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Abstract
This action research study examined the effects of African American English on writing in school and how it attributes to students’ attitudes toward writing. Research was conducted in two fourth grade classrooms during writing instruction. The data was collected through teacher and student questionnaires, observations, and student writing samples. The findings showed that teachers were not explicitly teaching students how to dialect shift between African American English and Standard English; however teachers were sensitive to their students’ needs based on their language variations. In order to ensure that writing instruction is culturally relevant for all students, it is important to use knowledge of students’ language variations while planning instruction.

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African American English and Writing Instruction

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M.S. Literacy Education

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Abstract

This action research study examined the effects of African American English on writing in school and how it attributes to students’ attitudes toward writing. Research was conducted in two fourth grade classrooms during writing instruction. The data was collected through teacher and student questionnaires, observations, and student writing samples. The findings showed that teachers were not explicitly teaching students how to dialect shift between African American English and Standard English; however teachers were sensitive to their students’ needs based on their language variations. In order to ensure that writing instruction is culturally relevant for all students, it is important to use knowledge of students’ language variations while planning instruction.
African American English and Writing Instruction

Code switching is the ability to use two or more language forms, either intrasentential, code switch within a sentence, or intersentential, code switch between sentences (Pagett, 2006; Becker, 2001). When a person is bilingual or multilingual there are many opportunities where they may want or need to code switch. Code Switching is used when a person cannot find a concrete word that is appropriate in a context within one language, when the translation of meaning in one language is lengthier, and to clarify meaning (Martinez, 2010). Some teachers have negative attitudes toward code switching or dialect variation and students’ use of variations in language because they feel that not using Standard English displays a lack of knowledge (Blake & Cutler, 2003). With America being a diverse nation with many different races, it is inevitable that some people will be able to speak multiple languages. Code switching is one way to make the process of communication and understanding, of a task, easier for those people that have a native language other than English (Martinez, 2010; Palmer, 2009). The skill of code switching can help to enhance understanding about a language (Hill, 2009) and can be of great use for someone whose primary language is not English (Martinez, 2010).

It is necessary for teachers to examine code switching as a “tool for cognitive development” rather than “cognitive confusion” (Reyes, 2004). For students who speak another language form at home, constantly using Standard English within speaking and writing can be a very difficult task. Teachers’ pedagogical decisions should include explicitly teaching students how to switch from their home language to Standard English, while respecting students’ culture and identities (Hill, 2009). When students use their primary language, if it is not Standard English, within speaking and writing, they are often faced with ridicule and negative feedback from their teacher (Wheeler, 2006). Students who are taught to code switch from their primary
language to Standard English, and learn the appropriate times for the different languages will be able to use that skill when they are speaking and writing. Hill (2009) explains how code switching is a skill that can be used by African American students in order to keep their own cultural beliefs or have their own voice, and also learn Standard English. Teachers can allow for students to write using their own voice during informal writing times, such as writing poetry or informal letters and also teach them the necessary skills to write during formal times such as state tests or any other standardized test. When students are able to depict formal and informal writing times, they will know whether or not it is appropriate to use their own voice or write using Standard English (Hill, 2009). Since literacy is constructed through meaning (Larson & Marsh, 2005) then code switching should be viewed as a necessary tool or skill for African American students to become proficient with Standard English. Based on Larson & Marsh’s (2005) definition of literacy, literacy practices must be culturally relevant to students in order for them to find the skills useful and meaningful. By using writing instruction to teach African American students to code switch between the two forms of English, the instruction is relevant to their culture and also benefits their performance within writing. Explicitly learning how to code switch can allow for students to excel within their literacy skills.

Focusing solely on African American students’ writing and their use of African American Vernacular English this research will examine how writing instruction is used to facilitate code switching. Exploring African American students’ writing instruction and writing pieces will give insight to their knowledge of Standard English and African American Vernacular English. Understanding teachers’ reactions to the different language forms in their classroom and their knowledge of code switching will help to understand their styles for writing instruction and the skills that they teach. If code switching is not a skill that is explicitly taught, this research will
examine then how the teacher addresses the issue of writing using African American Vernacular English during formal writing times.

The research question, “How is writing instruction used to facilitate dialect shifting for African American students and attribute to their attitudes toward writing?” was used to determine the effects of African American English on African American students’ writing achievement and attitudes toward writing. Since African American English is an acquired dialect, the action research study is supported by the sociocultural theory and sociolinguistic theory. Previous research has been completed on the topic of African American English and literacy skills, and most studies found a negative relationship between African American English and literacy skills. However, some studies found that the literacy skills of African American students increase as they move forward in school because of more exposure to Standard English while attending school. Through data collection and analysis, this action research study found that dialect shifting is not explicitly taught to students, reading achievement is related to writing achievement, and writing achievement affects students’ attitudes toward writing. These findings imply that teachers need to pay close attention to their students’ dialect variations and use that knowledge to plan and drive instruction.

**Theoretical Framework**

Larson & Marsh (2005) define the sociocultural theory as a practice in which children are active members of their community. The sociocultural theory is based around the idea of acquiring and learning knowledge through social interactions. Students’ language use is acquired through their social interactions, which takes place before they enter school. Therefore, not all students enter school speaking Standard English. Since acquisition is an unconscious
process that takes place through meaningful social interactions (Gee, 2001), it is important that the practices of the sociocultural theory are intertwined with literacy instruction. Teachers must take into consideration that not all students come to school speaking Standard English and provide those students’ with meaningful interactions that support code switching or dialect shifting from students’ home language to Standard English.

Like the sociocultural theory, the sociolinguistic theory is based on social practices as well. The sociolinguistic theory is defined by language being acquired through social interactions in our primary discourse (Gee, 2001 & Larson & Marsh, 2005). The language variations that children obtain are gained from their primary discourse, or ‘home’ life. Students’ who speak another language or dialect, other than Standard English, have acquired their language through their primary discourse, which was acquired well before school entry. Taking the sociolinguistic theory into consideration when planning literacy instruction will benefit all students with language variations.

Literacy is an event or act that involves social interactions, oral language, or written language. Gee (2001) defines literacy as being able to control the different uses of language in our secondary discourse, which build off of our uses of language that are acquired in our primary discourse. Primary discourse is language that is developed and used, unconsciously, within family, community, and cultural settings. Whereas secondary discourse is using language that is learned and acquired in situations such as school, the work place, business, and other professional settings. Upon entering school in kindergarten, children will come from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, which will cause them to have varying primary discourses as well. Within the school setting students will have to form a secondary discourse to fit in with the discourse of a school setting. In regards to African American students who use African
American English, it is important to take their primary discourse into consideration while planning lessons focused on literacy skills. African American students’ need to be given knowledge and skills to work with while acquiring a secondary discourse, such as that of a school setting, in order to correctly use their language based on their setting. Gee’s (2001) definition of literacy is strongly supported by the sociocultural and sociolinguist theories.

Larson and Marsh (2005) define literacy as a social practice. Literacy is ongoing and constructed through every day practices. The literacy practices are not to teach a specific set of skills, but to provide children with authentic opportunities to utilize and expand their knowledge (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Larson & Marsh (2005) believe that literacy can be taught in many different forms depending on the ability, culture, and needs of the students. Teachers must provide opportunities for students that fit their individual cultural needs in order to ensure that all students’ needs are being met. African American students’ culture may not always be viewed and shared within the school setting, which implies a need for teachers to allow students to use their home language while teaching them Standard English. Providing African American students with authentic opportunities to use their primary language and also dialect shift to Standard English will allow them to value their culture as well as appropriately use Standard English in the correct settings. Larson & Marsh’s (2005) definition of literacy is strongly supported by the sociocultural theory in that literacy is learned primarily through social interactions.

Acquisition is the unconscious process of gaining skills through engaging in valued social interactions (Gee, 2001). Children acquire language and literacy through social interactions within their home, community, and school. Before children enter school, they have already acquired a significant amount of language skills through social interactions that have taken place.
with other children and adults. The skills that children have acquired before entering school vary depending on race and socioeconomic status. When teaching literacy skills to African American students it is important for teachers to take into consideration that, “There are many different varieties of English. Some of these are different dialects spoken in different regions of the country or by different sociocultural groups” (Gee, 2004 p. 16). Children that grow up in a household with African Americans will have acquired the African American Vernacular English language pattern. Those who grow up in a white middle class household will have most likely acquired the Standard English language pattern, which puts them at a higher advantage in school, since that is the valued language in a school setting. This phenomenon highlights the importance of explicitly teaching African American students the skills to dialect shift from their home language to Standard English.

African American students usually acquire the African American Vernacular English and may be at a disadvantage when it comes to writing in school. If students are writing using their primary discourse, it is hard for them to succeed during formal writing times because it is not easy for them to write in a language that is essentially foreign. Teachers that just mark African American students’ writing incorrect or fill the paper with marks and corrections with no explanation, are devaluing those students’ culture and primary discourse. If teachers use writing instruction to demonstrate how to code switch from African American Vernacular English to Standard English, students will be able to use that skill independently during formal writing times and also within formal conversations they may take part in. Also, code switching would help students look into the grammatical patterns of both languages and essentially participate in a grammar lesson at the same time.
Using Gee’s (2001) definition of literacy, that it is the ability to control our language within primary and secondary discourses, it is evident that there is a need for instruction on code switching. Code switching is not necessarily an acquired skill, but must be explicitly taught to students to fully understand the procedure. If African American students are not receiving instruction on how to write using Standard English, they will not be able to excel within their writing. Students that are explicitly taught the skill of code switching will be able to control their language use within their writing.

**Research Question**

Through the knowledge of the acquisition of literacy skills, it is evident that African American students enter school with a primary discourse that does not match the discourse of an academic setting. Given that literacy is a social practice (Larson & Marsh, 2005) and is also the skill that controls our language in our primary and secondary discourses (Gee, 2001), this action research project asks, how is writing instruction used to facilitate dialect shifting for African American students and attribute to their attitudes toward writing?

**Literature Review**

The ensuing literature review looks into the effects of code switching on bilingual and African American students’ academic career and in particular cases, students’ literacy skills. I will discuss code switching for bilingual students. After, I will discuss research focused on code switching, or dialect shifting, for African American students. Further, I will focus on code switching or dialect shifting for African American students and the impact on African American students’ literacy achievement. Lastly, I will discuss what research shows about teachers’ attitudes toward code switching or dialect shifting and the implications it may have for African
American students’ academic achievement. Along with teachers’ attitudes, the research also discussed the ways that teachers can explicitly teach on the topic of code switching or dialect shifting.

**Code Switching for Bilingual Students**

Bilingual students’ primary discourse does not tend to match the discourse of schools in America. Research completed in a two-way immersion classroom identified lessons for Spanish speaking only, instructed by a fluent Spanish speaker, or lessons for English speaking, which was instructed by a fluent English speaker (Palmer, 2009). Within the classroom there was a motivational system in place to encourage students not to code switch, which was based on students’ reporting of other students speaking in the wrong language at a specific time and the offenders had to have a letter erased off of their name on the board in front of the classroom. The researcher observed students struggle for words or meaning when they were unable to comprehend in the language being spoken at the time, which often silenced the students during lessons. Also, students spoke in their native language with their peers and in social areas such as the cafeteria, which displays their need for cultural relevance in school. It was found that students’ used the motivational system to show linguistic power or capitol over one another, rather than the motivational system working to manage students’ language production. Other studies have been done to display the creative linguistic use and control that bilingual students carry (Martinez, 2010; Reyes, 2004; Becker, 2001). A study of 60 Mexican American students, age six to 11, was conducted using an oral narrative and a writing piece to find the amount of code switching that was taking place within these literary tasks (Becker, 2001). Becker (2001) discovered that students’ use of code switching within these literary tasks took place to create colorful dialogue, colorful language, plot development, story structure, and fluency. The
students in this study used code switching as a strategy to access deeper meaning across languages. The research suggests that teachers should consider code switching uses in their classroom to enhance bilingual students’ reading development and verbal skills. These findings display code switching as an academic tool for bilingual students’ success in literacy.

Code switching is used to clarify meaning, express nuances, and use the appropriate language features for a certain social context (Martinez, 2010; Pagett 2006; Reyes, 2004; Becker, 2001). Martinez (2010) conducted research in a sixth grade ELA classroom consisting of 29 bilingual students who had a wide range of English Proficiency. The study consisted of classroom observations, interviews with the teacher and students, and video and audio recordings. The findings of this study displayed the students’ uses for code switching was for the function of clarifying meaning, quoting or report speech, joke or tease, intimacy, shifting voice for different audiences, and to communicate nuances of meaning. Similarly, Reyes’ (2004) study of Spanish students’ conversations in a social, but cognitive context examined when students’ code switched and for what task they code switched. Students were to take place in a science activity with a friend of their choosing at lunchtime with no observers or teachers present in the room. The findings were closely related to age, meaning that younger students tended to code switch less than the older students. However, in both age groups, code switching appears to take place in order for students to comprehend or clarify the meaning of the cognitive task and to discuss topics unrelated to the science task. The findings from both studies suggest that students have awareness and control over their linguistic uses and are able to strategically use code switching in a beneficial manner (Martinez, 2010; Reyes, 2004).

Research has also displayed the social awareness of bilingual students and their language choices. Bilingual students recognize English as the dominant culture and are code switching
appropriately to match particular social settings and encounters (Martinez, 2010; Pagett, 2006; Reyes, 2004). Martinez’s (2010) study conducted in a sixth grade classroom displayed students’ linguistic awareness. Throughout the study code switching could be heard all over the classroom between peers and teachers, but students recognized appropriate times for a specific language, Spanish or English, to be used. For example, throughout the interviews and class discussions students mainly used English, but when speaking with their peers they mainly used Spanish across contexts. Similarly, Pagett (2006) studied two schools in Britain where children were fluent in two languages, which were varying home languages and English. However, English was the primary language used in the school setting and instruction was given in English. Through observations and interviews it became clear that students were embarrassed to use their home language at school with teachers and peers because it differed from other students’ native languages. Even when siblings were at school together and shared the same home language, they would speak to one another in English so avoid being over heard by peers and classmates. The students expressed, during interviews, that it is uncomfortable to use their home language at school because they do not want to seem different or be excluded based on their linguistic usage. The findings of all three studies indicate that students are aware of their linguistic use and are able to manipulate their speech to match social settings (Martinez, 2010; Pagett, 2006; Reyes, 2004).

**Code Switching for African American Students**

Most African American students enter school speaking African American English, which differs in grammatical and dialect features from Standard English. African American students tend to code switch from African American English to Standard English based on situational contexts (Brown, 2011; Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004). Thompson, Craig, &
Washington (2004) completed a study of 50 African American third grade students. Their study examined the amount of African American English that was produced throughout literacy contexts such as picture descriptions, oral reading, and writing tasks. The data from the study displayed the amount of African American English used decreased significantly throughout literacy contexts, which means as the tasks seemed more related to academics the students would use less African American English features as they were trying to dialect shift to Standard English. These findings suggest that African American students are aware of their dialect use and consciously make an effort to switch to Standard English within literacy tasks. In comparison to these findings, Brown (2011) examined the use of dialect and register of 12 African American students attending a charter school for students who had been in a juvenile detention center. Students were interviewed to identify their metalinguistic awareness and completed writing samples to be analyzed. The findings of the study indicated that students were able to register the appropriate dialect to be used in a specific context such as formal, informal, academic, spoken, or written and use that register to produce appropriate linguistic features for that context. Both studies suggest that African American students are aware of their linguistic use and are knowledgeable of Standard English (Brown, 2011; Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004). In relation to the metalinguistic knowledge students’ obtain, one study found that the socioeconomic status of the school had a major role in metalinguistic awareness of students. Terry et. al. (2010) studied African American and White students who spoke using nonmainstream American English and the amount of dialect variation that was seen across school and literacy contexts. Students attending schools with a higher percentage of students receiving Free and Reduced Lunch displayed a lower amount of dialect variation than those schools with a less percentage of students receiving Free and Reduced Lunch. This finding
suggests that students with lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are less aware of their language use and this may be due to their educational environment.

African American students are able to code switch, or dialect shift, at a very young age and their ability to do so increases with their age and grade level (Ivy & Masterson, 2011; Connor & Craig, 2006; Craig & Washington, 2004). Connor & Craig (2006) conducted a study of 63 African American preschool students, attending two different school districts. The preschool students took part in an oral narrative and sentence imitation as researchers examined their use of African American English and Standard English. The students were able to dialect shift at a higher rate within the sentence imitation, and showed little dialect shifting within the oral narrative. The results between the oral narrative and sentence imitation portrays African American preschoolers were able to dialect shift to Standard English when they felt the task was formal, such as the sentence imitation, whereas, the wordless storybook appeared to be more informal, or not school related. In addition to preschoolers’ ability to code switch, other studies have been completed to demonstrate the amount of code switching or dialect shifting that students’ produce throughout the elementary years (Ivy & Masterson, 2011; Craig & Washington, 2004). Craig & Washington (2004) completed a study of 400 African American students in preschool through third grade. Student language samples were obtained and examined for the amount of African American English features that were produced throughout and oral description of three colored pictures. Preschool and kindergarten students produced many African American English features and demonstrated little dialect variation compared to the students in first through third grade. First graders demonstrated the sharpest change in their ability to dialect shift from preschool and kindergarten, and as grade levels increased so did students’ ability to dialect shift. The findings of the study suggest that African American
students’ exposure to Standard English is the reason for the increase in ability to dialect shift. Ivy & Masterson (2011) displayed similar findings in their study of 30 African American students in third and eighth grade. The students’ speech and writing were studied to compare the use of African American English use with grade level. Students in third and eighth grade produced about the same amount of African American English features within their oral speech, but third graders used the same amount of African American English features within their oral speech and writing, whereas, eighth grade students produced less African American Features within their writing than they did within their oral speech. The data suggest that as students grow older they learn more morphosyntactic skills that allow dialect shifting to become more natural. The findings of these studies indicate that students acquire the ability to code switch or dialect shift and their skills continue to increase as they develop throughout their school career (Ivy & Masterson, 2011; Craig & Washington, 2004).

**Implications for African American Students’ Literacy Skills**

Much of the research on code switching and dialect shifting discussed the impact of African American English on literacy achievement for African American students. Terry (2012) conducted a study of 33 preschool students who were four to five years old. The students were varying in ethnicities of African American, Asian American, White, and mixed racial background. The students took part in an alphabet knowledge assessment, name writing, print concepts, and phonological awareness assessments to assess emergent literacy skills. The study found that no matter the dialect the students’ obtained, the students’ possessing Nonmainstream American English dialects have weaker emergent literacy skills than those students who do produce the Standard English dialect. The data also suggests that students who have more sophisticated metalinguistic awareness will have more success with literacy skills, as they will be
able to dialect shift unconsciously within recognized settings. Likewise, Terry et. al. (2010) found that the more Nonmainstream American English that students’ spoke the weaker their literacy skills, and specifically phonological awareness. The study conducted examined 670 students from 70 classrooms within a school district to determine the effects of dialect variation on literacy skills. To compare dialect variations and literacy achievement, 48% of the students were African American and 52% of the students were white. The data proposed that the students who spoke Nonmainstream American English and displayed higher literacy skills contained higher metalinguistic awareness than their peers with lower literacy achievement. These studies (Terry, 2012; Terry et. al., 2010) were aimed at literacy as a whole, whereas many other studies have been completed on reading and writing alone.

Studies that targeted reading achievement for African American students tended to study the primary and intermediate levels of schooling. The research displays the negative effects that dialect variation can have on African American students’ reading achievement (Craig et. al., 2009; Craig & Washington, 2004; Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004; Craig, Connor, & Washington, 2003). Craig, Connor, & Washington (2003) studied 50 African American students, who produced African American English, in preschool and kindergarten. Students were also assessed on the same terms again when they reached second and third grade in order to find early predictors of reading comprehension and examine the change in African American English use during literacy tasks. The students completed an expressive language sample and an assessment of nonverbal cognition. The findings of the study suggest that students who attended preschool had higher levels of literacy achievement, in second and third grade, than those African American students that did not attend preschool. The findings proposed that the fact that students who attended preschool were able to have earlier exposure to Standard English, allowed
them to acquire Standard English at a quicker rate. Emergent literacy skills display the ability to control students’ literacy achievement throughout their school career. Similarly, Craig & Washington (2004) studied African American students in preschool through third grade to determine the changes in production of African American English features. The results found that students’ literacy skills were increasing through grade levels and related the increase to African American students’ obtaining more exposure to Standard English through schooling. Since students’ exposure to Standard English increases their literacy achievement in school, students’ literacy achievement should increase each year they attend school. In relation to reading achievement, Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin (2004) conducted a study of African American students in kindergarten to second grade who participated in a word attack assessment, word identification assessment, passage comprehension, sentence imitation, and story recall. The study found that in kindergarten and first grade there was a significant relation between African American English use and reading achievement, but in second grade the correlation dropped, which implies that reading achievement is highly correlated with African American students’ familiarity with Standard English. Craig et. al. (2009) found similar results when studying African American students first through fifth grade. The study showed a decrease in reading scores as the production of African American English increased. The findings of the study suggest that students who are capable of dialect shifting within their writing obtain higher reading outcomes. Exposure to Standard English and dialect shifting has been shown to go hand in hand. The previous studies all display the negative effects that African American English may have on African American students’ reading achievement (Craig et. al., 2009; Craig & Washington, 2004; Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004; Craig, Connor, & Washington, 2003).
Many studies of the studies were on the topic of African American English and writing skills for African American Students. There were varying results of the affects that African American English had on writing achievement. Some studies suggested that African American English does not play a major role in writing skills for African American students (Apel & Tate, 2009; Terry & Connor, 2006; Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004). Terry & Connor (2006) studied African American students who spoke African American English and were typically achieving readers or struggling readers. Students participated in oral vocabulary, word reading, and a spelling assessment to determine the effect of dialect use in writing. The study found that word reading and vocabulary skills were directly related to spelling achievement. The researchers suggest this finding displays that African American English has a greater effect on other literacy skills than it does on writing skills. Apel & Tate (2009) also found that the amount of African American English spoken by a student did not impact their writing skills. The study examined 30 African American fourth grade students’ morphological awareness skills and students were placed in groups of high and low use of African American English. The findings implied that there was no difference for morphological awareness between the low and high African American English production groups. The study also found that morphological awareness is highly related to word-level reading, spelling, and vocabulary knowledge, but does not significantly impact the discrepancies of spelling. Like Terry & Connor (2006), Apel & Tate (2009) also suggest that African American English does not significantly affect writing skills. Thompson, Craig, & Washington’s (2004) study of 50 African American third graders also found that students’ use of African American English features within their writing was significantly lower than their use of African American English features within their oral language and reading. However, this study suggests that the students’ decrease in African
American English within their writing is due to the fact that African American English does not contain conventional written forms like Standard American English. These studies all share similar findings of African American students’ use of African American English within their writing (Apel & Tate, 2009; Terry & Connor, 2006; Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004).

Other studies that focused on African American students’ writing found that students struggled with specific parts of words. Phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, and inflected endings were considered to play a major role in African American students’ writing skills (Pearson et. al., 2009; Kohler et. al., 2007; Terry, 2006). Terry (2006) studied 92 students in first through third grade who spoke African American English dialect or Standard English dialect. The students took part in spelling inflected endings and other dialect sensitive patterns, morphological assessments, and word reading. The data displayed that students who spoke African American English had lower overall literacy skills than their Standard English speaking peers, but both groups relied on grammar knowledge to spell words. The findings also show African American students’ difficulty with spelling is heavily related to inflected endings, especially when followed by a vowel sound and linguistic mismatches between African American English and written form. Similar to this study, Pearson et. al. (2009) studied the phonological patterns of students ages four through 12 who spoke African American English or Mainstream American English. The researchers made students identify consonant segments and clusters of Mainstream American English in the initial position and final position of spoken words. This study found that all students, no matter their dialect, acquired the initial position of words equally, but students who spoke African American English acquired the final position of words much later than students who spoke Mainstream American English. These findings relate to Terry’s (2006) findings that African American students who spoke African American English
have a hard time spelling inflected endings, which could be because they have difficulty orally producing the final position of words. Kohler et. al. (2007) also studied writing patterns of 80 African American students who spoke African American English. Students participated in a written narrative of two wordless videos and a non-word spelling assessment. The results of the study show that students used more African American English features within the non-word spelling than they did within the written narratives. Kohler et. al. (2007) explained that “spelling integrates phonological and orthographic knowledge with morphological knowledge, allowing a comprehensive picture to emerge of children’s metalinguistic orientation to the encoding of word meaning” (pg. 166), which is the reason for African American students’ lack of success with the non-word spelling assessment. The non-word spelling task was more sensitive to dialect than the phonemic awareness. These studies found areas of weakness in writing for African American English speaking students (Pearson et. al., 2009; Kohler et. al., 2007; Terry, 2006), which go against the previously discussed studies that African American English does not play a major role in writing skills (Apel & Tate, 2009; Terry & Connor, 2006; Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004).

**Instruction and Teachers’ Attitudes toward African American English**

Along with African American English and code switching in the classroom, teachers’ attitudes toward African American students also plays a major role in their academic success (Howard, 2001; Blake & Cutler, 2003). Howard (2001) interviewed and observed the teaching practices of four African American teachers who were known to effectively teach African American students. All teachers in the study understood that there was a cultural mismatch between African American students’ home life and the culture of an academic setting and taught students’ valuable skills that would help them cope with cultural mismatch. The teachers in the
study felt it was their obligation to teach their African American students about academics as well as real life in society and how they need to change their discourse for certain social situations. The study found that all teachers were using practices that were culturally responsive and not only were students succeeding academically, but were also able to succeed in society. Similarly to this study, Blake & Cutler (2003) also conducted a study on teachers’ attitudes toward teaching students who produce African American English. The study consisted of 88 teachers, ranging in age, gender, ethnicity, and time teaching, who were teachers at five schools in New York City. The findings of the study displayed teachers with more African American students in their class have a more negative attitude toward African American English than those teachers who have few or no African American students, and the two schools with language programs had a more positive attitude toward African American English. This relationship could be related to the inadequate teaching practices of those teachers and their African American students’ lack of academic success. Also, the schools that valued culture and dialect mentioned their beliefs within their school philosophy. Both studies displayed the varying attitudes that teachers obtained on the subject of teaching African American students and effects the teachers have on African American students’ language use and academic success (Howard, 2001; Blake & Cutler, 2003).

Instruction of African American English and Standard English within the classroom should be explicitly taught to students in order to provide them with tools for success in literacy and other academic contexts (Hill, 2009; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Wheeler, 2006). Hill (2009) observed a classroom of 29 students with varying ethnicities and the students’ use of African American Vernacular English within the classroom. The classroom teacher was aware of his students’ varying dialects and made it a part of his teaching pedagogy to meet the linguistic
needs of his students. The classroom teacher explicitly taught students the times for speaking and writing in their home language and the times for students to code switch to Standard English during formal situations. The study displayed the importance of explicitly teaching students about their language use and how the knowledge helps them to succeed on formal tasks and in formal situations outside of school. This study also displayed the importance of allowing students to feel proud of their language and voice. Two female students, who were chosen to be interviewed for the study, discussed pieces they had written, using their home voice, and were aware that the writing piece would not have been as meaningful if it were written in Standard English. The students were aware of the appropriate times to speak or write using their home language, but were also highly capable of speaking and writing in Standard English when necessary. Wheeler (2006) had been part of a professional development team to improve writing instruction for African American students. A teacher who attended the professional development implemented the strategies learned into her writing instruction where the researcher observed her practices. Wheeler (2006) conducted a similar study to Hill (2009) in a second and third grade classroom where she observed the teachers’ practices for teaching code switching. The data found that as the classroom teacher began to explicitly teach formal and informal writing and when it is appropriate to use Standard English or African American English, students understood the topic and were instantly able to apply the learning to their existing knowledge. The researcher described the students’ reactions to the writing lessons and all students were able to understand the concepts of language and dialect variation in the primary years. Like Hill (2009), Wheeler (2006) also discussed the seriousness of silencing students with negative comments about their language use. Like Wheeler (2006), Godley & Minnici (2008) conducted a study that involved explicitly teaching linguistic awareness. The researchers instructed, observed, and
interviewed 31 students in tenth grade using the Critical Language pedagogy in order to teach students about their African American English language use compared to Standard English. Students were explicitly taught how to critically examine and discuss their language use, settings, and linguistic value. The findings of the study displayed that with use of explicit language instruction students were more understanding of their language use and more susceptible to code switch based on social context. Instead of students reacting negatively to code switching, like they had previous to the instruction, students were able to identify appropriate times for different language uses and were more accepting when teachers asked them to switch their language use at a specific time. Also, students were able feel comfortable and proud of their language understanding that one language is not the dominant language. These three studies provide clear insight to the importance of instruction of linguistic practices and dialects (Hill, 2009; Wheeler, 2006; Godley & Minnici, 2008).

The literature review has given insight into the idea of code switching and what it means for students and their literacy achievement. Through reviewing the literature and synthesizing the findings in each study, the literature review has brought light to the discussion and implications of code switching or dialect shifting. Examining code switching from the view of bilingual students or dialect shifting from the view of African American students, it is evident that this technique does not hinder their educational experiences but rather enhances their educational experiences. Also, looking into the effects that African American English has on African American students’ literacy skills, there is a clear need to explicitly instruct students how and when to dialect shift. Lastly, examining the effects that teachers’ attitudes and pedagogy may have on African American students’ academic success has clearly demonstrated the positive
and negative impacts teacher can create. Overall, the literature review has brought light to the full effects and purposes for code switching or dialect shifting.

Method

Context

The school where I completed my research was Westside Community School (pseudonym), which is located in Western New York. Westside Community School contains kindergarten through eighth grade. The racial make up of the students attending Westside Community School includes 88% Black or African American, 7% Hispanic or Latino, and 4% White. According to the 2009-2010 school report card, 79% of the students are eligible for free lunch and 6% of the students are eligible for reduced-price lunch. Westside Community School is located in a middle to higher-class neighborhood, but students do not predominately live in the neighborhood surrounding the school.

Participants

The research includes three teacher participants and five student participants. All participants’ names are pseudonyms. Two teacher participants, Ms. Red and Mr. James, co-teach for reading and writing instruction. The other teacher participant, Mrs. Honey, does not co-teach. Students switch between three different fourth grade classrooms for reading and writing.

Mrs. Honey, a fourth grade teacher, has been teaching at Westside Community School for five years and has been teaching for 13 years. She has been teaching fourth grade for three years. Mrs. Honey’s interests outside of school are playing soccer, running, and her children.
Jamie is a female African American student in Mrs. Honey’s classroom for reading and writing. She is nine years and nine months old. She enjoys going to the recreation center and watching television. Jamie comes from a lower middle class family. She is reading at a Fountas & Pinnell level O, which is an ending third grade level. Mrs. Honey says that Jamie has good structure and ideas within her writing, but lacks voice, mechanics, and syntax.

Zendaya is a female African American student in Mrs. Honey’s class for reading and writing. She is ten years and two months old. Zendaya comes from a family that is below poverty line. She enjoys reading and writing. Zendaya also loves to sing and dance. Zendaya is reading at a Fountas and Pinnell level V, which is a high fifth grade level. She is above grade level for writing as well, at a high 5th grade level. Mrs. Honey noted that Zendaya has a great use of voice and strong vocabulary within her writing.

Jack is a male African American student in Mrs. Honey’s classroom for reading and writing. He is nine years and nine months old. Jack comes from a family classified as the working poor. He enjoys playing football and basketball. Most of all Jack enjoys playing his Xbox 360. Jack is reading at a Fountas and Pinnell level P, which is an ending third grade level. Mrs. Honey noted that Jack struggles to form solid sentences and paragraphs. She also noted that he lacks structure within his writing.

Ms. Red is also a fourth grade teacher. She has an undergraduate degree in Communications and Media Management and a Graduate Degree in General and Special Education grades one through six. Ms. Red has been teaching for three years and has been at Westside Community School for three years. This school year is her first year teaching in fourth
grade. Outside of school Ms. Red enjoys spending time with her son, reading and being outdoors.

Mr. James, a fourth grade teacher that co-teaches with Ms. Red, has been teaching for five years. He majored in History and has a minor in Education. He is certified to teach first through sixth grade General and Special Education as well as seventh through ninth grade General and Special Education. This year is Mr. James’ first year at Westside Community School and his first year teaching fourth grade. Outside of teaching, Mr. James enjoys playing soccer and spending time with his wife and daughter.

Suess is a male African American student in Ms. Red and Mr. James’ fourth grade class for reading and writing. He receives reduced-price lunch. Suess is ten years and ten months old. Suess loves to play sports, especially football and basketball, and he enjoys reading. He is reading at a Fountas & Pinnell level N, which is a beginning third grade level. Ms. Red noted that Suess is a proficient writer and able to produce thoughts independently, and produce a decent length story. She said that he often has grammatical errors and struggles with order within his writing.

Junie is a female African American student in Ms. Red and Mr. James’ fourth grade class for reading and writing. She receives reduced-priced lunch. Junie is ten years and two months old. She enjoys spending time with her sister, cheerleading, and playing the violin. June is reading at a Fountas & Pinnell reading level M, which is an ending second grade level. Ms. Red noted that Junie is an emergent writer who is able to develop own ideas about a topic. However, she will often add ideas that do not fit the topic of her writing piece. Ms. Red also said that Junie will independently work on writing assignments, but the work produced is not at grade level.
Researcher Stance

I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher College, where I am studying Literacy Education. I plan to graduate with my Master’s degree in the spring of 2012. In 2010, I graduated from St. John Fisher College with a Bachelor of Science in Childhood Education and a Bachelor of Science in Special Education. Throughout the research I act as a passive observer. Mills (2011) defines a passive observer as someone who is not responsible for the instruction taking place in the classroom and is solely focusing on data collection. Since I have never taught at Westside Community School or interacted with the students, I am a passive observer throughout the research. As a passive observer, the participants may not feel comfortable talking with me one on one, which may have an impact on their responses to the questionnaire. Since there is little time to truly get to know the student participants, as a passive observer my observations are not as insightful as they would be if I knew more about the students.

Method

To complete this research I collected data through teacher and student questionnaires, observed writing instruction, and collected writing samples from student participants. Three students from Mrs. Honey’s classroom and two students from Ms. Red and Mr. James’ classroom, a total of five students, were given questionnaires based on their interests, dislikes, and perceptions towards writing in school. The student questionnaire were aimed toward understanding if students understand their dialect differences in and outside of school, are aware of when they use African American English or Standard English, and how they feel about their writing instruction in the classroom. Statements from the questionnaires also gage whether or not students enjoy writing, are successful with writing in school, or if they face challenges and frustrations toward writing in school. The teacher questionnaires targeted their writing
instructional strategies, perceptions of students’ writing, and acknowledgment of student language variations.

I also observed whole group writing instruction of the two fourth grade classrooms. During the observations I recorded applicable notes for my research. Within the observations I looked for students’ participation and interest in writing instruction, how students and teacher interacted throughout the writing process, and students’ processes while writing independently. Writing instruction was observed a total of two times, in both classrooms, for the purpose of my research.

Along with the questionnaires and observations, two writing samples of the five fourth grade students were also collected. I analyzed the writing samples for the production of African American English features within the pieces. The different African American features that I looked for in students’ writing were the absence of verbal –s, absence of plural –s, absence of possessive –s, absence of –ed, and the absence of copula is and are.

**Quality and Credibility of Research**

Throughout the study I ensured quality and credible research. Mills (2011) defines credibility as taking into account the complexities in a study and dealing with patterns or situations that are difficult to explain. To ensure that this study was credible I used triangulation through student and teacher questionnaires, observing writing instruction, and collecting writing samples. These three methods of data collection assured that I did not miss any complex details or phenomenon.

Transferability is the researcher’s stance that all information and data are context based (Mills, 2011). To include transferability into my research, I explored the school’s racial makeup,
socioeconomic status of the students, and location. Also, background information and student questionnaires allowed me to have detailed descriptions of the students in the context of school. Transferability was also included in the research by completing detailed observations of writing instruction and teacher student interactions during this time.

Mills (2011) defines dependability as the “stability of the data” (p. 104). Through triangulation of observations, questionnaires, and writing samples I ensured that the research contained dependability. The data that I gathered from the student questionnaires was supported by my observations of students’ attitudes and interactions during writing instruction. Also, the writing samples further supported the data I collect through questionnaires and observations. The teacher questionnaires and observations also ensured that the research contained dependability. The information that was gathered through teacher questionnaires was reinforced by observations during writing instruction through the teachers’ attitudes and interactions with students.

Further, this research contained confirmability. Confirmability relies on the objectivity or neutrality of the data that has been collected (Mills, 2011). Through the use of triangulation, the data collection methods validated one another and ensured that there was no bias to the research. Any biases that may have been created during the interviews were offset by observations in the context of school and through student writing samples.

**Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

Before beginning my research I gave all student participants assent forms and parental permission forms, since all student participants were under the age of 18 years old. Students had the ability to decline participation as well as the students’ parents. Teachers were given a consent form for participation in the research. All consent and assent forms were returned,
therefore all the data that I collected may be used in the research. In order to protect the rights of the participants, all students and teachers names are pseudonyms. Also, all marks on artifacts, that identify the participants, were removed.

Data Collection

As previously discussed, I used student and teacher questionnaires, observations, and student writing samples within my research. There was a separate questionnaire for teachers and students. The student questionnaires contained statements about students’ awareness of their dialect differences inside and outside of school, level of interest with writing, and feelings toward writing instruction and critique from their teachers. Teacher questionnaires contained statements about their writing instructional styles, acknowledgement of their students’ dialect differences, and their perceptions toward their students’ African American English use. To complete the questionnaires, participants chose to strongly agree, agree, feel neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement. I also observed whole group writing instruction, two times, in both fourth grade classrooms. While observing I looked for students’ engagement within writing tasks, teacher and student interactions, and student processes while writing independently. I categorized teacher and student interactions by the way teachers’ commented on student writing, students responded to teacher feedback, and level of support the teacher offered through writing. When looking for student engagement, I observed whether students were engaged in the mini lesson, writing independently the whole time, or were distracted in any way. Student processes were observed for how students’ dealt with issues while writing independently, and resources that they used. During the observations I took field notes based on the categories that I targeted. I also collected two writing pieces from the teacher and analyzed them for the production of African American English features. The features that I
looked for within students’ writing were the absence of verbal –s, absence of plural –s, absence of possessive –s, absence of past tense –ed, and the absence of copula *is* and *are*.

**Data Analysis**

After completing questionnaires with teachers and students, observing two times in each classroom, and obtaining two writing samples from each student participant, I began to organize and analyze the data. Each piece of data was looked through three times in order to thoroughly analyze and compare the data.

To begin analyzing the data I turned the questionnaires and writing samples into percentages. Each writing piece was analyzed using a rubric that identified six African American English (AAE) features in order to find a percentage of AAE features within students’ writing. Each statement on the questionnaire was turned into a percentage based on student and teacher responses. The first time going through my observational notes, I coded my observations into different possible themes.

The second time I went through my data I analyzed the writing samples in comparison with the questionnaire results as a whole group. I went through my observational notes again to see if any other patterns appeared and to further compare the observations to students’ writing samples and questionnaire responses.

The last time I went through my data to analyze it, I compared individual student’s data from the questionnaires, writing samples, and observations to see how his/her data compared across all forms. I also compared the individual student’s data to their teachers’ data that was collected from the teacher questionnaires.
**Findings & Discussion**

Through the action research study, there were a few findings that emerged while analyzing the data. By analyzing the data and comparing the different measures of data, there were themes that developed. The themes of the data are the following: writing instruction and facilitation of dialect shifting, reading level and writing achievement, and writing achievement and engagement with writing and writing instruction.

**Writing Instruction and Facilitation of Dialect Shifting**

After analyzing the data, it appeared that teacher participants do not explicitly teach students how to dialect shift from African American English to Standard English. Through observations of writing instruction, the mini lessons focused on the structure of their writing pieces, structure of sentences, or items that they should include in their writing. Table 1 displays statements given within the teacher questionnaire (Teacher Questionnaire, Appendix A) and the percentage of teacher participant responses.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I explicitly teach students how to dialect shift from AAE to SE</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use grammatical features of AAE to demonstrate SE during writing instruction</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am sensitive to the language variation that my African American students bring to the classroom</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I allow times for my students to write using AAE, if it is not a formal writing time</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. AAE = African American English; SE = Standard English

Looking at the Table 1, the statement from the questionnaire, “I explicitly teach students how to dialect shift from AAE to Standard English”, had 66% of teacher participants disagree. Also, through observing writing instruction it was evident that teachers did not explicitly teach any aspects of African American English to students during writing instruction. During the mini-lessons before individual writing time, teachers did not discuss African American English in comparison to Standard English or make reference to grammar in general. Instead, writing instruction was focused on the process and style of writing. One teacher participant in particular,
Ms. Red did agree to the statement, “I explicitly teach students how to dialect shift from AAE to Standard English”, and it was seen through observations that she did explain grammatical structures of Standard English in comparison to the African American features within the writing to several students. However, Ms. Red did not explicitly teach the topic to all students, instead she discussed students’ use of African American English features as she met one on one with students. Also, the statement, “I use grammatical features of AAE to demonstrate Standard English during writing instruction”, had 66% of teacher participants disagree and 33% strongly disagree, which also displays that teacher do not explicitly teach students’ how to dialect shift. Table 2 displays student responses, in percentages, to statements on the student questionnaire (Student Questionnaire, Appendix B).
Table 2

*Percentage of Student Responses to Student Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel that my teacher allows me to keep my voice when I write</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is easy for me to switch from the language I use outside of school to SE</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teacher generally understands my needs in writing and positively supports those needs</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. SE = Standard English

The statement from the questionnaire, “It is easy for me to switch from the language I use outside of school to Standard English”, had 60% agreement from student participants. This finding could indicate that although teachers are not explicitly teaching students how to dialect shift, it is still a process that they understand. This finding goes against Hill’s (2009) findings that explicitly teaching students how to code switch to Standard English helps them to succeed on formal tasks and in formal situations. The student participants in Hill’s (2009) study expressed, through interviews, that the teaching style of their teacher made it easier for them to write and speak in formal situations. The teacher participants in this study do not use grammatical features of African American English to teach their students Standard English, but
the students are aware of the dialect shifting process from African American English to Standard English.

Also from Table 1, 100% of teachers agreed to the statement, “I am sensitive to the language variation that my African American students bring to the classroom.” This piece of data displays that teachers are aware of their students’ language variations and possibly differentiate instruction in order to meet the linguistic needs of students. By comparing Table 1 and 2, it appeared that students felt that their teachers were sensitive to their dialect differences through 20% of student participants strongly agreeing and 80% of student participants agreeing to the statement, “My teacher generally understands my needs in writing and positively supports those needs.” Teachers supporting students’ needs was seen through observations of student and teacher interactions during writing instruction. Teachers never put students down for mistakes in their writing, but instead positively helped them work through the problem. During author’s chair, students of all writing abilities had a chance to share their piece and all teacher participants only gave positive comments to student’s writing in front of the class. The idea that these teachers are sensitive to their students’ dialect differences goes against Blake & Cutler’s (2003) findings that teachers who teach predominantly African American students had more negative attitudes toward those students’ language use than teachers who did not have African American students in their class. One finding that goes alongside Hill (2009), was that 66% of teacher participants agreed to the statement, “I allow times for my students to write using AAE, if it is not a formal writing time”, and 80% of student participants agreed to the statement, “I feel that my teacher allows me to keep my voice when I write.” This finding could mean that most teacher participants’ understand the significance of allowing students to write using their home language and that most student participants’ recognize this characteristic, which could help them
determine formal and informal writing times. Hill (2009) found that allowing students to keep their voice during informal writing times allowed students to better understand the differences between formal and informal writing and the times that they should be writing formally. Overall, it seems that teacher participants do not explicitly teach students how to dialect shift, but they are sensitive to their students’ language variations. This finding could mean that teachers’ sensitivity to students’ language variations may allow for students’ understanding of dialect shifting without explicitly teaching the skill.

**Reading Level and Writing Achievement**

After analyzing the data, there seemed to be a strong connection between reading level and writing level in the sense that students’ who are reading below grade level are also writing below grade level. Through discovering student participants’ reading level and comparing observational notes, student writing samples, and teacher participant responses to the questionnaires, it seems that there is a relationship between reading level and writing achievement. Table 3 displays the statement on the teacher questionnaire, “my African American students struggle with writing”, had 66% of teacher participants strongly agree and 33% agree. This finding shows that teachers are aware of their African American students’ struggles with writing, overall.
Table 3
Percentage of Teacher Responses to Statement on Teacher Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My African American students struggle with writing</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student participants that were reading below grade level were also below grade level with their writing skills. Seuss, Jamie, and Jack are Junie are all reading below grade level. Jamie is writing at an ending third grad level, which is about a full school year behind. When asked to discuss Jamie’s writing stage, Mrs. Honey said, “Jamie has good structure and ideas, but lacks voice, mechanics, and syntax” (Background information, Appendix C). Jack is reading at an ending third grade level, which is about a whole school year behind. When asked to discuss Jack’s writing stage, Mrs. Honey said, “Jack lacks structure, struggle to put a paragraph together, and form a solid sentence” (Background information, Appendix C). Zendaya is reading at a high 5th grade level, which is about a school year above grade level. When asked to discuss Zendaya’s writing stage, Mrs. Honey said, “Zendaya is above grade level, at high 5th grade, uses a lot of voice, and great vocabulary” (Background information, Appendix C). Junie is reading at an ending second grade level, which is significantly below grade level. When asked to discuss Junie’s writing stage, Ms. Red said, “Junie is an emergent writer, able to develop own thoughts about a given topic, though will often add details that should not belong in the story. She will take a topic and work independently on it, however the quality of work produced is not at grade level” (Background information, Appendix C). Seuss is reading at a beginning third grade level, which is more than a full school year behind. When asked to discuss Seuss’ writing stage, Ms.
Red said, “Seuss is a proficient writer, able to develop thoughts on his own about a given topic. He is able to produce a good length story, however it is often times out of order and contains grammatical and punctuation errors” (Background information, Appendix C).

Table 4, displays the writing rubric that was used to assess students’ writing samples for African American English features. The African American English features that were assessed in students’ writing samples are listed in the left hand column and the amount of times they appeared were tallied in the right hand column (Writing Rubric, Appendix D).

Table 4
African American English Writing Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAE Features</th>
<th>Amount of Times in Writing Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal –s absence (she go __)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural –s absence (four mile__)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive –s absence (John hat)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ed absence (yesterday they miss__)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copula is absence (Where my hat)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copula are absence (We going to the game)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. AAE = African American English
Table adapted from:

Table 5 displays student participants’ percentages of African American English features, from the rubric in Table 4, within their writing for two different writing samples.
Table 5  
*Percentage of African American English Features in Student’s Writing*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Percentage of AAE features in Writing Sample #1</th>
<th>Percentage of AAE features in Writing Sample #2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zendaya</td>
<td>.2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>.9%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seuss</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junie</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. AAE = African America English  
Jack, Jamie, Junie, and Seuss all have a higher percentage of African American English features within their writing than Zendaya, who is reading above grade level, at a fifth grade level. Junie’s first writing sample contains 0% African American English features; however that particular writing piece was a list of procedures instead of a narrative, which could be the reason for lack of African American English within that writing piece. Junie’s second writing piece is seen in Figure 1, which contains 3% African American English features. Junie’s teacher edited the writing piece, which is why there are markings, but the African American features were looked for based on what Junie had originally written. Looking at the writing rubric in Table 4 and comparing the writing sample in Figure 1, there are several African American English features that are seen in Junie’s writing such as one instance of plural –s absence, two instances of possessive –s absence, and one instance of –ed absence.
Figure 1. Junie’s Second Writing Sample

Figure 2 displays Jamie’s writing piece that is a letter written to a college class thanking them for their classroom makeover. The writing sample contains 4.5% African American English features, which is represented in Table 5 as Jamie’s second writing sample. Looking at Figure 2, there are two instances of verbal –s absence, two instances of –ed absence, and one instance of the copula is.
This finding is also supported through observations of student participants by their interactions with their teacher during writing time. Zendaya, who is above grade level in reading and writing, was always focused and on task during writing time, and rarely had any questions for Mrs. Honey, which displays her confidence and ability to write independently. However, Junie, Jamie, and Jack often needed support or redirection from their teachers, which can be seen as an inability to be successful with writing independently. Seuss relied heavily on adults in the classroom and had a hard time moving on until he felt that he could do his work independently, which could also be seen as lack of confidence and ability to write independently. Craig et al. (2009) also found that students who were able to dialect shift within their reading displayed higher reading outcomes. Zendaya, who is at the highest reading level of all student participants, shows the lowest percentage of African American English features within her writing.
However, looking at Table 5, it is clear that there are not many African American English features overall within students’ writing. The highest percentage of African American English features is 4.5%, which does not display a huge concern for African American features affecting students’ writing achievement and could mean that there are other factors that are more heavily contributing to writing achievement. Referring back to Table 2, this finding is supported through 60% of student agreement to the statement, “It is easy for me to switch from the language I use outside of school to Standard English.” Also, through observations, it was clear that student participants were rarely asking questions about grammar, rather they had concerns with structure, ideas, and spelling of unknown words. The fact that students rarely asked questions about grammar could mean that they are comfortable with their grammar use and instead struggle in different areas, such as structure and ideas. This finding is similar to Apel & Tate’s (2009) finding that the amount of African American English features produced by a student did not impact their writing skills. Craig & Washington’s (2004) findings showed that as children increased grade level and were more exposed to Standard English, their African American English use decreased, which could also be a key factor in the low percentages of African American English features within student participants’ writing samples. Generally, reading achievement seems to play a significant role in writing achievement; however African American features do not seem to be the cause for the low writing achievement of student participants.

**Writing Achievement and Engagement with Writing Attitudes**

Attitudes toward writing, negative or positive, seem to be effected by student participant’s writing achievement. Student participants displaying low writing achievement also displayed less engagement with writing instruction. Through observations, student questionnaires, and writing samples, this finding seemed apparent through all data types.
Both sets of observations that were done in Ms. Red and Mr. James’ classroom displayed Junie as having a negative attitude toward writing. For instance, throughout a complete writing lesson, Junie had her head down on her desk, talked with neighbors, and stared around the classroom. Within this particular set of observations, Junie wrote for about ten minutes out of the 45-minute writing block (Field notes, March 13, 2012). Other observations, completed during writing instruction and individual writing time, Junie played with items in her lap, talked with neighbors, stared around the room, or had her head down on her desk (Field notes, March 9, 2012). Junie’s writing samples also display a negative attitude toward writing. A procedural writing assignment, that asked students to write about the steps involved in creating a woodland habitat, was assigned to students in Ms. Red and Mr. James’ classroom. Figure 3 shows Junie’s procedural writing for creating a woodland habitat.
Looking at Figure 3, it is clear that Junie did not meet the requirements of the assignment, but instead left the writing piece in an outline format. This finding could display Junie’s negative attitude toward writing by not completing the task before handing in the assignment. Table 6 shows Junie’s response to a statement on the questionnaire.
Table 6
*Junie’s Response to Student Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy writing in school</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Junie</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Junie agreed to the statement, “I enjoy writing in school”, which does not support the observational notes and writing samples. Junie’s enjoyment with writing in school might not reflect her attitude towards writing due to the particular assignments that were being completed, or Junie could have been having a bad day on the days that she was observed. Although Junie was never explicitly asked why she enjoys writing, her agreement to the statement, “I enjoy writing in school”, could be that Junie does enjoy writing, but her lack of writing achievement has caused her to shut down during writing time in school and in turn give her a negative attitude towards the subject.

Seuss, also is below grade level, but displays a positive attitude toward writing instruction and individual writing time. Observation notes display Seuss staying focused on writing, asking for assistance with his writing from teachers and other adults in the classroom, and even writing after the class is told to stop writing (Field notes, March 9, 2012). Seuss’ writing samples are both about a page long, however they do display effort. Figure 4, displays a procedural writing assignment on creating a woodland habitat.
Seuss’ writing piece displays a proper title, indentation, and organization. It seems apparent that Seuss understood the writing assignment and used correct terminology, such as ‘first’, ‘second’, and ‘then’, which can display a positive attitude toward this particular writing piece. The finding that Seuss has a positive attitude toward writing is also supported by his responses to statements on the questionnaire, displayed in Table 7.
Table 7
*Seuss’ Responses to Student Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy writing in school</td>
<td>Seuss</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy writing outside of school</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Seuss</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seuss’ agreement to these statement, displays that he has a positive attitude towards writing both inside and outside of school. The finding goes against the idea of writing achievement affecting engagement with writing because Seuss has low writing achievement in school, but seems to have a very positive attitude toward writing. Seuss’ highly positive attitude could be due to the fact that Seuss is able to independently use resources around him to feel successful with his writing.

Through both sets of observations in Mrs. Honey’s classroom, Jack displayed many off task behaviors, such as leaving to go to the bathroom, dancing and hopping around the room, and talking with other students (Field Notes, March 8, 2012 & Field Notes, March 12, 2012). Many of these behaviors happen at the beginning of individual writing time and last for about ten minutes. Throughout one of the observations, Jack was working with another adult in the classroom at a table where Mrs. Honey said she has off task students work, but the small group did not meet in the second observation (Field Notes, March 8, 2012). During this small group writing Jack spent about 25 minutes producing the work displayed in Figure 5, however the last two sentences were written after this lesson because Jack needed more time to finish.
Figure 5. Jack’s Thank You Letter

Dear Mrs. Chrisman and student,

Thank you for our new classroom makeover. We appreciate your hard work.

I also like our classroom wall. I love the stuffed animals.
I like the two chickens. I like them because they are cute and fluffy.
I like the dog to because he looks funny with the bones. Now he have a very nice.

March 18, 2012

The amount of time given to Jack to complete the letter, his behaviors during the writing period, and the amount Jack wrote, displays a more negative attitude toward writing. Table 8 displays Jack’s responses to the questionnaire.

Table 8
Jack’s Responses to Student Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy writing in school</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy writing outside of school</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jack’s responses to the statements on the questionnaire clearly display his enjoyment toward writing, which should in turn give him a positive attitude toward the subject. Jack seeming to have a negative attitude toward writing could be due to distractions in the classroom, events that happened previously in the day, or lack of interest in the writing topic. Also, the reason for Jack’s lack of engagement with writing instruction in school could be due to his lack of writing achievement in school.

Through observing Zendaya in Mrs. Honey’s classroom, it seems apparent that she has a positive attitude toward writing. Zendaya worked diligently throughout all observations and was clearly focused on her writing (Field notes March 8, 2012 & March 12, 2012). Figure 6 displays Zendaya’s assignment to write a thank you letter.
Figure 6. Zendaya’s Thank You Letter

Dear Mrs. Christmas and Students,

Thank you so much for the class makeover. I know you put all your effort and energy into this makeover and I would like to thank you for that. First, wanna thank you for all the hard work you put into this class makeover. I appreciate it so, so much. Also, I would like to thank you for the library and the new books. I especially like the number the stars book and I love that all of you took your time and organized the books a put them in the correct categories. That was very sweet and kind. My last thing I would to thank you for is the freshly painted walls. I love the color and the eagle looks fantastic. I thank you so much and we all appreciate you so much.

The writing sample displays great detail, thoughtful comments, and personal information about what she liked best. Observing Zendaya write the thank you letter, it was apparent that she was eager to write the letter as she continuously wrote throughout the writing time and when finished, Zendaya was the first student to ask to share their letter. Table 9 displays Zendaya’s responses to statements from the student questionnaire.
Table 9
Zendaya’s Responses to Student Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy writing in school</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zendaya</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy writing outside of school</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zendaya</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through Zendaya’s responses to the statements, it is clear that she enjoys writing, which displays her as having a positive attitude toward writing. The reason for Zendaya’s positive attitude toward writing could be due to the fact that she has high achievement within writing and is confident to complete her work independently.

Looking at Table 1, 100% of teacher participants were neutral to the statement; “I plan writing instruction to be culturally relevant for all students.” Neutral, in this case, meaning that teachers do not intentionally plan for the material to be culturally relevant, but sometimes it may end up being culturally relevant to students. The lack of teacher initiative to make writing assignments culturally relevant could be another reason for some students’ negative attitudes towards writing because the assignments do not relate to their lives and may not be meaningful. Howard (2001) found that when teaching African American students instruction that is culturally relevant will help students succeed academically. Since teacher participants did not feel that they could agree or disagree with the statement, there could be a lack of planning to have
culturally relevant material within writing instruction or it may just happen based on themes, but is not intentionally planned in every day writing instruction.

Through observations of individual students during writing time, student questionnaires, and writing samples, it seems evident that lower achievement with writing in school correlates with negative attitudes towards writing.

**Implications**

The findings of the action research study illustrate a few implications to teaching practices. Teachers that teach African American students must understand and accept that their students’ enter school with dialect variations. African American English is acknowledged in the classroom, but teachers need to take further steps to ensure their African American students are adequately learning literacy skills.

Teacher participants in the study did not explicitly teach their African American students how to dialect shift from African American English to Standard English, however they were sensitive to their students’ needs due to their language variation. Most student participants in the study enjoyed writing, even if they were not meeting grade level standards in writing. Teachers, who teach African American students, should take into consideration their students’ dialect variations and use that knowledge to teach literacy skills. Teachers could explicitly teach African American students how to shift from the African American English dialect to the Standard English dialect, which would give students further insight to the similarities and differences of the two languages. Also, teachers could make writing lessons culturally relevant for students in order for them to be successful with the writing task. Using texts that contain the
African American English dialect within their dialogue could be used as models for writing or serve as culturally relevant material for reading.

Finding that reading achievement might play a significant role in writing achievement, teachers should be aware of their students’ reading abilities to ensure they are positively supporting students’ writing abilities. Since guided reading groups are divided based on reading level, teachers could use those same groups to partake in guided writing activities. As with guided reading, teachers could focus on a specific topic within writing each week to intensely work with students on that skill. Also, teachers could find students’ areas of weakness within writing and divide guided writing groups based on that data. Focusing on one writing strategy a week or every other week could develop students’ writing achievement in the areas where they are individually struggling.

Students’ writing achievement seemed to play a major role in their attitudes toward writing. In order to promote a wide range of writing, teachers must first get students to become engaged with writing and in turn should create positive attitudes toward writing. One way teachers can promote positive attitudes toward writing is to constantly be giving positive reinforcement. When students make errors within their writing, instead of making marks on their paper, teachers could hold one-on-one conferences with students to give the positive aspects of student writing and also discuss changes that could be made. Also, instead of telling students what to change, encourage them to take action and problem solve. As students begin to revise their writing independently, they may become more confident with their writing skills and think more positively about writing.

Conclusion
The research question, “How is writing instruction used to facilitate dialect shifting for African American students and attribute to their attitudes toward writing?” was used to determine the effects of African American English on African American students’ writing achievement and attitudes toward writing. Since African American English is an acquired dialect, the action research study is supported by the socioculutral theory and sociolinguistic theory. Previous research has been completed on the topic of African American English and literacy skills, and most studies found a negative relationship between African American English and literacy skills. However, some studies found that the literacy skills of African American students increase as they move forward in school because of more exposure to Standard English while attending school. Through data collection and analysis, this action research study found that dialect shifting is not explicitly taught to students, reading achievement is related to writing achievement, and writing achievement effects students’ attitudes toward writing. These findings imply that teachers need to pay close attention to their students’ dialect variations and use that knowledge to plan and drive instruction.

If completing this study again there are a few changes that should be made to gain a more in depth data collection. First, the study should be done over an entire school year in order to really focus in on writing instruction and students’ writing achievement. If it had been done over a longer period of time, it would be clearer which students were growing and which students were not making satisfactory progress within writing. In the beginning of the study there were a total of six student participants however parental permission was not given for one student so they were eliminated from the study. To really focus in on the affects of African American English on writing for African American students, more participants would be needed to make the findings more generalized. The research leaves one question unanswered, which is what are
the affects on writing when explicitly teaching students how to dialect shift from African American English to Standard English? Completing an action research study in classrooms where explicit instruction of dialect shifting does occur, would give further insight to the effects of teaching students the skill of dialect shifting. In conclusion, when teaching writing skills to African American students it is crucial that the teacher is knowledgeable about their students’ language variations and to use that knowledge to drive instruction.
References


*Reading and Writing,* 19(9) 907-931. doi: 10.1007/s11145-006-9023-0.

Terry, N.P. (2012). Examining relationships among dialect variation and emergent literacy skills.  


**Appendix A**

*Teacher Questionnaire*

I am sensitive to the language variation that my African American students’ bring to the classroom.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

My African American students are aware that their home language does not always match Standard English.
I correct students when they speak using African American English features.

I correct students when they use African American English features within their writing.

I try to have students avoid African American English features within their writing.

My African American students struggle with writing.

I explicitly teach students how to dialect shift from African American English to Standard English.

I allow times for my students to write using African American English, if it is not a formal writing time.

I use grammatical features of African American English to demonstrate Standard English during writing instruction.

I plan writing instruction to be culturally relevant for all students.

Appendix B

Student Questionnaire

I enjoy writing in school.

I enjoy writing outside of school.

I am aware that my language use outside of school does not always match up with the language use at school.
It is easy for me to switch from the language I use outside of school to Standard English (language of school).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

It is harder for me to write during formal times (Standardized Tests) than it is during informal times (Journal/poetry).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

My teacher is always there to positively critique my work and help me throughout the writing process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I feel that my teacher negatively criticizes my grammar use within writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I feel that my teacher allows me to keep my voice (or style) when I write.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

When my teacher marks my paper wrong, I have a hard time understanding the problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

My teacher generally understands my needs in writing and positively supports those needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Appendix C

Background information from Mrs. Honey

**Jamie**

Race: African American

Socioeconomic Status: Lower middle class
Reading Level: Fountas & Pinnell O
Writing Stage: has good structure and ideas, but lacks voice, mechanics, and syntax

**Jack**

Race: African American
Socioeconomic Status: Working Poor
Reading Level: Fountas & Pinnell P
Writing Stage: lacks structure, struggles to put a paragraph together, and form a solid sentence

**Zendaya**
Race: African American
Socioeconomic Status: Working Poor – below poverty line
Reading Level: Fountas & Pinnell P
Writing Stage: above grade level, at a high 5th grade, uses a lot of voice, and great vocabulary

Background information from Ms. Red & Mr. James

Junie

Race: African American
Socioeconomic Status: unknown – does receive reduced lunch
Reading Level: Instructional level Fountal & Pinnell M
Writing Stage: Emergent- able to develop own thoughts about a given topic, though will often add details that should not belong in the story. She will take a topic and work independently on it, however the quality of work produced is not grade level.

Seuss

Race: African American
Socioeconomic Status: unknown –does receive reduced lunch
Reading Level: Instructional level Foutnas & Pinnell N
Writing Stage: Proficient – able to develop thoughts on own about given topic. He is able to produce a good length story, however it is often times out of order and contains grammatical and punctuation errors.

Appendix D

African American English Writing Rubric

Participant _____________________________________________________

Writing Piece & Date ____________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAE features</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal –s absence (she go___)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural –s absence (four mile___)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive – s absence (John hat)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ed absence (yesterday they miss__)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copula <em>is</em> absence (Where my hat)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copula <em>are</em> absence (we going to the game)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart adapted from:

Comments: