

High School Principals Perceptions on Ebonics: A Framework for School Leaders

Garrard McClendon, Ph.D.

Chicago State University
College of Education
9501 S. King Drive, Chicago, IL 60628
United States of America

Abstract

This study investigated high school principals' individual and aggregate perceptions of and expectations for students who use African American Vernacular English. Using the African American English Teacher Attitude Scale (AAETAS), the study seeks to describe the relationship between principals' demographic characteristics and their perceptions of African American Vernacular English. The study used raw scores from the AAETAS instrument created by Hoover, McNair-Knox, Lewis and Politzer (1997) and coded the principals' perceptions of AAVE in a histogram. Principals' demographic information was gathered on the following categories: race, gender, home language, county location, childhood hometown community, age, years in education, years as a teacher, years in administration, student socio-economic class, school's dominate culture, and total school enrollment. The results show an overall attitude of mild acceptance of AAVE in about 80% of the respondents. Five principals reported to having a negative attitude toward AAVE. Demographic factors such as gender, race, school location, enrollment, socio-economic status, age of principal, hometown setting and dialect were shown to influence principals' perceptions and expectations of African American Vernacular English.

Principals may want to view the AAVE as different as opposed to derogatory, deviant, or deficient (Jonsberg 2001). This study found that a majority of the high school principals in Cook County, IL, who completed the principal's profile and the African American English Teacher Attitude Scale were in the "Difference" category. "Difference" means that listeners view AAVE as different and not necessarily negative. Seventeen respondents out of 22 (77.3%) were in this category. "Deficit" represents a strongly negative attitude towards AAVE. Five out of 22 principals were in this category (22.7%). "Excellence" is a strong positive attitude towards AAVE. No principals fell into this category.

Because this is a qualitative study, the principals' responses have been explained through narrative. The findings in this study showed that 17 principals are neutral to mildly positive about AAVE and have neutral to mildly positive expectations for students who use AAVE. Five of the 22 school principals in this study indicated that the dialect could be harmful to one's academic career, and they perceived AAVE as a dialect they would mildly prefer students not use.

Keywords: Ebonics, Black English, Perceptions, Expectations, African American Education, High school, Attitudes, Vernacular, Language Use, Dialect, Code-switching

Introduction

Teachers' and administrators' perceptions of students can be a factor in the school's own culture and climate: "The more open the climate of the school, the less alienated students tend to be" (Hoy, 2008, p. 1). "Meaningful school improvement begins with cultural change—and cultural change begins with the school leader" (Reeves, 2007, p. 94).

The climate of negative attitude toward dialect can be significant. Nearly four hundred years after Africans were forced to come to North America, language discrimination pervades our current society. Studies have demonstrated that dialect can affect behavior, perception, and expectation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate Chicago high school principals' perceptions and attitudes toward students who use language not considered standard, more specifically, African American Vernacular English. Craig (2002) stated that many African American students speak AAVE. There are numerous studies (Fogel, 2006; Goodman, 2006; Isenbarger, 2006) that include teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward AAVE, which includes the Ann Arbor, Michigan, Black English court case focusing on language barriers created by teachers' unconscious negative attitudes toward students' use of African American English, and the negative effect these attitudes have on student learning (Ball, 1997). Substantial literature (Blasé, 1999; Jonsberg, 2001; Powell & Aaron, 1982) exists on teachers' expectations and perceptions, but little about administrators' perceptions.

The purpose of this study was to collect principal's perceptions and expectations, not to find determine their effect on student performance. There may be conflicting views about empirical determinants, but African American students tend to be the outcasts in American schools – the group about which widespread notions of academic inferiority prevail (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 2005; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; McWhorter, 2000; Steele, 1999). This phenomenon may extend to teachers' and principals' negative perceptions of the language that many Black students use. A review of the literature indicated a need for research on high school principals' perceptions of and expectations for students who use Black Vernacular English.

According to Sergiovanni (1991), principals are considered the leaders of schools. He considers school leaders to be culture builders. It is only appropriate that principals' perceptions of students' language skills be surveyed to gauge academic expectations against cultural biases. Self-fulfilling prophecies can influence teachers' decisions. According to Masland (1979), a teacher's bias against a student's Black English dialect may trigger lower teacher expectations and lower student performance.

According to Oates (2003), anti-Black bias among White teachers is more prevalent than the same bias from Black teachers. White teachers' perceptions are significantly more consequential to the performance of African American students (Ferguson, 1998). Claude Steele (2006) stated that a person's "social identity" defined as group membership in categories such as age, gender, religion, and ethnicity—has significance when "rooted in concrete situations"(p. 1). Steele defined these situations as "identity contingencies"—settings in which a person is treated according to a specific social identity.

Research Design

A 46-statement instrument was used to gather data on high school principals' perceptions and expectations of students who used AAVE. The African American English Teacher Attitude Scale (AAETAS) was used in this study. It is a four point, 46-item Likert Scale designed by Mary Rhodes Hoover, Faye McNair-Knox, Shirley Lewis, and Robert L. Politzer (1997). This study is an example of qualitative research. With qualitative research, one preserves chronological flow, sees precisely which events lead to which consequences, and derives fruitful explanations (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 336).

Procedures

The methodological procedures used were the selection of the instrument, the selection of high schools, the selection of subjects, the gathering of data, and the analysis of the data.

The principals' demographic profiles were used to sort data in reference to each principal's years of experience, ethnicity, population of school, principal's age, gender, number of years as an administrator, number of years as a teacher, and other categories germane to the school climate. To triangulate data, the literature review sources were examined.

Sample Population

A volunteer sample of high school principals within Cook County, Illinois, were used for this study. These schools varied in enrollment from 23 students to over 3,700. Students of African American descent were present in over 90% of these schools.

Data Analysis

The research questions that led the analysis of data are: “What perceptions did Illinois secondary school principals have concerning the use of Black Vernacular English by students in an academic setting? What expectations did Illinois secondary school principals have concerning the use of Standard American English by students in an academic setting? From the data collected, trends surfaced and significance results concerning perceptions and expectations were obtained.

This data allowed the researcher to study the principals, individually and as an aggregate. The researcher tallied and coded principals’ attitudes based on the AAETAS. Because the test had 23 positive statements, 23 negative ones, and statements that pertained to multicultural acceptance, the researcher was able to immediately quantify and qualify data. The Likert-scale of the AAETAS and the Principal’s Profile Form assisted in the process of finding relationships among data. Coded data was used to focus on qualitative relationships/outcomes and perceptions, not for specific numerical outcomes claiming empirical proof of attitudes.

The following were contrasted for possible qualitative relationships: 1) number of African Americans students in school, 2) principal’s age, 3) years of experience teaching and in administration, 4) number of teachers in the school, 5) school location, 6) population, 7) administrator’s ethnicity/race, 8) grade point average expectations, 9) behavior, 10) post-secondary school expectations, 11) gender of administrator, and 12) principal’s hometown population and demographics.

Principals’ attitudes toward AAVE

The researcher was most concerned with the responses germane to attitudes towards AAVE. African American principals (raw averages of 130.2) had a more positive perception of AAVE than White principals (raw averages of 126.5), however, the sample does not show a definitive consensus because there were only 3 Black principals in the sample. Males were much more likely to show a more positive attitude to AAVE than females. Male raw scores averaged 127.3 and females 126. Native Standard English speakers showed a more positive attitude to AAVE than dual dialect speakers.

Principals in schools with an upper-middle-class social status exhibited the most positive perception of speakers of AAVE. Principals in lower-class schools had an attitude toward AAVE that was less positive than upper-middle-class schools, but principals in schools with middle-class students were slightly more positive than principals in lower-middle-class schools. The least accepting toward AAVE were principals in schools with lower-middle-class students.

The age group of 40-49 had the most positive attitude toward AAVE (raw score 128.3). The least positive group was the 50-59 age cohort (averaging 124.7). However, the age group of 60 and over had a raw score of 127.9. The group with the most teaching and administrative experience, (26 years or more), was most positive toward AAVE. See figures below.

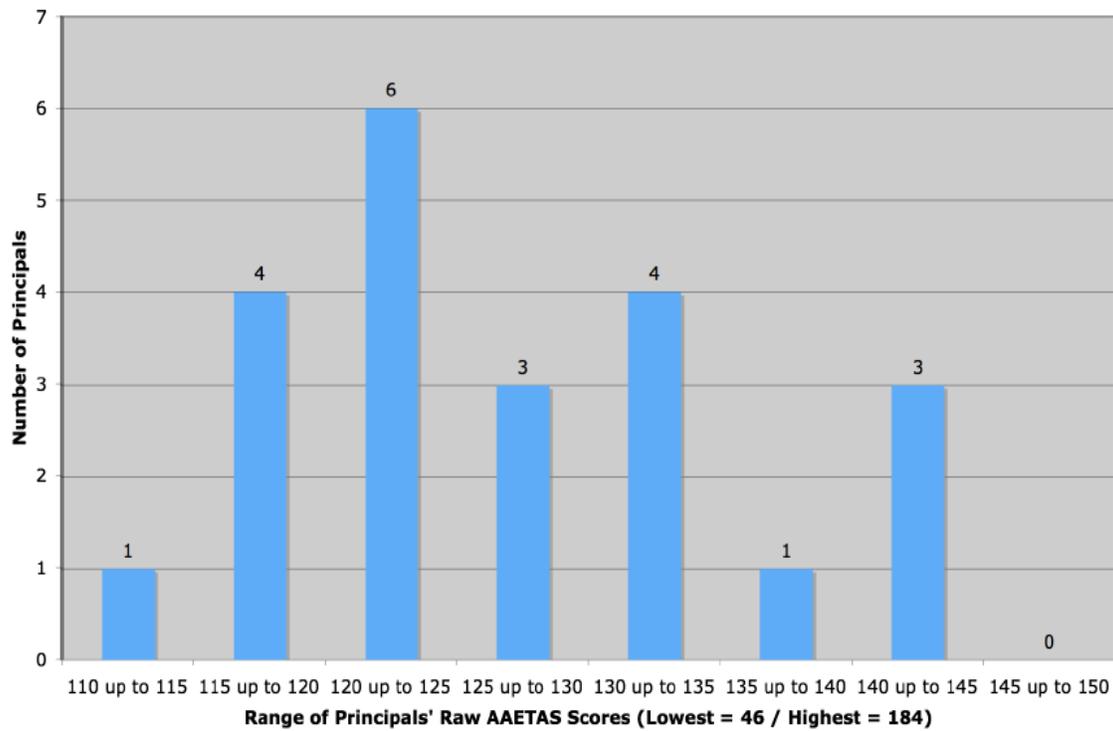


Figure 1. AAETAS Raw Scores for Cook County Principals by Deficit, Difference, and Excellence (N=22)

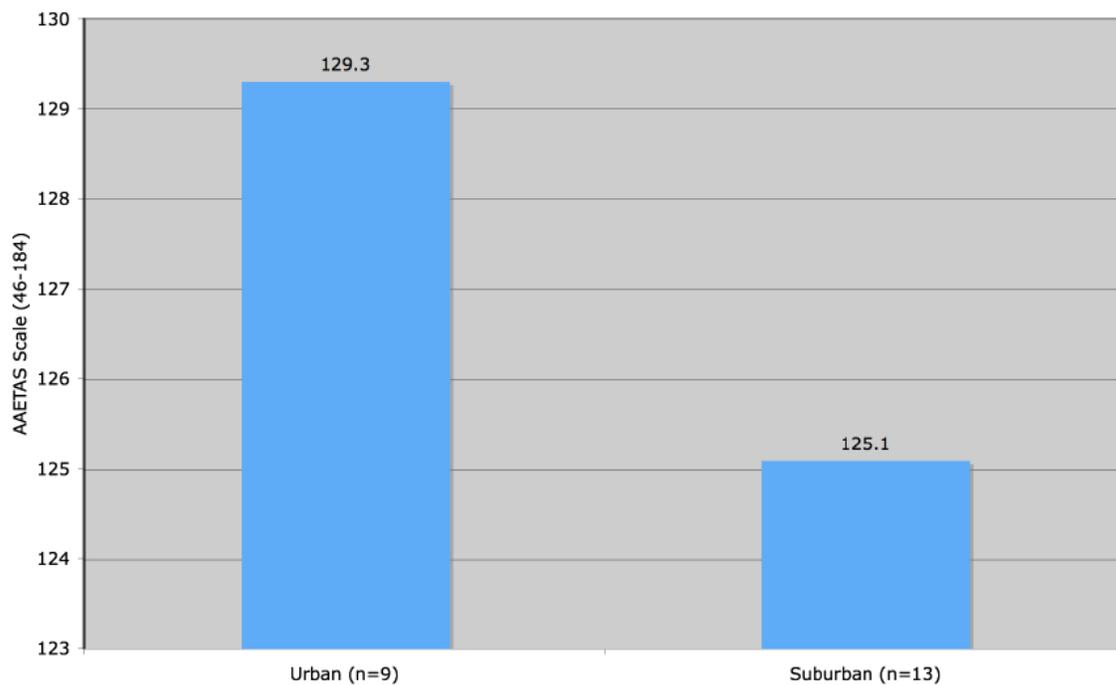


Figure 2. AAVE Acceptance by Principals' Hometown (N=22)

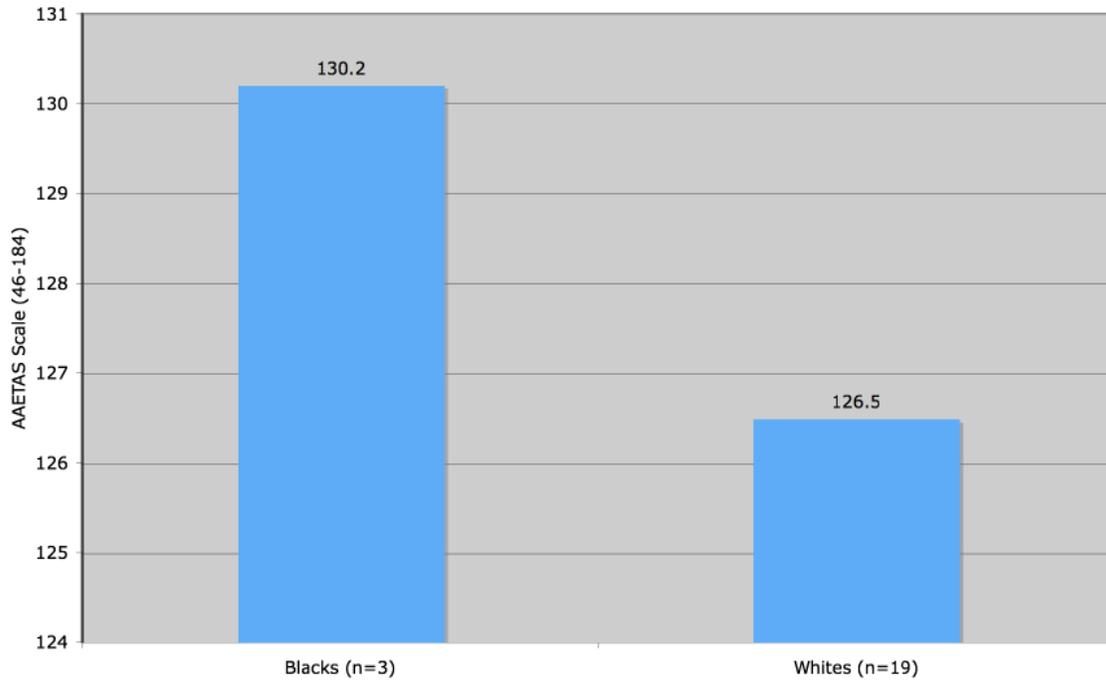


Figure 3. AAVE Acceptance by Race Ethnicity (N=22)

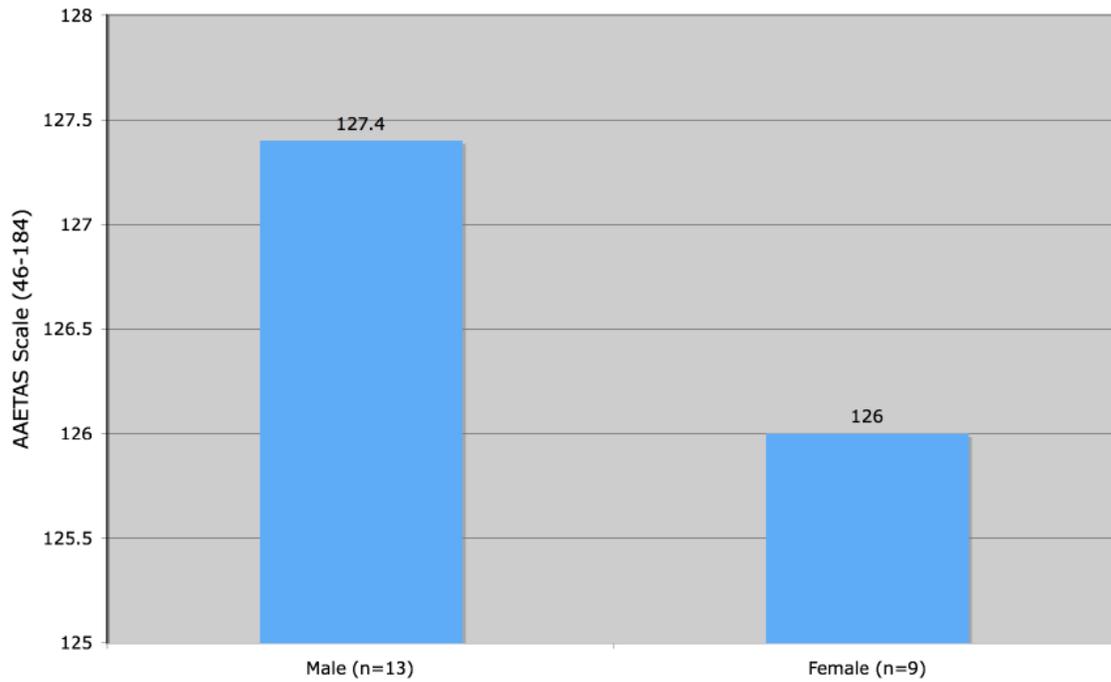


Figure 4. AAVE Acceptance by Gender (N=22)

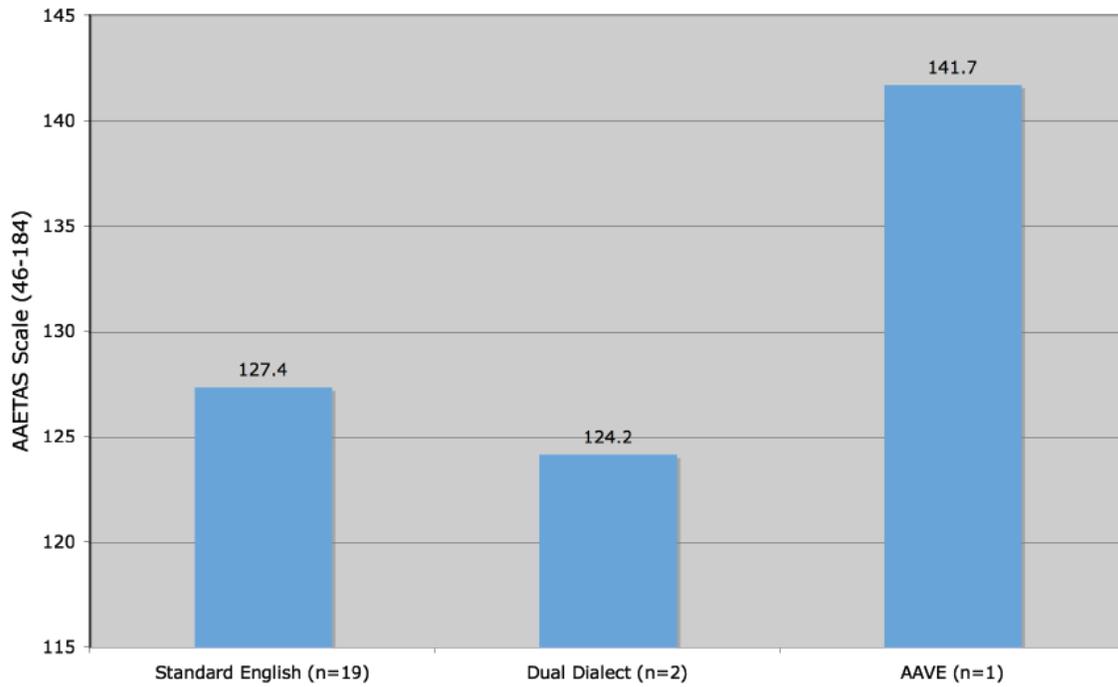


Figure 5. AAVE Acceptance by Dialect (N=22)

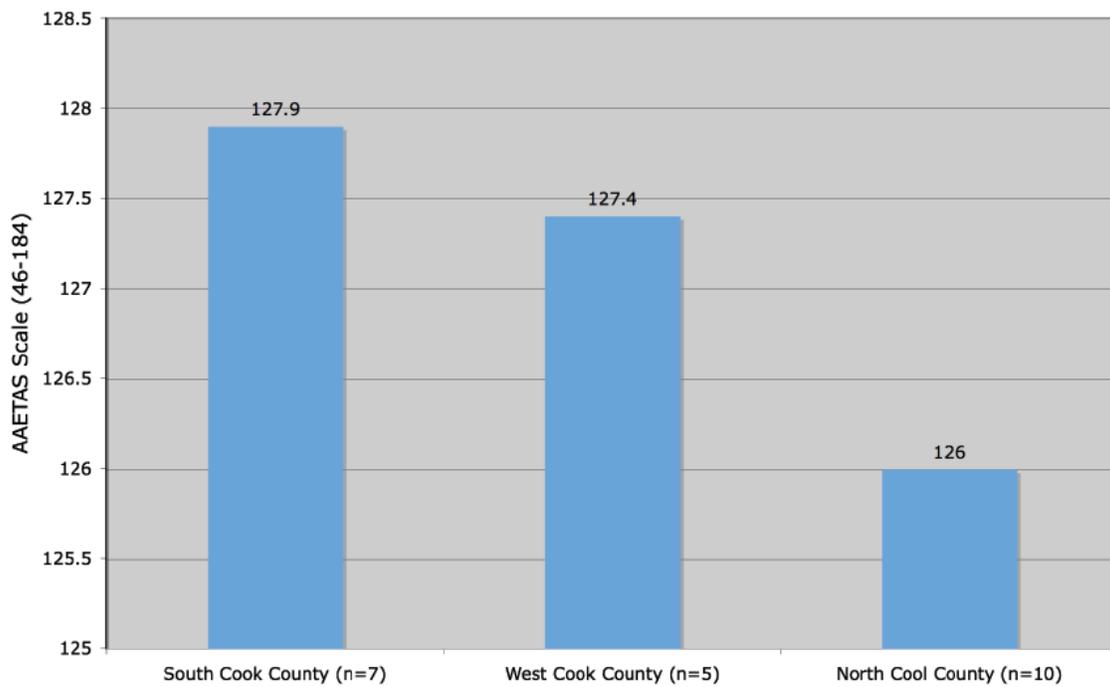


Figure 6. AAVE Acceptance by Principals' County Location (N=22)

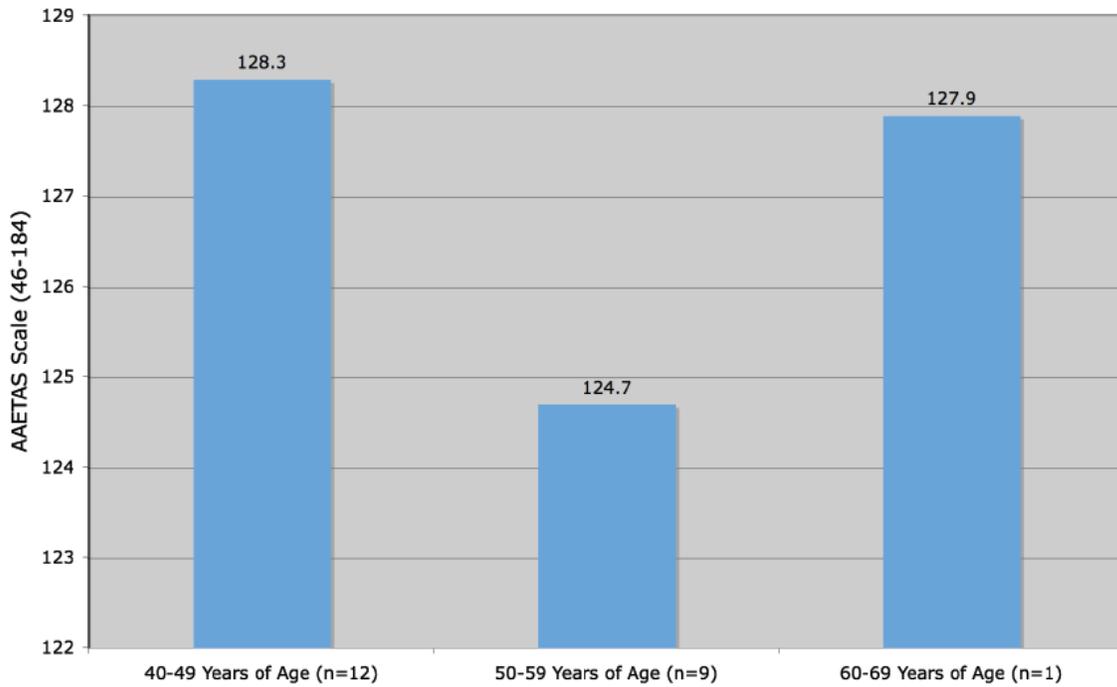


Figure 7. AAVE Acceptance by Principals' Age (N=22)

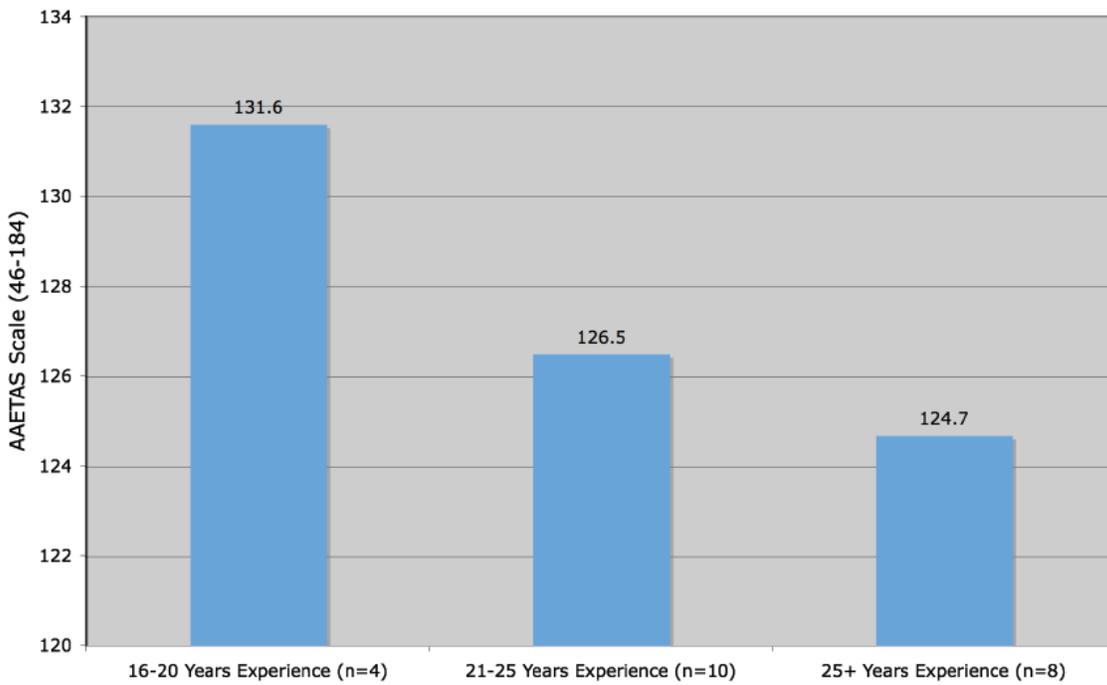


Figure 8. AAVE Acceptance by Principals' Years in Education (N=22)

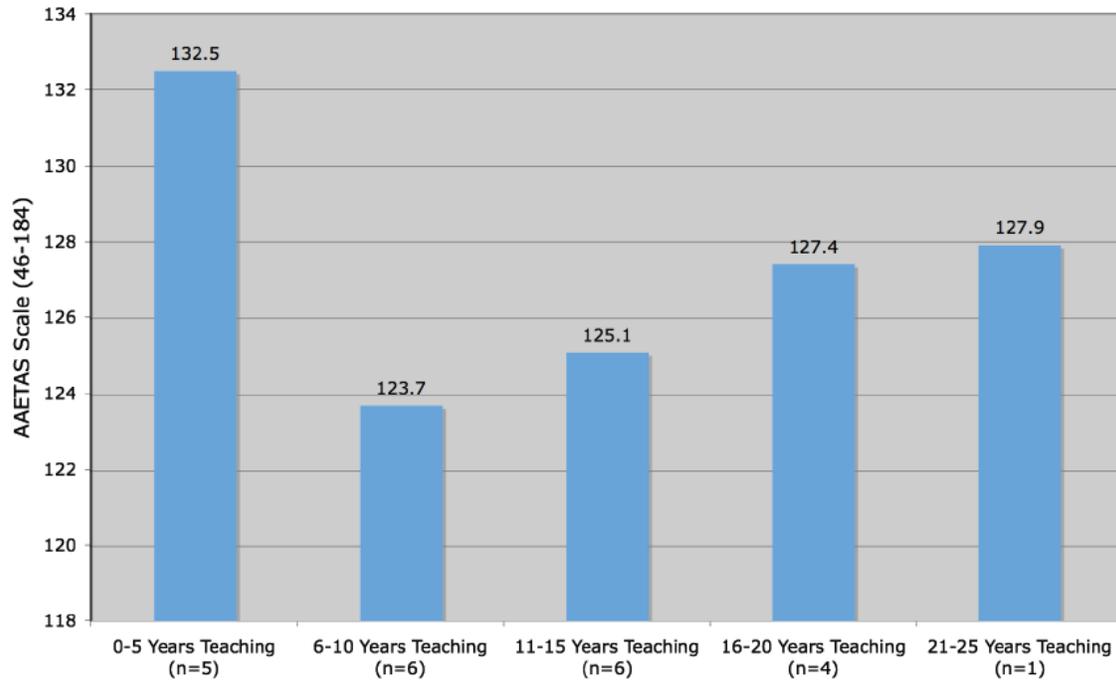


Figure 9. AAVE Acceptance by Years as a Teacher (N=22)

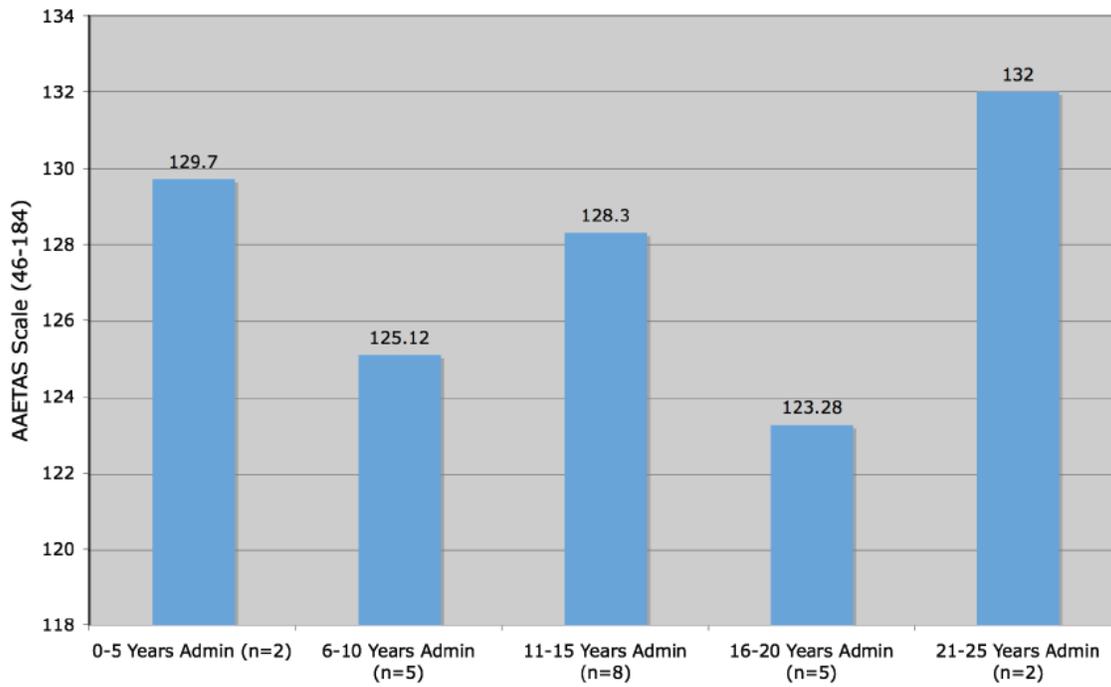


Figure 10. AAVE Acceptance by Years as Administrator (N=22)

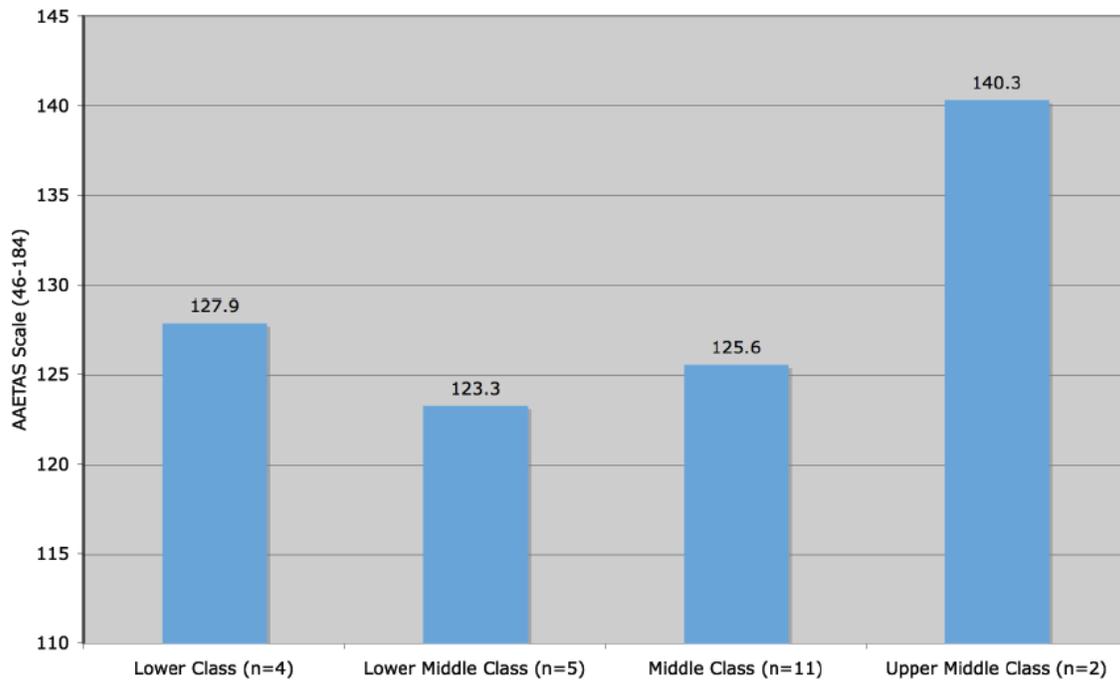


Figure 11. AAVE Acceptance by Socio Economic Class of Students (N=22)

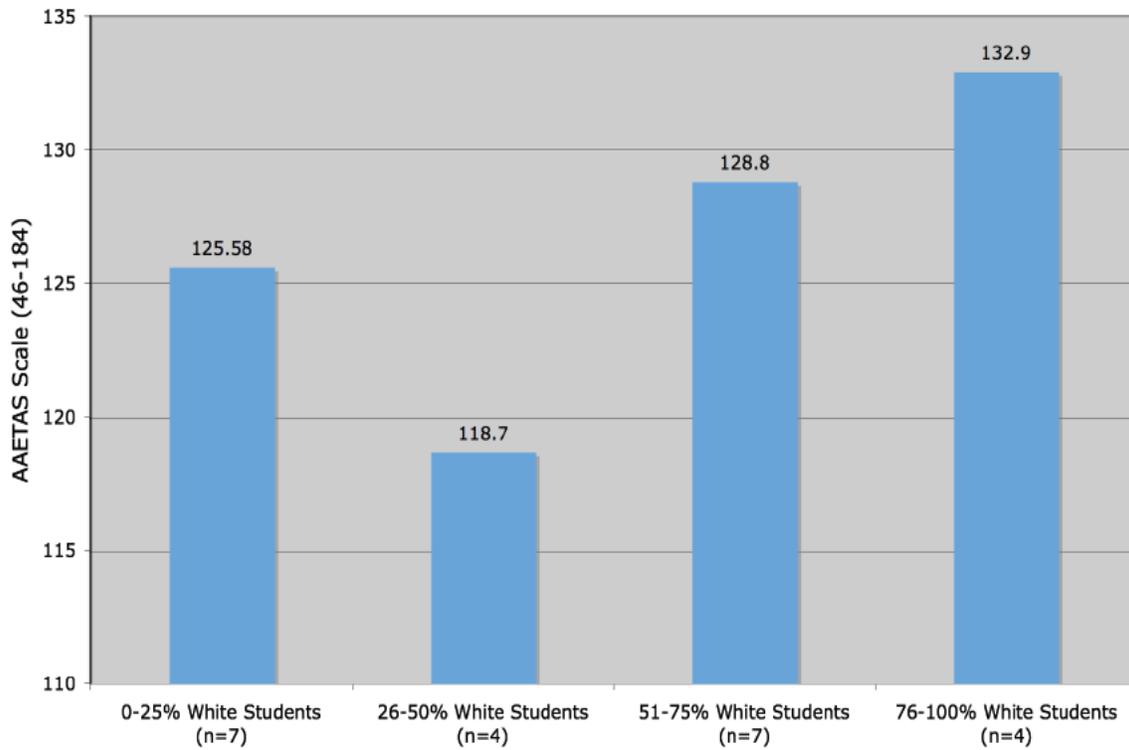


Figure 12. AAVE Acceptance by Students' Dominant Enrollment (N=22)

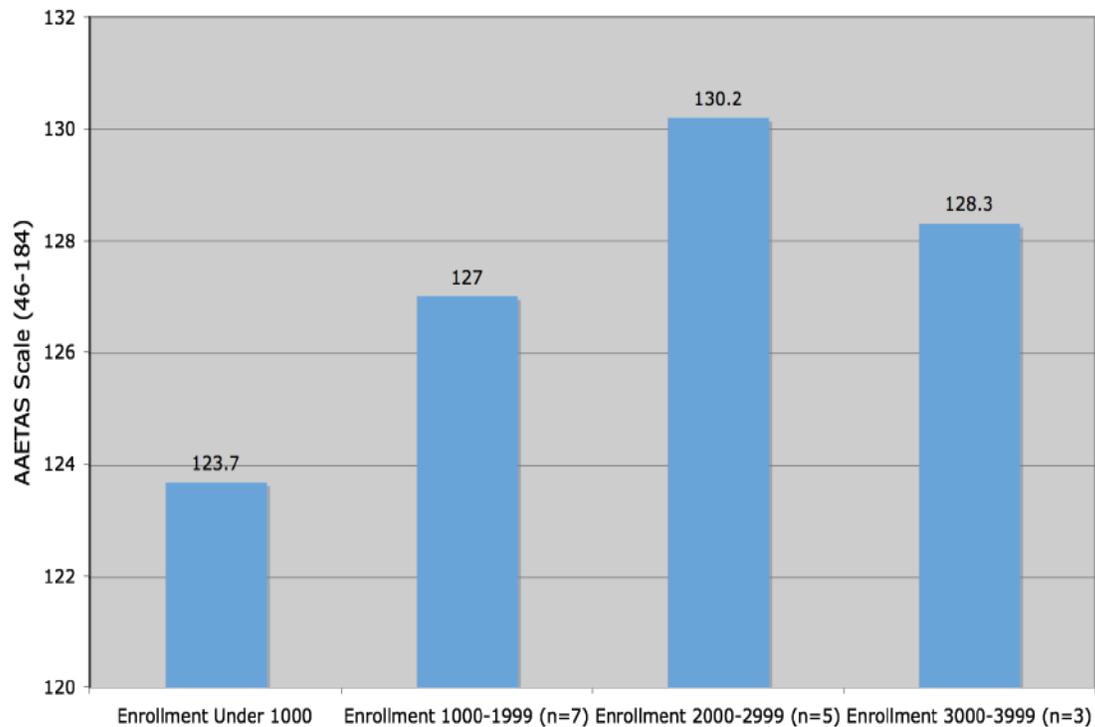


Figure 13. AAVE Acceptance by Total School Enrollment (N=22)

Final Reflections and Conclusions

Overall, the findings in this study display evidence that most principals provide responses that show a neutral to mildly favorable perception of AAVE, and neutral to mildly positive expectations for students who use AAVE.

Cook County, Illinois, public school principals view AAVE mildly positively, as reflected in the charts and instrument statement tallies noted above. However, there are selected categories that show negative attitudes that may depict a lack of understanding, disagreement with, or ambivalence toward AAVE.

The data in this study showed that the majority of principals were mildly positive toward AAVE. This was not consistent for all 22 participants. There was 1 participant who responded with an attitude considered “deficit” or “negative” according to the designers of the AAETAS. This individual’s average score was 2.489, with 2.5 as a neutral from the 5 point Likert scale. In this study, the individual would be considered mildly negative toward AAVE, with some specific responses noted earlier as strongly negative. Four other participants (with raw scores of 120 and below) had attitudes that were similar (see histogram), but 17 principals consistently showed a mild acceptance of AAVE.

The principals did imply that code-switching was preferred to speaking AAVE all the time by their responses to the prompt “African Americans need to know both standard and Black English in order to survive in America.” Sixteen principals agreed to this statement while only 6 disagreed. Code-switching is “the use of 2 or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction” (Myers-Scotton & Ury, 1977). It is not random or meaningless. It has a role and function, often used as a “key” to communication (Greene and Walker, 2004).

Discussion of Research Findings

Five of the 22 school principals in this study indicated that the dialect could be harmful to one’s academic career, and they perceived AAVE as a dialect they would mildly prefer students not use. According to the instrument, a score at or less than 120 was considered “Deficit” or a strong negative attitude towards AAVE. Scores between 120 and 159 were considered “Difference”, which meant that listeners viewed AAVE as different and not negative. Raw scores of 160 and above were considered “Excellence”, or a strong positive attitude towards AAVE. Because this is a qualitative study, the principals’ affirmative and negative responses have been carefully described and commented on below.

In the current study, there were 5 principals with overall scores in the Deficit category (under 120), 13 principals in the Difference category (120-135), and 4 in the category deemed “favorable” (135 and above). Scores in the top 20%, above 138, were deemed as “more favorable” scores. Scores for the current study ranged from 114.5 to 143.0. Figure 14 below illustrates the individual scores of the 22 principals, in increments of 5. Each educator’s perceptions, expectations, and the attitudes toward AAVE are rated.

“Although all languages should be accepted and considered equal, the reality is that Standard American English is what is expected by society (Isenbarger, 2006, p.127).

To promote a social justice frame of reference, principals can coach their faculty by sharing the practice of accepting African American Vernacular English as an accepted and valid dialect. Dandy (1991), believes a whole language approach to language arts instruction is beneficial to Black children and that it can be compatible with Afrocentric teaching models.

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

The findings show that some principals have an aversion to African American Vernacular English according to the AAETAS. The researcher suggests that principals communicate with their teachers on how to instruct students on when to use Standard American English instead of AAVE. Administrators who have respect for students’ language backgrounds will know that SAE may be the preferred dialect in professional settings, but they should respect the student’s dialect as well. Each child brings their own personality and culture to school. Delpit says, “Children have the right to their own language” (p.291, 1988). Administrators should embrace this right and share the respect for student culture, while ensuring that teachers promote SAE for the business world. Isenbarger states, “I believe in teaching the individual child, and tailoring instruction to his or her needs (Isenbarger, p.130, 2006).

The building leader has to expect and should deliver a value additive model. This is imperative for principals because school climate and tone start with the building leader. Principals should prepare to lead teachers in code-switching training. Because some students do not speak standard American English in school, building principals can instruct their teachers to be sensitive to dialects, while maintaining a Standard English benchmark.

Valuing culture

The building leader has to deliver a value additive model. Adding a value model that shows how some student dialects can be perceived as detrimental to their academic performance. With the diversity found in schools, principals need to be aware of how dialects are evaluated by their teaching faculty. This is expressed in *The Skin That We Speak* by Delpit and Dowdy (2002). Delpit asserts, “To reject a person’s language can only feel as if we are rejecting him” (p. 47).

The Stanford Center for Research and Development Center study compared the attitudes toward AAVE of in-service teachers in four cities (Trenton, NJ; New York, NY; Palo Alto, CA; and Miami, FL), using the AAETAS instrument (Hoover et al., 1977). The Hoover, Politzer, McNair-Knox, Lewis studies of 1977 and 1997, show similar attitudes. In the 1977 Stanford study of four cities, the mean raw score was 126.36, (Trenton 127.9, Palo Alto 137.9, New York 131.9, Miami 124), while scores in the Florida A & M and McClendon studies were 127 and 126.84, respectively. These data show that the AAETAS is an instrument and that individuals in the education profession have similar attitudes across the country, in large cities and smaller towns.

Contribution to research and professional practice

This study offers a view of principals' attitudes concerning AAVE in the Chicago metropolitan area. This study's examination of principal's attitudes can be particularly helpful, given that the AAETAS has been previously administered more to pre-service and in-service teachers than to building leaders. This study can offer school corporations an honest assessment of principals' attitudes toward AAVE, and thus indicate what may be needed to improve principals' training and leadership skills. Professional practices can be enhanced through professional development workshops focusing on AAVE. The AAETAS can be used as an instrument to assist school districts, to further reinforce the need for respect for dialects by principals and teachers.

Building principals who become aware of their expectations and perceptions of AAVE may be able to assist their faculty with strategies on how to develop a school climate that cultivates dialectic awareness and the bridge approach to teaching students Standard American English. A principal, who shows respect for AAVE and its speakers, can gain the confidence to share methods on dialect code-switching in school, business, and casual environments. As the building leader, the principal should assume "the role of the artist...if I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see" (Baldwin, 1962, p. 156).

References

- Aaron, R. P. & Powell, G. (1982). Feedback practices as a function of teacher and pupil race during reading group instruction. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 51 (1), 50-59.
- Abdul-Hakim, I. (2002). Florida preservice teachers' attitudes toward African-American Vernacular English. (Doctoral dissertation, The Florida State University, 2002), *Dissertation Abstracts International* 64(118).
- Ainsworth-Darnell, K., Downey, D., & Fischer, E.J. (2005). Black student achievement and the oppositional culture model. *The Journal of Negro Education* 74(3), 201-209.
- Baldwin, J., & Standley, F.L. (1962). *Conversations with James Baldwin*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press.
- Baldwin, J. (1979). If Black English isn't a language, then tell me what is? *New York Times*, July 29. (50) New York, NY,
- Ball, A. & Lardner, T. (Dec. 1997). Dispositions toward language: Teacher constructs of knowledge and the Ann Arbor Black English Case. *College Composition and Communication* Vol. 48, 4, 469-485.
- Blake, R., & Cutler, C. (2000). AAE and variation in teachers' attitudes: A question of philosophy? *Linguistics and Education*, 14, 163-194.
- Blase, J. (1999). Principals' instructional leadership and teacher development: Teachers' perspectives. *Administration Quarterly*, 35, 349-378.
- Craig, H.K., & Washington, J.A. (2002). Oral language expectations for African American preschoolers and kindergartners. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 11, 59-70.
- Dandy, E. B. (1991). *Black communications: breaking down the barriers*. Chicago, IL: African American Images.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Delpit, L. (1998). What should teachers do? Ebonics and culturally responsive instruction. In T. Perry & L. Delpit (Eds.), *The real ebonics debate: Power language, and the education of African American children* (pp. 17-26). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Delpit, L., & Dowdy, K. (2002). *The skin that we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Ferguson, R.F. (1998). Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the black-white test score gap. In C. Jencks, & M. Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White test score gap* (pp. 273-317). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Fogel, H.E. (2006). Teaching African American English forms to standard American English-speaking teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(5), 464-480.
- Hoover, M.R. (1978). Community attitudes towards Black English. *Language in Society*, 7, 65-87.

- Hoover, M.R., McNair-Knox, F., Lewis, S.A.R., & Politzer, R.L. (1997). African American English Attitude measures for teachers. In R. L. Jones (Ed.), *Handbook of test and measurements for Black populations* (383-393). Hampton, VA: Cobb and Henry Publishers.
- Hoy, W.K. & Miskel C.G. (2008). *Educational administration: Theory, research and practice* (8th ed.) McGraw Hill, New York.
- Irvine, J.J. (1990). *Black students and school failure: Politics, practices, and prescriptions*. New York: Greenwood.
- Isenbarger, L. W., & Ingram, A. (2006). An intersection of theory and practice: Accepting the language a child brings into the classroom. *Language Arts*, 84 (2), 125-135.
- Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (Eds.). (1998). *The Black-White test score gap: An introduction*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Jonsberg, S. D. (2001). What's a (White) teacher to do about Black English? *The English Journal*, 90, 51-53.
- Masland, R. L., Sarason, S. B., & Gladwin, T. (1978). *Mental subnormality*. New York: Basic Books.
- McWhorter, J. (1997). Wasting energy on an illusion: six months later. *The Black Scholar*, 27 (2), 2-5.
- Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Myers-Scotton, C., & Ury, W. (1977). "Bilingual Strategies: The Social Functions of Code-switching." *Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 13, 5-20.
- Oates, G. (2003). Teacher-student racial congruence, teacher perceptions, and test performance. *Social Science Quarterly*, 84(3), 508-525.
- Redd, T., & Webb, K.S. (2005). *A teacher's introduction to African American English: What a writing teacher should know*. Urban, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Reeves, D. (2006). *Leading to change: How do you change school culture*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 64, 94.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (1991). *The principalship: A reflective practice perspective*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (1992). *Moral leadership: Getting the most out of school leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (1998). *Supervision: A redefinition*. Alexandria, VA: McGraw-Hill.
- Steele, C. (1992). Race and the schooling of African-American Americans. *The Atlantic Monthly*, April, 68-78.
- Steele, C. (1999). Thin Ice: Stereotype threat and Black college students. *The Atlantic Monthly*, August, 284(2), 44-47, 50-54.
- Steele, C. (2004). Stereotype threat. Retrieved From <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/offices/comm/csj/092404/steele.shtml>