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## **African-American English: Teacher Beliefs, Teacher Needs and Teacher Preparation Programs**

**Abha Gupta**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this descriptive study was to investigate elementary school teachers' self-perceived beliefs regarding African-American English (AAE), and their professional preparedness to address linguistic needs of AA students in the classrooms. The findings revealed three central issues: (1) teachers had limited understanding of the linguistic features of AAE, (2) teachers believed they had limited pedagogical skills to address issues related to AAE, and (3) teachers indicated that teacher education programs at the pre-service level were inadequate in preparing them for teaching students who spoke AAE in the classrooms. The study has implications for teachers' in-service training needs regarding culturally responsive education, as well as for teacher educators in teacher preparation programs to revisit the curricula as part of education reform. Implications and recommendations for teacher preparation and program implementation are provided.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The goal of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions about the impact of dialect on educational achievement of students who speak [African-American English](#) (AAE) in the United States. The two-pronged purpose of this descriptive study was (1) to investigate elementary school teachers' self-perceived beliefs regarding African-American English (AAE) and (2) to examine teachers' beliefs regarding their preparedness to address diverse linguistic needs of students. The data gathered from this investigative study has implications for teacher education programs and teachers' in-service training needs regarding culturally responsive education.

#### **What is African-American English (AAE)?**

Several dialect variations of English exist across the United States. These variations typically reflect cultural, regional, and ethnic differences. One such variation is African-American English, a unique historical, cultural, linguistic system spoken by many African Americans. AAE is a variety of English spoken by many Americans of African descent. However, it must be noted that not all African Americans speak this variety. AAE is spoken by many African Americans, some Caucasians, and others as well. Some of the more common terms with reference to AAE include *Black English*, *Ebonics*, *Black Vernacular English* (BVE),

and *African-American Vernacular English* (AAVE). The linguistic forms of AAE also occur in other American English dialects. For instance, “*When we was about to go to church,*” the subject-verb agreement feature is part of both AAE and Southern White English (Oetting & McDonald, 2001). In schools, AAE is spoken by many students when they begin formal schooling (Craig & Washington, 2000). According to Snow (1998),

Many of the approximately 8 million African-American students in U.S. schools are also speakers of African-American Vernacular English. The most characteristic form of the vernacular is spoken by a majority, both youth and adults, in inner cities where there is a high concentration of African Americans. (p. 239)

The wide use of AAE among large numbers of students in the classrooms calls for a study of its impact on learning and teaching.

### **Why is Teacher Perception about AAE the Focus of Study?**

Many users of AAE face literacy challenges with respect to reading or writing in school. Language plays a role in the poor academic outcomes of the disproportionately high numbers of African-American students who live in low income homes. Craig, Connor, and Washington (2003) contend that African-American students are more likely to read below the levels of their peers. Research has given strength to ideas that children from an African-American heritage would do worse than other children in traditional academic settings (Baker, 2005; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Salzer, 1998). The Black-White Achievement Gap is a term used to refer to the academic performance disparities that characterize African-American and Caucasian students. For example, the prevalence of reading below basic levels at Grade 4 is much greater for African-American than Caucasian students, 58% compared to 24% according to the 2005 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). Language alone, however, is not a sufficient explanation for the Black-White Achievement Gap. A number of other variables must be considered, such as socio economic status, access to books at home, and parental education. However, oral language skills play a critical role in academic performance, particularly in the early years of reading and writing—the foundation of literacy. The gap begins at entrance into school and continues through high school, across all major content areas. In other words, regardless of grade or academic content, Black students score lower than White students.

- 63% of African-American 4<sup>th</sup> graders read below basic levels as compared to 27% of majority students (NAEP, Donahue et.al 2001, reported in Craig, Thompson, Washington, & Potter, 2004, p. 141).
- According to Snow (1998, p. 239), approximately 8 million AA students in US schools are also speakers of AAVE.
- AA students perform more poorly, disproportionately so, on standardized reading assessments than their majority peers. (Snow, 1998)

There have been many theories about teacher perceptions and their impact on student achievement (Green, 2002; Randolph, 2005). From the teacher preparation program perspective in higher education, I was interested in examining what the beliefs of our teachers in the local school district were and how well they were prepared for addressing the need. The majority of the teachers taught in schools with more than 60% AA population.

The following study contains the results of surveys conducted in one mid-Atlantic state in the US. The school district in the study is considered a ‘high need’ district with significant achievement gap among major subgroups of students, namely the Black and White population in elementary and middle schools in reading-language arts, and all of the content areas (except history and social studies). The data from 2004-2005 shows a significant gap between the two subgroups as reflected in Table 1 below in not only reading and language arts, but other core academic subjects as well. In the statewide achievement results for fifth and eighth grades, the percentages of Black student achievement are consistently lower than that of their White peers in the majority of academic areas.

### Achievement Gap

**Table 1.** Percentages of Students by Subgroup and Subject Indicating Achievement Gap for 5<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> Graders

Subject	Grade	Black % student achievement (passed)	White % student achievement (passed)	Black % student achievement (passed)	White % student achievement (passed)
		2003 - 2004		2004 - 2005	
Reading-Language Arts	<b>5</b>	74	87	74	87
History-Social Studies	<b>5</b>	86	96	78	91
Science	<b>5</b>	71	89	58	87
Reading-Language Arts	<b>8</b>	43	75	52	71
History-Social Studies	<b>8</b>	46	63	100	100
Science	<b>8</b>	64	91	64	84

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Questions

This study surveyed teachers’ perceptions of academic factors related to AAE speakers: (1) What were the teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about academic factors regarding the achievement of speakers of AAE, and (2) how well teachers believe they were prepared for meeting instructional needs of students who speak AAE.

### Procedures

Data used in this research was gathered by distributing 500 surveys to all the teachers in elementary schools (K-6) of the selected school district. Surveys were distributed with a returned envelope enclosed. In addition, a cover letter was included explaining the purpose of the survey. The survey on AAE was completed by 156 elementary school teachers from 14 schools across the district.

## Instrument

The survey reflected the teachers' perceptions of variant English, and preparedness to address teaching speakers of variant English. The survey consisted of 25 items with a Likert-type scale (with 1 designating "strongly disagree" to 5 designating "strongly agree") with some additional yes/no and open-ended questions. The two major sections of the survey addressed (a) teachers' perceptions and (b) teachers' preparedness in addressing instructional needs of speakers of AAE.

A demographic section of the survey assessed teacher background including gender, ethnicity, teaching experience, grade level, and educational qualifications. Construct validity of the instrument was determined by examining the items on that instrument and determining if they were a fair and representative sample of the general domain which the instrument was designed to measure. This was ascertained through basing the items on the body of research and theories. Subject-matter experts were asked to review the instrument for face validity.

For internal reliability of the total instrument (25 items), Cronbach's reliability test was conducted resulting in the following co-efficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .779$ ). Separate reliability tests (Tables 2-4) for internal consistency of the two parts of the survey (Part I: Perception, and Part II: Pedagogy) resulted in the following coefficients (Part I, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ , Part II, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .723$ ).

**Table 2.** Cronbach's Alpha for Total Instrument

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.779	.786	25

**Table 3.** Cronbach's Alpha for Part-I (Perception) of the Instrument

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.800	.800	17

**Table 4.** Cronbach's Alpha for Part-II (Pedagogy) of the Instrument

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.723	.740	8

## Demographics

The survey respondents represented teachers working with a range of grades from Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 6. The breakdown was as follows: PreK-3 (67.3%) and Grades 4-6 (31.4%). Majority of the respondents were classroom teachers (81.4%), some were reading teachers and special education teachers (12.8%), and some were resource teachers (5.1%). In terms of teaching experience, respondents were almost equally divided between beginning teachers with less than 5 years of experience ( $n = 44$ , 28.2%) and teachers who had been in the teaching field for more than 6 years in the range of 6-10 years of teaching experience ( $n = 41$ , 26.3%) and those with more than 21 years of teaching experience ( $n = 41$ , 26.3%). Almost three-fourths of the respondents were working in a Title I school ( $n = 112$ , 71.8%). Most of the respondents had teacher license ( $n = 138$ , 88.5%) with few on provisional certification ( $n = 12$ ,

7.7%). Majority of the teachers had postgraduate experience—they had either received a Master’s degree or were working on it (n = 102, 65.4%); some had received only Bachelors degree (n = 46, 29.5%). Most of the teachers indicated having had more than 2 courses in Reading/Language Arts during their teacher preparation program (n = 140, 89.7%). More than three-fourths of the respondents (n = 119, 76%) indicated teaching in schools with more than 60% of African-American students. Equally, more than half of the respondents (n = 84, 53.8%) were teaching in schools with more than 80% of African-American students. Reported ethnicity of the respondents was split (n = 67, 44.4% AA and n = 82, 54.3% Caucasian). The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 5 below.

**Table 5:** The Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Number (%)</b>
<i>Highest Level of Education*</i>	
Bachelor’s degree	46 (29.5)
Master’s degree (completed /pursuing)	102 (65.4)
Additional endorsement	2 (1.3)
Doctorate	2 (1.3)
<i>Years of Experience Teaching*</i>	
0-5	44 (28.2)
6-10	41 (26.3)
11-15	21 (13.5)
16-20	8 (5.1)
21 or >	41 (26.3)
<i>Current Role*</i>	
Classroom teacher	127 (81.4)
Reading Specialist/Literacy coach	5 (3.2)
Special Ed teacher	15 (9.6)
Other resource teacher	8 (5.1)
Teaching Level: Elementary*	155 (99.4)
<i>Grade Level*</i>	
PreK - 3	105 (67.3)
4 - 6	49 (31.4)
<i>School*</i>	
Teaching at Title I school	112 (71.8)
Teaching at non-Title I school	38 (24.4)
<i>Educator Credentials*</i>	
Teacher license	138 (88.5)
Provisional	12 (7.7)
Other	4 (2.6%)
<i>Reading-Language Arts Courses Taken*</i>	
0-1	13 (8.3)
2-4	58 (37.2)
5-7	47 (30.1)
7 or >	35 (22.4)
<i>Approximate % of AA Students in Your School*</i>	
0-20	6 (3.8)
21-40	14 (9.0)
41-60	12 (7.7)
61-80	35 (22.4)
81-100	84 (53.8)

<i>Ethnicity*</i>	
African American	67 (42.9)
Caucasian	82 (52.6)
Other	2 (1.3)

\*Highest Level of Education missing 4  
 Years of Experience Teaching missing 1  
 Current Role missing 1  
 Teaching Level: Elementary missing 1  
 Grade Level missing 2

School missing 6  
 Educator Credentials missing 2  
 Reading /Language Arts Courses Taken missing 3  
 Approximate % of AA Students in Your School missing 5  
 Ethnicity missing 5

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The responses received from the surveys are summarized below, organized according to major sections of the survey instrument. The responses revealed several issues that would need to be addressed in order to assist teachers in providing effective instruction in linguistically diverse classrooms.

### *Research Question 1: Teachers' Perceptions and Knowledge*

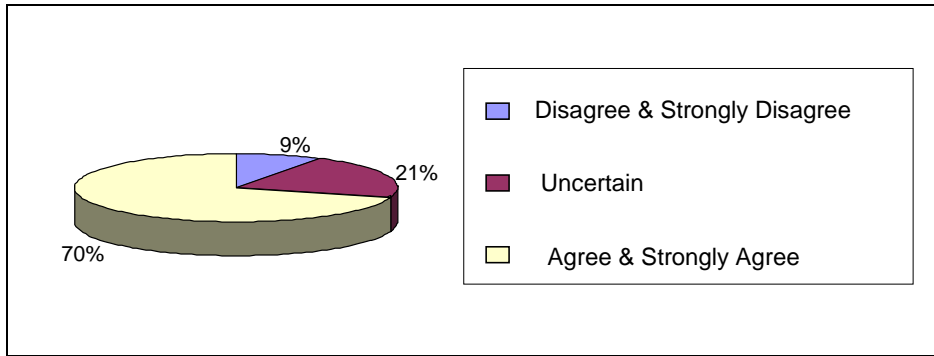
Teachers' reported beliefs concerning instrument items related to AAE (Items 1-17) are presented in Table 6 below. The table includes responses (n) and percentages (%) for each individual item on a 5-point Likert scale for the entire group of respondents. The majority of the survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (n = 97, 63%) with the statement that AAE is an adequate language system. More than half of respondents (n = 81) strongly agreed or agreed that students who speak AAE will have communication problems in the classroom (54%). Equally, more than half of the respondents agreed that students who speak AAE are likely to have reading problems (n = 87, 58.8%) and more than two-thirds of them believed that AAE speakers are likely to have writing problems (n = 108, 73%). Interestingly, a larger number of teachers believed AAE triggers more writing problems (73%) than reading problems (58.8%). About half of the respondents believed that AAE is incompatible with the language of the schools, and will, therefore, interfere with learning (n = 76, 49%). When asked to rate whether teachers are likely to have lower expectations of speakers of AAE compared with speakers of SAE, results were unevenly split: 35.7% agreed or strongly agreed; 49.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed; and 14.9% remained undecided. A large majority of respondents (70.9%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that speaking SAE is not likely to result in improved school success for African-American students. More than three fourths of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that speaking SAE is not likely to result in better job opportunities for AA students (n = 121, 78.6%). Similarly, more than half of the respondents (n = 84, 55.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that AAE is one of the factors that contributes to achievement gap between Black and White students. More than three fourths of the respondents believed AAE affects students' performance in language arts (n = 117, 78%). Approximately seven out of ten teachers (n = 106, 70.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that addressing linguistic issues of AAE speakers in the schools will enhance student achievement (Item 16). Four out of five respondents (87%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that oral language has little to do with academic performance (Figures 1-2).

**Table 6.** Frequencies for Teachers' Beliefs Regarding AAE Survey

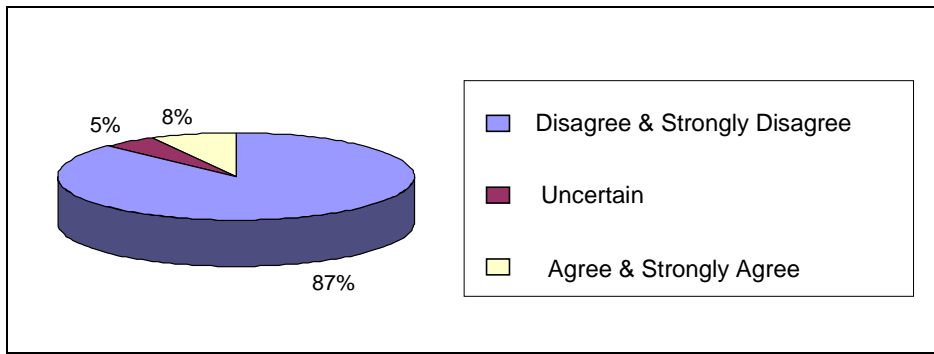
	<b>Survey Item Part-I (Teacher Perceptions about AAE)</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree % (n)</b>	<b>Disagree % (n)</b>	<b>Uncertain % (n)</b>	<b>Agree % (n)</b>	<b>Strongly Agree % (n)</b>
1	AAE is an adequate language system	28.1% (43)	35.3% (54)	22.2% (34)	9.8% (15)	4.6% (7)
2	Students who speak AAE will have communication problems in the classroom	6.0% (9)	27.3% (41)	12.7% (19)	42.0% (63)	12.0% (18)
3	Students who speak AAE are likely to have reading problems	4.1% (6)	20.3% (30)	16.9% (25)	41.9% (62)	16.9% (25)
4	Students who speak AAE are likely to have writing problems	1.4% (2)	12.9% (19)	12.2% (18)	50.3% (74)	23.1% (34)
5	Speakers of AAE will do more poorly on standardized achievement tests than will speakers of SAE	3.9% (6)	14.4% (22)	22.2% (34)	41.8% (64)	17.6% (27)
6	AAE is incompatible with the language of the schools and will therefore interfere with learning	3.9% (6)	22.9% (35)	22.2% (34)	41.2% (63)	9.8% (15)
7	Teachers are likely to have lower expectations of speakers of AAE compared to speakers of SAE	16.9% (26)	32.5% (50)	14.9% (23)	24.0% (37)	11.7% (18)
8	Speaking SAE is not likely to result in improved school success for African-American students	20.6% (32)	50.3% (78)	12.9% (20)	12.3% (19)	3.9% (6)
9	Speaking SAE is not likely to result in better job opportunities for African-American students	36.4% (56)	42.2% (65)	8.4% (13)	8.4% (13)	4.5% (7)
10	Speaking AAE impacts learning in school	2.6% (4)	13.1% (20)	17.0% (26)	52.9% (81)	14.4% (22)
11	AAE is one of the many factors contributing to the achievement gap among black and white students	6.6% (10)	14.6% (22)	23.2% (35)	43.7% (66)	11.9% (18)
12	AAE affects students' performance in Language Arts	2.7% (4)	10.0% (15)	9.3% (14)	60.0% (90)	18.0% (27)
13	Speaking AAE affects students' performance in content areas	2.7% (4)	22.8% (34)	15.4% (23)	45.0% (67)	14.1% (21)
14	Speaking AAE affects students' performance in Math	9.8% (15)	40.5% (62)	22.2% (34)	19.6% (30)	7.8% (12)
15	Resource teachers are more effective in using specific teaching strategies to students speaking AAE, as compared to regular classroom teachers	12.5% (19)	36.2% (55)	33.6% (51)	14.5% (22)	3.3% (5)
16	Addressing linguistic issues of AAE speakers in the schools will enhance student achievement	3.3% (5)	5.3% (8)	20.7% (31)	52.7% (79)	18.0% (27)
17	Oral language has little to do with academic performance	43.5% (67)	43.5% (67)	5.2% (8)	4.5% (7)	3.2% (5)



**Figure 1.** Addressing Linguistic Issues of AAE Speakers Will Enhance Student Achievement



**Figure 2.** Oral Language has Little to do With Academic Performance



*Research Question 2: Teachers’ Pedagogical Beliefs and Preparedness*

Table 7 below presents how well teachers believe they are prepared for meeting instructional needs of AAE speakers and what their perceptions are regarding their teacher preparation program with respect to receiving training in pre-service program to address linguistic diversity in classrooms. Only about one-fourth (n = 40, 26%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their teacher education programs adequately prepared them to address linguistic diversity in the classroom. More than two-thirds of the survey respondents (n = 103, 67%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their teacher preparation program trained them to address the linguistic needs of students speaking AAE. A small percentage (n = 10, 6%) remained undecided (Figure 3).

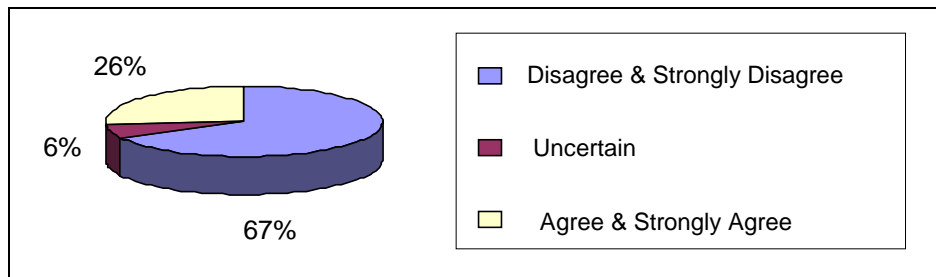
*On-Site Professional Development Training*

When asked about onsite support in terms of having received in-service professional development training provided by the school system to address the linguistic needs of students speaking AAE, more than two-thirds of the teachers (n = 109, 72%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had been offered any such workshop. Less than one-fourth of the survey respondents indicated as having received training by the school system (n = 36, 23%) (Figure 4). More than two-thirds of the respondents indicated their desire to learn some teaching strategies to address the linguistic needs of students speaking AAE (n = 109, 72%). A small percentage (n = 23, 15%) of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, whereas, 12 % remained undecided.

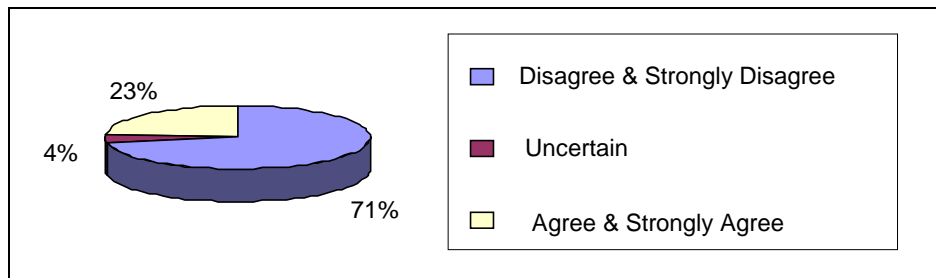
**Table 7.** Teachers’ Pedagogical Beliefs

	<b>Survey Item Part II (Pedagogy Related)</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree % (n)</b>	<b>Disagree % (n)</b>	<b>Uncertain % (n)</b>	<b>Agree % (n)</b>	<b>Strongly Agree % (n)</b>
18	My teacher preparation program trained me to address the linguistic needs of students speaking AAE	28.8% (44)	38.6% (59)	6.5% (10)	21.6% (33)	4.6% (7)
19	I have received in-service training to address the linguistic needs of students speaking AAE	28.8% (44)	43.1% (66)	4.6% (7)	17.6% (27)	5.9% (9)
20	I have acquired some teaching strategies on my own to address the linguistic needs of my students	6.5% (10)	7.8% (12)	6.5% (10)	65.6% (101)	13.6% (21)
21	I would like to learn some teaching strategies to address the linguistic needs of students speaking AAE	6.0% (9)	9.3% (14)	12.0% (18)	55.3% (83)	17.3% (26)
22	I am familiar with the linguistic features of AAE	6.7% (10)	19.3% (29)	24.0% (36)	43.3% (65)	6.7% (10)
23	I am comfortable teaching students who speak AAE	5.9% (9)	8.6% (13)	7.9% (12)	48.0% (73)	29.6% (45)
24	During a read-aloud by a student, I can identify if a deviation from text is a dialect variation	1.3% (2)	7.1% (11)	13.6% (21)	63.0% (97)	14.9% (23)
25	I can identify AAE features in a writing sample of a student	1.3% (2)	4.5% (7)	12.3% (19)	62.6% (97)	19.4% (30)

**Figure 3.** My Teacher Preparation Program Trained Me to Address the Linguistic Needs of Students Speaking AAE



**Figure 4.** I Have Received In-Service Training to Address the Linguistic Needs of Students Speaking AAE



## Limitations

The present study has limitations that are important to consider in interpreting the findings. The results relied exclusively on self-reported data; the lack of field-based observations itself is a limitation. The data thus reflects only teachers' perceptions of instruction, which may be quite different from actual practice as classroom observations were not conducted.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings from the survey revealed four major issues: a need for (1) pedagogical strategies; (2) more course work on reading and language arts; (3) re-examining teacher training program with respect to language and literacy based courses; and (4) target oriented in-service training.

First, an encouraging finding from this study is that teachers expressed a high need to learn teaching strategies to address linguistic issues of their AA students. More than two-thirds of the teachers surveyed (n = 109, 72%) indicated a need to learn strategies and ways to address the linguistic issues. This made sense as three fourths of the respondents surveyed (n = 119, 76%) taught in schools with more than 60% of AA students. More than half of the respondents (n = 84, 53%) were teaching in schools with more than 80% of African-American students. Given the high percentage of AA students being taught by the respondents who are the primary instructors responsible for instruction, their urgent need to equip themselves with effective pedagogical strategies to address linguistic issues is understandable.

All of the respondents were teaching at elementary schools where the foundation for language and literacy is built for higher education. The focus on language structure in the state's learning standards is much more in elementary grades than in higher grades. The state's writing standards on which students get tested are heavily built around language structure including syntactic elements such as subject-verb agreement, prepositional phrases, elimination of double negatives, noun-pronoun agreement, and spelling homophones correctly. These linguistic elements are salient in language usage of dialect users with a variation from the conventional form (e.g., 'It don't do nobody any good' (double negative), and 'he don't want to be killed' (subject-verb agreement), etc.). Literacy skills in English infuse all subject areas. In higher grades, where subject area teachers differ, there should be a concerted effort by all subject teachers to relate required writing standards into all core areas.

Teachers expressed their need to broaden their repertoire of instructional methods to better meet the needs of all students. With increasing percentage of students representing linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom, general education teachers need to be prepared to the best of their ability. The participants in this study clearly had a limited understanding of effective instructional methods for students who spoke AAE, despite the fact that the majority of the participants worked in the school setting with more than 60% AA students. More than half of the respondents (n = 84, 55%) agreed or strongly agreed that AAE is one of the factors that contributes to achievement gap between Black and White students. Approximately seven out of ten teachers (n = 106, 70%) agreed or strongly agreed that addressing linguistic issues of AAE speakers in the schools will enhance student achievement (Item 16). One respondent commented,

*As a kindergarten teacher I have had difficulty teaching writing and spelling to those students who speak AAE, although I don't believe in changing people or their culture, I do believe we need to encourage appropriate classroom English to ensure standard academic success in the 'real world.'*

Another respondent raised a similar issue with writing skills: “Students who speak AAE will not have oral communication problems, but may experience written communication issues in the classroom and workplace. Due to the written portion of the test, it may affect written portion of content areas.” Another teacher wrote, “Most of my students speak in a *mixture*; the greatest problem is use of pronouns and tenses.”

Second, survey results clearly lay out the need for more emphasis on literacy and language structure in teacher training coursework. Chi-square tests of significance indicated that teachers who had taken more number of formal courses in reading and language arts (5 or more courses) were found to be more likely to acquire teaching strategies on their own (Item 20) than those with fewer courses in reading and language arts ( $\chi^2 = 3.874$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Those with 5+ courses were more likely to agree with the statement (90%) compared to those with 4 or fewer formal courses (78.1%). This clearly demonstrates that when language concepts are firmly entrenched, teachers are better equipped to address linguistic issues encountered in the classroom.

Third, more than two-thirds of the survey respondents ( $n = 103$ , 67%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their teacher preparation program trained them to address the linguistic needs of students speaking AAE. In other words, the majority of the respondents in the current study agreed that their pre-service teacher preparation program did not equip them with the necessary skills to face the challenges of addressing linguistic issues in the classroom. Flowers (2007) identifies teacher quality as an important factor in considering achievement of AA students, in terms of the effects of teacher knowledge of diversity issues and teachers’ prior knowledge on AA students’ reading achievement. The author highly recommends examining the content of teacher preparation courses that address diversity, addressing to what extent the courses reflect the complexity of AA experience. Continued efforts to focus and evaluate teacher preparation programs in the area of language and literacy are critical if we are to provide effective literacy practices for all students.

Teacher educators must serve as guides in attempt to redefine the classroom instruction for linguistically diverse students. Required coursework with heavy emphasis on language will provide the necessary foundation for teachers to address linguistic issues in the classroom. The emphasis on the language strand must relate to reading and writing issues which is minimal in the traditional introductory language courses taught under speech/communication umbrellas, where the emphasis is more on speech production, articulation, vocal and audio-logical issues. This is not to undermine the importance of working knowledge of the speech sound system that builds the foundation for language learning, but for literacy implications, language competencies must go beyond speech mechanism to literacy practices. The literacy educator (which is all teachers certified to teach at elementary school level) needs coursework focused on language and literacy development with direct implications to reading and writing in the classroom. Given the diversity in our classrooms today, teachers recognize that young children differ considerably in their academic abilities. According to Fillmore and Snow (2000),

To make valid judgments about students’ abilities, teachers need to understand the different sources of variation in language use, whether a particular pattern signals a membership in a language community that speaks a vernacular variety of English, normal progress for a second language learner of English, normal deviations from the adult standard that are associated with earlier stages of development, or developmental delays or disorders. The over-representation of Africa American, Native American and Latino children in special education placements suggest that use of a vernacular variety of English or normal-second language learner features is often misinterpreted as indicating developmental delay (Ortiz, 1992). (p. 9)

Fourth, in-service teacher training that focuses on particular topic of linguistic variation appears to be necessary. The majority of the respondents (n = 110, 71%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they received in-service training to address the linguistic needs of students in their class. Workshops need to target language specific issues and ways to make curricular modifications through integration of topics. Successful practices when shared by teachers with peers, through workshops and dialogue, build a repertoire of age-appropriate strategies to use in the classroom. This fosters teacher collaboration, where colleagues become an important source of support and information regarding effective practices.

Finally, the goal of the study was to begin examining the factors that contribute to teachers' ability to meet the educational and linguistic needs of students who speak AAE. To this end, the study examined teachers' attributions and confidence regarding teaching and assessed teachers' perceptions towards AAE and their pedagogical needs. The ability to successfully instruct students in any setting requires more than training; it requires that teachers feel empowered to apply new skills and competencies. The concept of efficacy has been used here to describe both a belief that an action will lead to an outcome, and that one has the ability to perform an action that will lead to expected outcomes. Thus, if a teacher believes that addressing students' linguistic needs in schools can positively enhance achievement (survey findings indicated 70.7% teachers believed so), and that s/he has the ability to teach the student successfully, the teacher feels self-efficacy. These differences should not be treated as reflecting deficiencies in ability. Instead, schools must provide children the support they need to master the language required for academic development and equip them with the language required for success in society after completion of school. For the process to be effective, the learners, as well as the communities they belong to, must be respected. Practitioners need good understanding and knowledge of language variability in order to make educational decisions that ensure effective instruction.

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