>figured world</i> of learning, inquiry, and achievement, must be able to access and understand the deep structure of African American culture, history, language, and life well enough to appropriate it in the structuring of the classroom intellectual environment.
3.	Accomplished teachers of African American children understand education viewed as a broader process than schooling—as a total process of promoting the intellectual, spiritual, ethical, and social development of young people, and the stewarding them into capable, caring and character-rich adults.
4.	Accomplished teachers of African American children are critical consumers of contemporary curriculum, educational policy, and instructional practice, and interrogate them as a matter of daily practice by asking, “How does this practice or policy perpetuate the underachievement of African American learners?”
5.	Accomplished teachers of African American children understand that their own daily practice necessarily entails recognizing and deconstructing the ways that traditional pedagogy and current instructional paradigms perpetuate underachievement of children of color.
6.	Accomplished teachers of African American children actively research what they need to know culturally and historically in order to create the rich figured world of learning in their classroom, and recognize human development as a process occurring simultaneously in three domains—the psychological or intrapersonal, the social interpersonal, and the cultural.