Literacy acquisition for young speakers of African-American Vernacular English

ABSTRACT

That children in minority and impoverished communities tend not to attain the same levels of reading achievement as their white and more affluent peers is widely known, but it is less well understood why this is so. The purpose of this paper is to examine this phenomenon with particular reference to speakers of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). I will begin by reviewing selected literature on how AAVE speakers acquire literacy and the particular pitfalls and complications involved, including a historical examination of linguistic deficit theory with a focus on its consequences today. Other issues I will examine in this review include teacher attitudes toward linguistic variation, definitions of literacy and what it entails, and a comparative look at oral and written language acquisition. I will then describe Writing Our Way, a summer literacy enrichment program for children in a poor and largely African-American community in Chester, Pennsylvania, and examine the program from my perspective as a participant with respect to the issues discussed in this paper. I hope this case study will serve as a lens through which to begin to examine the practical realities involved with issues such as language attitudes in the classroom, the phenomenon of cross-cultural interaction in education, and the meaning of literacy. I will also use this case study, as well as other models of literacy education programs for AAVE-speaking children, to draw out some recommendations for instruction, policy, and future research.
I. INTRODUCTION

The consistent lag in the acquisition and mastery of literacy skills by poor, minority, and inner-city children has been well documented and examined, but continues to exist, leaving many children virtually predestined to a life of underachievement relative to their capabilities. This phenomenon is reflective of larger trends as well; more generally, schools as a whole are failing to teach certain students – those who belong to certain disenfranchised minority groups – to a level at which they can compete with those from more privileged, mainstream groups for jobs, college admissions, and other avenues to mainstream success. Brookins et al. (1997) document the condition of children "at risk" in schools, noting, "While in school, many inner-city elementary and middle-school children fall far below the national means on standardized tests for reading and mathematics achievement." In addition to the generally low achievement of these groups, other injustices are evident at the individual level. Addressing speakers of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) in particular, Baugh (1983:108) notes, "Due to the broader range of variation that exists between street speech and standard English, countless gifted minority students have been dismissed as poor intellectual risks." Further, these discrepancies in achievement appear to emerge and worsen as children progress through school; minority children do not start out with the severe disadvantage evident in later achievement (Labov 1994). Clearly, many children are not achieving literacy and other academic competencies to the degree of which

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they are capable.

A major factor in this inequality stems from cultural differences between those in the empowered mainstream and those in historically marginalized groups. Baugh (1983) and others acknowledge the "plethora of social, psychological, historical, and linguistic reasons that educators have encountered so much difficulty teaching minority children in the public schools" (3). Various arguments have been made to determine the precise role of language differences—does the problem stem from actual linguistic differences and lack of mutual intelligibility, or is the nature of differences more a result of socially constructed attitudes toward dialect variation? Labov (1994) gives the academic consensus on AAVE speakers, that "Dialect differences [affect] education primarily as symbols of social conflict." While the answer may vary for different communities of speakers, then, for speakers of AAVE the overwhelming problem of unequal educational achievement lies not with dialect variations themselves but with the (sometimes implicit) beliefs and attitudes about those differences and the way that those ideas influence behavior and institutions.

AAVE and the social backdrop of educational failure

Scores of authors and academics have made the case quite thoroughly that AAVE is a distinct and complex linguistic form with a great deal of complexity and nuance. Researching in the 1960s, Labov found highly regular linguistic structures in the speech of members of African-American communities, where this language was commonly viewed by whites as evidence of ignorance (Baugh 1983). Baugh, Pinker, and others demonstrate the sophistication with which its speakers use it, affirming its ability to convey complex and abstract ideas as well as (or in some
cases, more effectively than, as Labov (1994) argues) the white majority dialect. It is indisputable within the linguistic community that AAVE is a legitimate and complex language form that displays as much adherence to rules as any other known human language. It is used with uniformity across geographical and, in many instances, racial and ethnic lines and so is classifiable as a distinct dialect.

At the same time as linguistics has explored and examined AAVE and its usage to such advanced degrees, teachers and schools have been working directly with children for whom AAVE is native, encountering both successes and frustrations, but all the while developing their own theories and opinions about the nature of these children's language and about how to teach them. Some of the questions this paper will address involve what these theories are, how they are informed, and how linguistic knowledge can help to shape their development, as well as the development of policy with respect to how language differences are treated in educational settings.

Despite the prevailing views of linguists and many other academics about the legitimacy and complexity of AAVE and the extensive work that has been done to dispute common fallacies based on notions of linguistic inferiority/superiority or the linguistic competency of various groups, many misguided and educationally harmful beliefs remain strong in the larger culture, including educational institutions. The presence of these notions can be observed not just in certain individuals' explicit beliefs, but in more hidden and insidious ways. As Tyack and Cuban (1997) document, current school practices are direct products of their history, and the structure or "grammar" of public schools today is notably resistant to substantial change. In addition,
public schools as an institution underwent significant change in the 3rd quarter of this century—precisely at the time that deficit theories were taking hold in the thinking and actions of policy makers and practitioners. Yet schools have been greatly resistant to change in the period since the Johnson-era reforms; hence school practices by and large still reflect deficit-era thinking.

Schools inevitably reflect the larger cultures of which they are a part, and the practices of those who make them run—teachers, administrators, policy makers—reflect the practices and beliefs of the schools they themselves were brought up in. Thus, ideas that have been long accepted in the more dynamic institutions (i.e. academia) take much longer to seep into public schools, particularly when they are ideas that some still vocally oppose.

Huge questions remain about what meaning and application the findings of linguistics have in practice—in education, in the law, and in the larger society. These are questions that the field of linguistics has a great deal to contribute to—indeed, linguistics, its views, and its findings about languages in general and AAVE in particular, are essential elements to consider as our knowledge grows about how children learn. The linguistic and cultural backgrounds children bring to the school environment play a significant role. Any future theories about how children in the AAVE community learn, and particularly how they acquire literacy, would be deficient without a great deal of input from this field.

Still, in practice we find that schools—and society—operate largely without the information and understandings that linguistics offers. Events such as the widespread reactions to the Oakland School Board’s resolution on Ebonics in 1996 highlight the fact that many in the information and understandings that linguistics offers. Events such as the widespread reactions to the Oakland School Board’s resolution on Ebonics in 1996 highlight the fact that many in the general public and in the educational community hold ill-conceived notions about language
differences. The viewpoint of linguistics has not substantially reached the educational community, particularly the very practitioners who matter most to children's lives, teachers themselves. Some larger questions are pertinent here: What are the causes of this divide? How could individuals and groups from each community—linguists and educators—begin to bridge the gulf in knowledge in a way that results in greater social good, improving the policy and practice of education for AAVE-speaking children?

Finally, and more specifically, what exactly are the contributions that linguistic research has to make to educational practice with specific reference to the literacy of AAVE-speaking children, and how might that transfer be effectively done? This is the central question I will examine in light of existing research about the literacy needs of these children and the issues surrounding their schooling. It is a broad question, and this paper will only begin to touch on the many complex issues and questions involved. I write this with the knowledge (and to some extent, the intent) that it will raise more questions that it answers, and I offer these questions in hopes that they will inspire additional questions, debate, and further examination of the issues.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions

To begin with, a discussion of what is meant, respectively, by literacy and reading is needed. "Learning to read and write" is one basic, commonly offered definition of literacy, and, as Snow et al. (1991) note, is "the most basic expectation for children attending school," but even needed. "Learning to read and write" is one basic, commonly offered definition of literacy, and, as Snow et al. (1991) note, is "the most basic expectation for children attending school," but even these terms need to be precisely defined. One way to look at what is meant by literacy is to
make its goals explicit; Snow et al. suggest that a satisfactory literacy level enables individuals "to participate fully in American economic and political life" (1). In terms of its larger meaning within a sociocultural context, Bleich (1988) suggests that distinguishing between the issue of "language" and the issues of "language use" and "literacy" can broaden how we conceive of literacy. As it is commonly conceived of, "the meaning of literacy has been grossly underestimated ... As a rule it is conceived of and presented as a skill something like driving: something more or less easy to learn ... but something nevertheless 'transparent,' not in itself carrying values or urging any social conduct ... Those who cannot or do not become literate are understood to be deficient in some way – sick or lazy or self-indulgent" (66).

Snow et al. (1991) propose a developmental definition of literacy, based on the idea that "Being literate is a very different enterprise for the skilled first grader, fourth grader, high school student, and adult, and the effects of school experiences can be quite different at different points in a child's development ... The tasks that can reasonably be set at various levels of literacy are different, and the resources available to approach those tasks are different as well" (6). Literacy is also frequently used interchangeably with general school achievement, and although I try to distinguish the two in my references, my assumption is that they are similar in the factors that influence them, and in their ultimate meaning for children's success in school and society. This notion of literacy as a larger phenomenon than merely skills of a given individual reflects the views of Gee, who sees literacy as "much more than reading and writing, but rather ... part of a larger political entity ... for discourse." that serves functions of identity (Delpit 1995:153). views of Gee, who sees literacy as "much more than reading and writing, but rather ... part of a larger political entity ... [or] discourse," that serves functions of identity (Delpit 1995:153).

Delpit further elaborates on Gee's position that "One never learns simply to read and
write, but to read and write within some larger discourse, and therefore within some larger set of values and beliefs" (153). Problematic ideas arise from Gee's ideas about how discourses are learned – specifically, that they are acquired within a particular social and cultural context and cannot be "overtly" taught (Delpit 154). What is striking about this view is its resemblance to sociolinguistic theories of dialect acquisition; Baugh in particular stresses the importance of affect and acculturation in the learning of nonnative dialects. As Delpit points out, this presents a significant conflict for educators working toward the goal of enabling minorities to become fluent in the dominant discourse, because it suggests that this is impossible within a formal school context.

However, Delpit later draws from Gee's work to suggest that perhaps the abandonment of literacy goals for non-mainstream students is based on the flawed assumption that literacy in different discourses is not connected and not transferable. While some literacy instruction programs fail to adequately recognize and use students' native nonstandard dialects, others err on the extreme side of attempting to foster literacy solely in the students' native dialect. Delpit, among others, argues that both extremes are misguided; "The point must not be to eliminate students' home languages, but rather to add other voices and discourses to their repertoire" (1995:163).

A working definition of literacy for the purposes of this paper will combine elements of these various definitions; literacy is here viewed as a capacity to participate in a text-based culture, involving knowledge of how to use texts in addition to being able to decode them individually, and characterized by practices as well as competency. In particular, Heath's (1982)
emphasis on "ways of taking" meaning from texts is an important part of this view of literacy and is something that is learned in every community. Reading is viewed as a fundamental component of literacy; it is necessary but not sufficient.

The current state of reading instruction for AAVE-speaking children

Current models of literacy instruction vary greatly, but some widely used methods and programs can be examined as representative of current teaching. Cherkasky-Davis (1998) outlines current "best practices" in reading instruction, advocating progressive, literature-based techniques over traditional methods that rely on basal readers, ability grouping, and phonics instruction. Cherkasky-Davis lists recommendations for teaching reading based on current research and progressive thinking. The recommendations stress the importance of comprehension beyond decoding (with the recognition that decoding is a necessary skill for good readers), reading-aloud activities, use of authentic texts and learning situations, and writing of all kinds, among other things. However, it is important to note that these progressive practices are being implemented by only some of today's reading teachers, and are presumably more prevalent in schools where largely middle-class and white students predominate. The older, traditional model is still widespread, as evidenced partially by the current "Great Debate" over phonics versus whole-language instruction, which Cherkasky-Davis characterizes as "a symbolic skirmish in the broader culture wars between two opposing paradigms of teaching and learning, of child development, and of human nature" (39).

Cherkasky-Davis's recommendations are opposed by a different, but also powerful line of thinking in educational policy, as Baugh (1999) describes in evaluating the recommendations of
the U.S. Department of Education under the Reagan administration. Baugh argues that the proposals they offer are dismissive of the social and economic realities of many minority children, and finds misleading the claim that the proposed recommendations "tried to deal with the 'general' or 'usual' or 'average' situation," arguing that "to strive for homogenized educational policies in a diverse and continually changing society is both futile and misleading" (Baugh 1999:16).

Deficit theory in historical perspective and modern literacy education

While most researchers and scholars have moved well beyond the deficit/deprivation models that emerged and became incorporated into popular thinking in the 1960s and early 70s, this line of thought runs deep beneath educational thought, practice, and policy even today. The theory arose as psychologists and educators sought to explain the observed differences in school achievement of black and urban children with white middle-class children. The lag in achievement was closely correlated with socioeconomic status, but it was also marked for segregated ethnic minorities. Deutsch and others proposed a cultural deficit explanation: that "black children are said to lack the favorable factors in their home environment which enable middle-class children to do well in school. These factors involve the development, through verbal interaction with adults, of various cognitive skills, including the ability to reason abstractly, to speak fluently, and to focus upon long-range goals" (Labov 1994).

In criticism of these ideas from a linguistic perspective, Labov (1994) notes, "The concept of verbal deprivation has no basis in social reality . . . the myth of verbal deprivation is particularly dangerous because it diverts the attention from real defects of our educational system"
to the imaginary defects of the child; and ... it leads its sponsors inevitably to the hypothesis of the genetic inferiority of black children, which the verbal deprivation theory was designed to avoid." In terms of educational reform, Labov even goes so far as to suggest that some aspects of middle-class, educated standard English may not be useful or desirable for many educational purposes, and that the stylistics of middle-class language are at times "dysfunctional" and can get in the way of effective expression. In any case, it is hardly disputable that imposing middle-class, white English on all children and expecting them to fit a standard mold of language style at the outset has proven to be an unproductive approach in educating diverse children. Yet typical reading instruction models still follow this pattern.

The chief shortfall -- and danger -- of deficit theory is that it locates the problem of educational achievement (or failure) with the child and the home environment, rather than with educational environments and practices. So it is ironic that linguistic/cultural deprivation theories were initiated, at least in part, with the intention of refuting those who would blame children for their own failure to achieve by attributing failure to genetic deficiencies (Webber 1979). Instead, researchers such as Jensen and Bereiter looked at the environments in which children were raised for indicators of later school performance (Baugh 1988). The idea was that early experiences with language and other cultural norms affected children's readiness to adapt to school learning, in contrast to myths of genetic inferiority for minorities and other low-achieving groups of children.

Progressive instructional principles like those advocated by Cherkasky-Davis reflect a body of knowledge and beliefs about learning that has been generated by educational research and practice and is widely supported by educational practitioners and other advocates. Although
many authors only indirectly address issues of inequality in reading instruction, their views on
differences in language and reading achievement for different student populations call for close
examination. It is necessary to look beyond the surface of the various arguments to extrapolate
and examine what is assumed about the nature of literacy and its relation to nonmainstream
children and groups that traditionally produce many poor readers. Contradictions exist where
policies and programs advocated by teachers and other practitioners seek to empower and value
students from marginalized populations, yet their practice reflects beliefs that run counter to
these goals. As Wilson points out, despite the stated intent of many reading readiness and
intervention programs to foster constructivist learning and enable the learner to develop
understandings for themselves, most operate on a fairly traditional, teacher-controlled model of
pedagogy (61).

In fact a sharp contradiction exists between the rhetoric of educational philosophy that is
commonly put forth by reading programs as their guiding principles, and the approach to reading
instruction prescribed by and practiced within these programs. This discrepancy stems from a
conflict between what progressive educators know and commonly believe about instruction, and
powerful but contradictory ideas that underlie our beliefs about differences and inequality. This
conflict results in a tension between rhetoric and instructional practices that masks the deeper
problems with reading instruction for all children.

Reading pedagogy – revisiting deficit theory

First it is necessary to closely examine the reading programs currently being used and
proposed and to examine the thinking underlying the pedagogical model they use. Most popular
reading readiness or intervention programs imply (or invoke even more explicitly) theories of cultural and/or linguistic deficit in explaining differences in achievement in reading by children who come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In particular, most reading intervention programs operate as the name suggests – by intervening in order to combat or reverse something in a child’s life (or to add something that was previously lacking). The underlying assumption here is that, at least in terms of reading, the child’s previous experiences have been inadequate and the effect of this inadequacy should be negated. Cherkasky-Davis neatly summarizes the view of most reading instructors toward teaching children with minimal early experience with literacy:

What about those kids whose parents and families, for whatever reason, currently fail to nurture literacy? . . . If we are convinced of the power of parent-child reading (and we certainly are), and if this experience has been missed, then it must be substituted, provided in some analogous form, by the people at school [italics mine]. Every child needs to go through the ‘lap stage’ of reading development, ideally at the ages of two, three, and four with a parent. But if this doesn’t happen, then the school must help the child recapitulate this critical experience with someone else, later on, . . . School must be ready, not to be the parent, but to fill in analogous adult-child literacy experiences if they are missed at home (41).

This view of the school’s role seems unwittingly oppositional, almost antagonistic, to the home environment of such children. Granted, a great many children do come to school undernourished or otherwise poorly provided for, and the school is left to deal with the situation as is, but the nature of literacy suggests that it is a different matter entirely than other types of provisions and should be dealt with differently than one would deal with deficits in nutrition, shelter, or other more basic needs. Literacy is complex and is constructed and maintained largely within cultural contexts. It seems that schools and school reading programs could deal more effectively with early reading problems by addressing it in this context rather than with simple
add-on reading programs administered in the same manner as federal lunch programs.

What are the implications of reading programs that aim to "recover" or compensate for some early lacking elements in a child's development? Is this too reminiscent of 60's era deficit/deprivation theory? Cherkasky-Davis describes features of homes that prepare children well for literacy acquisition as "print-rich . . . where parents model reading and writing, where literacy is a tool of day-to-day family life, where stories and words are treasured, where reading aloud is a bedtime ritual" (40). It is clear that many children who do not become good readers grew up in "homes where none of these foundational experiences are known about or practiced." The absence of these activities is variously attributed to overworked parents, divorce and single-parenthood, linguistic deficit, and cultural deprivation. But what is important is not the cause, but what happens when kids from widely varying backgrounds get to school and how schools work with these differences in fostering literacy development.

By attempting to compensate for experiences judged to be lacking, reading programs almost assume (and in some ways help to ensure) that children who do not receive typical middle-class early literacy exposure will always be behind their more privileged peers in reading achievement. For instance, suppose there is no substitute for early literacy experiences at pre-school ages (i.e., birth to 4 yrs.) in terms of getting kids to behave like the middle-class kids who did have experiences like parental involvement, reading aloud, and early exposure to print – i.e., suppose the first four years of life represent a "critical period" in which irreversible tendencies develop. Both from a policy perspective and from a teaching perspective, how should you address the situation? Federal policy seems to be veering towards earlier and earlier intervention.
in children's life à la Head Start and Title I programs. But at what point does this become too prescriptive and too invasive of parents’ rights? If parents don’t consent to enrolling their children in early-childhood federal programs or allowing state intervention, is it either practical or ethical to require them to do so?

From a teaching perspective this raises questions about the goals and methods of literacy instruction. What exactly is it that we think children ought to be like or to be able to do in first and second grades, and how certain are we that the ideals we have in mind are the most important for the child’s future success? Further, is it possible that the molds that we expect or want children to fit into are in fact too constricting, and that we should consider different models for how literacy might be acquired instead of continually designing new packages for the same process -- acquiring decoding and comprehension skills -- in essentially the same format -- that is, through formal, classroom-based, teacher-directed pedagogy?

Why this contradiction? Examining conflicting beliefs

It is essential to begin to understand the causes of the conflict between educational knowledge and underlying beliefs. In this section I will propose some possible reasons for the divide between what progressive educators know and believe about teaching diverse students and the contradictory assumptions evident in instructional models for reading.

Stated quite simply, the idea of cultural and linguistic deprivation that took hold in the late 60s is a very powerful one that was easy for many people to grasp onto in making sense of the observed differences in educational achievement between children in marginalized groups and more privileged middle-class children. Deficit theory was not only eminently comprehensible, it
seemed to explain quite thoroughly the gaps in achievement that were clear to both educators and the general public. Its proponents in the 1960s made a strong and widely accepted case for the theory, and as a result it became ingrained into the mindset of academics and the public alike. Many current teachers were educated in the era when the theory was widely accepted, and others were influenced by it in less direct ways. In short, although long discredited, deficit theory is far from absent in educational thinking today and its influence can be seen in vestiges of practice that once used it as a theoretical foundation.

Reading Recovery founder Marie Clay neatly sums up a second reason for the discrepancy between progressive educational knowledge and practice; namely, the policy need to fit all children into a "single shoe size" (Wilson 61). Flexibility in adapting instruction to individual children's prior knowledge and abilities, Wilson suggests, "is inimical to the prevailing paradigm in U.S. reading education" (61). The practical and ideological divide between policy makers and practitioners constitutes a further policy-related problem contributing to the conflict between educational knowledge and assumptions.

Finally, the very rigidity of the curriculum itself perpetuates the mismatch between practice and ideals. Each party in the educational process, it seems, is trapped in some way by the inability of curriculum to be adapted and responsive to individual children. Teachers come to expect uniformity across groups of children and to view their job as one of performing the same instructional tasks repeatedly instead of being adaptive, flexible, and creative. Children are held to a standard timetable and come to understand that they are branded failures when they do not match the standard criteria. They are subsequently often shuffled into self-perpetuating cycles
of underachievement and low expectations. And policy makers and the public are confined by the reinforcing belief that there is one right process and sequence of developing literacy and that kids who do not adhere to this are incapable. They come to believe that policy, and the grammar of schooling, is simply "the way things are" and immutable.

**Potential contributions of linguistic knowledge to reading instruction**

Is there sufficient reason to believe that some children are less prepared for literacy acquisition than others because of elements of home environment and culture? How does approaching the problem in this way have implications for deficit theory? How can we approach the problem without being racist or culturally biased?

First we must examine differences between language and literacy and how they are acquired. How analogous is literacy acquisition to language learning? Snow suggests that despite the failings of deficit theory, there remain great differences between the literacy backgrounds of children of different cultures and socioeconomic groups in the U.S., and that these are at least partly to blame for achievement lags of certain minority and poor groups of children. Snow (1983) distinguishes between reading and writing skills and the ability to deal with decontextualized information and suggests that "literacy skills are simple enough to be acquired at school, whereas developing the skill of using language in a decontextualized way relies more heavily on experiences only home can provide."

The importance of clearly defining what is meant by literacy is underscored in Heath's work. Heath describes "ways of taking" from sources of information and how they differ between different communities and are learned by the children in those communities. Heath's
work emphasizes that "learning to read through using and learning from language has been less systematically studied than the decoding process" (Glaser, cited in Heath 70). Children learn how to take meaning from text even before they master decoding skills (Heath 70).

"Children have to learn to select, hold, and retrieve content from books and other written or printed texts in accordance with their community's rules or "ways of taking," and the children's learning follows community paths of language socialization. In each society, certain kinds of childhood participation in literacy events may precede others, as the developmental sequence builds toward the whole complex of home and community behaviors characteristic of the society. The ways of taking employed in the school may in turn build directly on the preschool development, may require substantial adaptation on the part of the children, or may even run directly counter to aspects of the community's pattern" (70).

What might a literacy model not based in language- or cultural-deficit-theory look like?

Multiple layers of change are needed for educators to overcome the obstacles to effective policy for reading instruction. To begin to think about this, we should examine the underlying assumptions and definitions of current literacy instruction.

Cherkasky-Davis proposes the view that literacy is inherently and profoundly social (45), an intriguing idea from a linguist's perspective. People commonly view reading and writing as solitary tasks. If literacy can be compared to oral language in this sense, though, might there be other parallels between how children acquire language and how literacy is acquired? Certainly there is evidence that language and literacy learning are similar in other ways — in particular, the observed differences in the ease with which children versus adults learn both oral and written language. Adults notoriously struggle with taking on either a new language or previously absent literacy skills, while children seem to acquire both with relative ease. Further evidence suggesting that the mechanisms for learning language and literacy are similar would seem to hold strong implications for how we teach literacy, given what we know about how language is learned. But
current reading instruction methods often operate under assumptions that run counter to evidence about oral language acquisition.

Beyond deficit theories: A digression into cognitive linguistics

In pushing policy and practice in reading instruction beyond the deficit theories still implicitly present, other models of learning can be useful in developing new ideas about how literacy might be taught and learned. In particular, the field of linguistics sheds light on how we view literacy and its acquisition, by examining possible parallels with theories of how language is acquired and develops. It is clear that literacy learning is similar to language acquisition in some ways and different in others. Most notable among differences is that literacy is not universal across human culture, but language is, and so there are clear differences in what individual students and groups of students bring to the classroom in terms of literacy background. But current thinking on language acquisition offers some potentially useful ideas for thinking about how literacy might be similar.

The theory of constructivism, as Cherkasky-Davis describes it, bears a striking resemblance to current thinking on how children acquire language. The cognitive linguist Steven Pinker has proposed a model for describing children’s language learning that views language as a fundamental component of human nature and the child’s brain as wired, to some degree, to acquire it. This thinking stems from Chomsky’s postulate of Universal Grammar, meaning that all humans have an innate template for language onto which the superficial constructs of a specific language is mapped. Developmentally, the language-instinct theory views language as a human need, comparable in some ways even to basic needs such as food and attention.
Clay explicitly acknowledges the parallel between language and literacy acquisition (Wilson 60) in defending the constructivist approach to teaching reading: "In learning to speak and understand her native language . . . a child formulates a complex web of rules that allows her to construct and understand sentences that in turn enable her to transact business with people in predictable ways." Pinker would suggest that the template for this complex web of rules is already present in the child’s mind. If we can view literacy as analogous to language in this way, then, the language-instinct theory lends support to the idea that literacy is a uniquely and universally human ability, leading to the conclusion that all children have the fundamental wiring and capability to acquire literacy just as they do for language. The implication for reading instruction, then, is to adjust instruction to the complex cultural context in which different children encounter literacy, with consideration for the variations in meaning and value that literacy carries in their communities.

III. CASE STUDY

The questions raised here point to the larger issue: How, then, can educators address the complex literacy needs of diverse children, including those who speak AAVE? While large-scale educational reform is an ambitious (and admirable) goal, there is a good deal to be learned from small, community-based efforts to enhance the learning and literacy of children who face educational barriers that include those based in dialect differences. One of these programs, of which I had the privilege of taking part, will be the focus here.

Overview
Chester, Pennsylvania is a city of about 42,000 located on the Delaware River about 15 miles southwest of Philadelphia. Once a thriving ship-building and industrial city, in the postwar era, Chester lost much of its industry as a result of economic and technological changes. Political corruption exacerbated these detrimental economic effects, leaving the city largely poor and minority (Kelly 1998). The public school system in Chester enrolled 88% African-American children in the 1998-99 school year (Philadelphia Inquirer 1999). Achievement data for students in the Chester Upland district are chronically among the lowest in the state.

The William Penn community is a publicly subsidized residential community near the Chester waterfront. The population is almost entirely African-American. Swarthmore College has established ties with this community through numerous service and collaborative projects, of which Writing Our Way is one. Many of these projects have formed and operated under the auspices of the Chester-Swarthmore College Community Coalition, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting community empowerment (Anderson 1999).

The goals, participants, and practices of WOW have changed over the five years of its existence, and as a result its central structure is difficult, if not impossible, to define neatly. Indeed, these characteristics of fluidity and flexibility are in some ways defining features of the program, as it becomes differently conceived of and implemented each year by the different group of individuals who make it happen each year. Some specific goals are clear, however: WOW has been working gradually toward its early goals of using texts that would evoke prior knowledge, taking oral and written stories from the community and turning them into texts to be used by the community itself. In its mission and practice, additionally, WOW has an emphasis
on impacting practice and attitude toward reading and writing, in contrast to most public school environments, where achievement test results are the bottom line.

Teachers are responsible for helping to plan and implement a summer writing and academic enrichment program for eight to ten children from the William Penn Housing Project in Chester. College students work in pairs with community members from Chester to direct educational activities for a group of 8-12 children over a six-week period in the summer. There are approximately 40 children in the program ranging from 5-12 years old.

WOW begins with two weeks of intensive training for teachers, which involves developing the structure of the program as well as giving the teachers a chance to get to know each other and develop goals together. The training is led by past WOW teachers and the program director, Swarthmore education professor Diane Anderson.

After the training, each teacher-pair works with a group of children daily during six weeks of the summer, focusing on activities that develop writing skills and other academic areas. The program has its origin in the recognition of the disparity between the resources and outcomes of Chester public school students, and those of students in nearby districts. One of WOW's central goals is to not only augment the academic experience of these school children but also to convey to them a sense of self-confidence in academic endeavors, with the aim of giving them the opportunity to achieve to their fullest capabilities.

An integral feature of the program is the fact that the teachers work in pairs of one Swarthmore student and one Chester community member to determine and direct the students' activities, so that the Chester community is actively and directly involved in the program. This
is in line with the larger community-empowerment objective of the Chester-Swarthmore College Community Coalition, and it fundamentally impacts the shape and direction of the program, its policies, and its day-to-day practices.

The success of WOW centers around the attitudes of the children toward education and learning. The children produce writing of their own, which they collect in a book or creative project of their own making, and which serves as the most concrete evidence of their accomplishments through WOW. Staff partners also work together in evaluating the students’ progress and each others’ effectiveness. Because WOW depends so much on close interaction between the teachers and students, and between the Swarthmore students and Chester community members, the direction of the program is necessarily guided by the evolving needs of the children as determined by extensive review, discussion, and participation by the teachers as well as the students.

Recommendations for WOW

The community basis of WOW is the essence of what makes it unique, and what gives it promise. It is also what sets the program apart from traditional literacy learning models that begin with the assumption that AAVE-speaking children’s home environment is deficient or inadequate for making them successfully literate. WOW must tap into this resource more to help shape it in the future. It should also seek more broad-sweeping change, not only in the children but in the community and its values and practices as well. Because the community members who participate in and support WOW already value literacy and school success, a movement to make that a more salient part of the community culture would meet the criterion of being based in and
driven by the community itself.

IV. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Where can reading instruction policy go from here?

We have seen that policy is characteristically reluctant to afford flexibility to practitioners, just as practitioners and policy makers themselves are constricted by implicit but destructive beliefs running beneath educational philosophy and practice. Some promising strands emerge from current research and efforts to implement effective reading instruction for diverse children. But it is critical that we allow our understanding of learning itself, as well as of cultural and social constructions of meaning and value, drive us to look beyond simple deficit- and deprivation-based models of literacy education. A few of the many complicated questions remain are suggested here, and a few elements of promising reform follow.

Questions remaining and extending from this study

Many additional questions need to be addressed in relation to this problem. While many are beyond the scope of this paper, they are worth keeping in mind in considering the issues presented here: Who are teachers? What are their beliefs, and how do those affect their practices? How might their resistance play out and hinder real collaboration? What are the roots of this resistance problem?

Further complicating questions include: What are the potential pitfalls of transmitting of this resistance problem?

Further complicating questions include: What are the potential pitfalls of transmitting knowledge from one field to the other? How is the process further complicated by the already
existing gap between educational research and practice? Which one should linguistics focus on? What are the potential social benefits of such a collaboration? What is necessary for this to happen, in realistic and practical terms?

Further, Who are educational researchers? Who are linguists? Where do they start out from in terms of beliefs and goals (equity, equality, social justice, what are their beliefs about education? What are educators’ beliefs about linguistics?

Future research on these and related questions could help to clarify and improve the working relationship between these two fields, and enable greater development toward the common goal of enabling speakers of AAVE to become good readers.

The role of parents and parental involvement should be central. Real reform must have full inclusion and input from everyone who has an impact on a child’s educational experiences. Cherkasky-Davis in fact incorporates parental involvement as a required part of reading instruction (40). What is vital here is to ensure that decisions are made truly democratically and not imposed from outside authorities. Including parents in education (and, indeed, engaging parents in their own continuing learning) is a practice with great potential for effecting improvement in reading.

In addition, clearly defining literacy and examining assumptions of current practices and policies. Only as we continue to grow in our understanding of our own assumptions and how they are reflected in practice can we begin to critically examine current practice and imagine how it could be altered.

In terms of specific practices for teaching AAVE speakers, linguists and educators alike
are divided, but general ideas emerge that can help shape policy and instruction. Labov (1994) suggests that "[Linguists] do not believe that the standard language is the only medium in which teaching and learning can take place, or that the first step in education is to convert all first-graders to replicas of white middle-class suburban children." Baugh (1999) agrees with this principle, while stressing the importance that nonstandard dialect speakers be given access and enabled to participate in the mainstream culture: "Language arts instruction should honor the linguistic heritage of every student at the same time that students are provided with adequate instruction that allows them to fulfill any professional ambition that is within their personal capacity to achieve" (1999:157).

A great deal of promise lies in the existing data on programs like Reading Recovery, and these should continue to be developed and examined, particularly with respect to the ways that they impact children with characteristics of typically poor readers. However, two cautionary principles should guide policy makers and practitioners alike in future developments of methods to address the literacy needs of diverse student populations. First, existing and proposed reading readiness and intervention programs should be closely examined and continually monitored for how they view language differences and how they view and treat students who do not have traditional middle-class pre-literacy experiences. Existing and new programs should always be considered with an eye toward the assumptions that they make about learning and language differences.

Second, the larger picture of reading instruction should be reexamined in light of present differences.

Second, the larger picture of reading instruction should be reexamined in light of present failures and successes in enabling all children to become successfully literate. Why are traditional
methods not working for large numbers of students, and why do we continue to employ those methods knowing they are ineffective? While recovery/intervention programs that are successful in helping students who are not benefiting from traditional reading instruction should be applauded, policy makers should keep in mind that the reason they are needed is that basic, mainstream classroom methods are not working for many kids. How can the success of Reading Recovery and other programs help to shape new models of classroom reading instruction for AAVE-speaking students? Finally and most importantly, how can policy best work with practitioners to move toward a system where the widely different needs and abilities of individuals and groups of students can both be addressed by and help to enrich and change teaching itself? Questions such as these should form the long-term path of research, policy, and practice.
Bibliography


