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### African American English, School Demographics, and Literacy Achievement in Reading Recovery

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AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH, SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS, AND LITERACY  
ACHIEVEMENT IN READING RECOVERY

By  
Brandynne Thompson

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2019

## Approval Page

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## **Abstract**

AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH, SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS, AND LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT IN READING RECOVERY. Thompson, Brandynne, 2019:

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African-American students continue to lag behind White peers in nationwide test scores, in part due to deficits in literacy skills which may be connected to use of African American English (AAE) in the school setting. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between exposure to varying levels of mainstream American English (MAE) for AAE-speaking students and specific literacy skills during Reading Recovery intervention. Elementary schools were designated as high exposure or low exposure to MAE based on school racial demographics, and pre and postintervention scores of first-grade students in Reading Recovery intervention were analyzed to determine differences. First-grade teachers and Reading Recovery teachers of the student participants were surveyed using the African American English Teacher Attitude Scale (Hoover, McNair, Lewis, & Politzer, 1997) to determine differences in attitude towards AAE related to levels of exposure to the dialect. Findings indicated few differences between MAE- and AAE-speaking students in overall literacy growth during intervention. AAE-speaking students were similar in preintervention scores and overall growth regardless of school demographics, except in the area of letter identification, where students in low exposure schools entered intervention with significantly higher scores. Teacher attitudes towards AAE were not found to be related to school demographics. Recommendations include early screening for dialect use, immediate support and intervention for AAE-speaking

students entering school, and thorough training for teachers in recognition and support of dialect-speaking students in schools.

*Keywords:* African American English, Reading Recovery, literacy achievement, dialect

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Problem Statement**

### **Introduction**

African-American students drop out of high school at a rate that could be described as epidemic. Data from 2013 show that the graduation rate for African-American students is 70.7%, almost 16% lower than the rate of 86.6% for White students and among the lowest rate for any ethnicity (Civic Enterprises, 2015). The reasons students drop out of high school are varied and complex, but low literacy skills are often a major contributing factor. The inability to understand or evaluate text prohibits students from progressing in all academic areas of school. For African-American students, this inability may be related to differences in the nonmainstream American English (NMAE) spoken at home and the formal mainstream American English (MAE) used in schools and literacy texts. It is also possible that development of literacy skills is further limited in environments in which students are surrounded by peers speaking NMAE dialects such as African American English (AAE), rather than by MAE-speaking students. This study investigated whether the growth of literacy skills of AAE-speaking first-grade students is related to the dialect used by peers in their school environments. Chapter 1 introduces the history and consequences of the achievement gap, factors contributing to the achievement gap, and the purpose and significance of the study.

### **Background of the Study**

Learning to read is one of the primary tasks expected of children entering school. Reading is an essential skill for effective academic learning and advancement in school and, thus, is foundational to school success. Sadly, national and state-level reading achievement test data indicate that African-American children continue to perform



substantially below their peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) further reported National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data showing that African Americans score lower than their non-Hispanic White peers across content areas and attribute the wide-ranging test score disparities to weaknesses in literacy skills. This delay in literacy skills of African-American children and the disparity on test scores between African-American and White children are not new phenomena; they have been longstanding topics of concern and debate for educators and policy makers. Defined as “the difference between how well low-income and minority children perform on standardized tests as compared with their peers” (Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2011, p. 7), the achievement gap, also referred to as the African American-White literacy gap, has persisted and defied explanation for decades.

The achievement gap initially became a national topic of concern when NAEP tests were first administered in the 1970s, but its history long precedes national testing. The literacy gap initially stemmed from racial oppression, which ultimately precipitated differences in educational opportunities and environments between African-American and White populations (Cohen, White, & Cohen, 2012). Slavery, in particular, can be pinpointed as a circumstance related to the large-scale illiteracy of the African-American population prior to the Civil War. Post-Emancipation education continued to exhibit severe inequalities between the races. Prior to the 1950s, minority schools had shorter sessions and significantly lower per-child education expenditures than White schools (Margo, 1990; Welch, 1973). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 increased expectations of equality between African-American and White students and set the stage for significant increases

in academic opportunities for minority students. During this period of time, the gap in reading achievement between African-American and White students astonishingly averaged more than 40 points. Substantial narrowing of the gap occurred during the following decade, with the narrowest margins of approximately 25 points occurring in the 1980s. This convergence occurs at the lower end of the score distribution, but disparity remains large for higher achieving students (Center on Education Policy, 2009). This narrowing of the achievement gap is largely due to improvements in performance by African-American students.

However encouraging the previous convergence of scores appears, data continue to reveal a clear and substantial achievement gap in literacy skills between African-American and White students. Score margins have fluctuated only slightly over the last 30 years. Since then, the literacy gap has remained intact in spite of the nation's educational reform efforts. In fact, gaps between subgroups remain large, often with a disparity of as much as 20 percentage points. One example of this disturbing trend is apparent in the results of the 2011 NAEP reading assessment. Among fourth graders who scored above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile in 2011, 71% were White and only 7% were African American. Fifty-one percent of African-American students scored in the below basic range for reading achievement, while 22% of White students fell into that range. According to NAEP reports, these statistics have remained largely unchanged since 2005. Scale scores in 2005 indicate an average score of 230 for White students and 205 for African-American students, a 25 point difference. Reported scores from 2011 show an average score of 231 for fourth-grade White students and 205 for African-American students, holding the gap steady at 26 points. According to Portes (2008), "existing

programs classified as comprehensive school reform do not significantly reduce the learning gap in terms of children's academic development as measured by performance standards such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress or similar tests" (p. 2).

The disparity in literacy achievement has extensive consequences for minority and low-income students. A growing body of evidence suggests that early literacy achievement is significantly related to school achievement outcomes in later grades (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Cohen et al., 2012; Hernandez, 2011; Wren, 2003). Research by Wren (2003) indicated that literacy intervention and remediation programs are only beneficial for 13% of students who struggle with reading beyond the fourth grade. Students with reading deficits are more likely to exhibit behavioral and social issues, as well having an increased likelihood of being retained (Hernandez, 2011). The same study reports that "one in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time, a rate four times greater than that for proficient readers" (Hernandez, 2011, p. 3). The rate for low-income African-American students was among the highest at 31%, approximately eight times the rate for proficient readers. Many of these students fail to finish high school at all. Although many think of this as an individual problem, the dropout rate actually impacts society significantly. Dropouts cost our society in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity (Hernandez, 2011). High school dropouts also have higher rates of arrest and teenage pregnancy, which incur additional expenses. The disinterest in school that leads to dropping out begins long before the high school years; it begins near the time of middle school, spurred by retention in grade and the struggle to succeed academically. In a great many cases, it is a

direct result of the inability to read proficiently.

Beyond high school achievement, this literacy gap also results in serious handicaps in competing in higher education, in today's economy, and in accessing career opportunities (Cohen et al., 2012; Olneck, 2005; Portes, 2008). Educational attainment has been closely linked with occupational and economic status. Students with poor literacy achievement are substantially less likely to obtain postsecondary education and subsequently less able to acquire new skills that would lead to gainful and prolonged employment. These former students often become unable to compete in an increasingly technical labor market, resulting in a widening income achievement gap (Olneck, 2005). Unfortunately, this perpetuates a vicious cycle within our society. Studies have found effects between maternal educational attainment level and children's academic performance (Cohen et al., 2012). The poor literacy skills of this generation may impact academic performance of future generations negatively.

While the achievement gap is a serious concern for the individuals impacted, it has also become a concern for schools and school districts due to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB was signed into law in 2002 and is essentially based upon the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The standards-based reform movement introduced new testing requirements for public schools and places emphasis on raising academic achievement for all students but particularly for historically low-achieving groups such as ethnic minorities and low-income students. NCLB requires participating states to administer assessments linked to state reading and mathematics content to all public school students in Grades 3-8 on an annual basis. Assessment results are utilized to determine if schools and districts are meeting their primary goals, such as

reducing achievement gaps. Inadequate progress or performance on assessments as determined by disaggregated data results in numerous and increasingly intrusive corrective actions or sanctions for a school. For example, schools that fail to make adequate progress for 2 or more consecutive years are required to provide students with options to attend other public schools that have not been identified as needing improvement. Among other sanctions, schools that continue to perform inadequately may also be required to replace relevant school staff, change curriculum, seek consultation, or change the organizational structure of the school in order to rectify their lack of progress. In short, failing to improve the achievement gap within the school according to NCLB standards puts both students and staff at risk.

Numerous reasons have been put forth for this perplexing gap in academic success, including socioeconomic status (SES; Conlin, 2009; Hernandez, 2011; Stockman, 2010; Ward, 1986) and children's use of NMAE dialects that do not match the formal dialect used in the majority of schools in the U.S. (Craig, Zhang, Hensel, & Quinn, 2009; Ortiz et al., 2012; Terry, Connor, Petscher, & Conlin, 2012; Terry, Connor, Thomas-Tate, & Love, 2010). As mentioned previously, the deficit in reading proficiency is especially evident among children living in low-income homes. Children whose families live in poverty tend to develop weaker academic skills and achieve less academic success (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Conlin, 2009; Ward, 1986). Low-income families historically have less access to early education and books and are also more likely to live in neighborhoods with inadequate housing and low-performing schools. As a result, many children of poverty enter school lacking the language skills necessary for academic success, a phenomenon referred to as the "readiness gap." A

study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010) reported that children from low-income homes are typically 12 to 14 months below national norms in language and preliteracy achievement by the time they enter kindergarten. These deficits become more obvious as students progress through the grades. In 2009, 83% of children from low-income homes scored below proficient on fourth-grade NAEP reading tests, in comparison to 55% of children from moderate- to high-income homes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

The search for factors contributing to the achievement gap for reading have also included examinations of NMAE, oral dialects used that differ from the Standard English language used in schools (Craig et al., 2009). AAE is one such dialect, a cultural behavior pattern transmitted by tradition. It is considered a fully formed system of speech, rather than a diminished form of Standard English, also referred to as MAE. AAE shares many features with other kinds of English but is distinct due to a number of pronunciation and grammatical features which are not shared by other dialects (Wolfram, 1970). In 1971, Wolfram reported that reading problems seem to be more common among nonmainstream English speakers than among their mainstream English speaking counterparts. Wolfram (1971) further discovered a correlation between speaking nonmainstream varieties of English and reading failure, indicating that the likelihood of reading problems developing is increased if a person is a member of an NMAE-speaking population. More recently, Terry et al. (2010) found a large number of children whose primary language is English but whose nonmainstream language use and practices are significantly different from those they encounter in formal mainstream environments such as schools. Researchers across multiple recent studies have reported significant

(although varied) connections between young children's NMAE production and performance on multiple oral language and literacy measures (e.g., Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004; Connor & Craig, 2006; Terry & Connor, 2012; Terry et al., 2010). Investigations by Terry et al. (2012) have revealed significant, moderate, and often negative correlations between frequency or amount of NMAE use and measures of word reading, decoding, vocabulary, phonological awareness, and reading comprehension skill. The children who spoke more NMAE in these studies had weaker language and literacy skills. This finding is consistent across several studies, irrespective of the instrument used to measure NMAE use (e.g., sentence imitation, dialect density) or the oral language or reading skill in question (e.g., word reading, phonological awareness). The reasons for the difficulties indicated are unclear. The purpose of reading assessment is to evaluate student abilities to decode and comprehend Standard English text, though many students' home dialects are not Standard English. For many, their spoken dialect is drastically different from the language encountered in formal educational settings. AAE is a dialect with rules for language form, content, and use that diverge from those characteristically encountered in school dialogue and written English (Terry, 2006). According to Terry et al. (2012), "the acquisition of literacy skills is dependent not only on children's ability to think about language to manipulate it purposefully but also on their ability to understand and use language to communicate effectively" (p. 65). Perhaps the differences in structure and meaning between NMAE and mainstream English interfere with the ability to comprehend the formal English used in books (Terry, 2012). An alternate explanation is that teachers view NMAE as substandard, negatively judging and holding lower expectations of dialect-speaking students. This negative perception could translate to

lower scoring and differences in instruction for students who speak a dialect other than MAE (Flemister-White, 2009; Jones, 2011; Lawson, 2010; Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010). Another possibility is that NMAE-speaking children lack sensitivity to and awareness of language, which interferes with reading achievement (Terry et al., 2012). Although several theories have been put forth to explain the difficulties that NMAE-speaking students encounter in reading, research has not been able to consistently support a singular explanation.

While social class appears to be the most important factor associated with dialect differences in the African-American community, racial isolation is another important factor in accounting for speech differences. According to Wolfram (1970), it is of particular importance with relation to language acquisition. Wolfram (1970) indicated that “a Black child who has predominantly white peers will speak like his peers, not his parents” (p. 8). This suggests that AAE-speaking children have a greater ability to acquire MAE skills in an MAE-speaking environment. Terry et al. (2012) noted that children who are exposed to diverse linguistic environments may have more opportunities to perceive differences between dialects and to practice shifting between them. The results of that study found that children who increased their use of MAE at a greater rate between first and second grade exhibited greater growth in literacy achievement than children who did not increase or decrease MAE use, indicating that increasing use of MAE predicted growth in literacy achievement over prior reading performance. Craig et al. (2009) proposed that “students who adapt to the MAE language of the classroom and curriculum should find learning in general and acquisition of literacy achievement in particular to be less of a challenge than do those students who do



not make this adaptation” (p. 841). Craig et al.’s (2009) study provided strong support for the dialect shifting-reading achievement hypothesis, which predicts that AAE-speaking students who shift toward MAE in literacy tasks presented in MAE outperform students who do not make the shift. When students in the study were grouped into higher and lower reading groups, students in the lower reading group produced AAE dialect features at rates three times greater than those of the students in the higher achievement group. Obviously, the ability to shift away from NMAE dialects towards the MAE of the classroom is of consequence to reading achievement.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

Since evidence suggests that MAE students perform significantly better on standardized tests in reading and that AAE-speaking students can improve their skills in speaking MAE, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between exposure to varying levels of MAE for AAE-speaking students and specific literacy skills. These associations are explored because American schools have continually become more culturally and linguistically diverse, with growing numbers of children whose primary language is English but whose nonmainstream dialect is significantly different from language encountered in formal settings such as schools.

### **The Research Problem**

Results of multiple studies provide evidence of a significant relation between dialect differences and early reading achievement that is above and beyond SES and race differences. Wolfram (1971) discovered a correlation between speaking nonmainstream varieties of English and reading failure, indicating that the likelihood of reading problems developing is increased if a person is a member of an NMAE-speaking population. Terry

(2012) discovered significant negative associations between the rate of dialect features produced and emergent literacy measures, reporting that children who spoke NMAE more frequently performed more poorly on tasks such as alphabet knowledge, letter sounds, beginning sound awareness, and rhyme awareness. Labov's (2010) findings also discovered a "moderate but significant correlation" (p. 19) between reading errors and dialect features specific to speakers of AAE. Together, these reports suggest that AAE-speaking children with less exposure to mainstream English in the school environment seem to be at a higher risk for having difficulty acquiring basic literacy achievement in the early elementary years.

### **Significance of the Study**

The vast majority of previous studies failed to differentiate between MAE versus NMAE environments and the relationship to literacy achievement. The current study sought to add to the literature by comparing students who have had differing levels of exposure to MAE through evaluation of AAE speakers in demographically different school environments within impoverished areas.

### **Setting**

The study was conducted within 12 public elementary schools in a moderately sized county in upstate South Carolina. The poverty index for the schools ranged between 61-84%, with nine of the 12 schools qualifying for Title 1 funding in accordance with standards of the federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program (FARL). The schools were distributed between two adjacent school districts. In total, the districts were comprised of 22 elementary schools, seven middle schools, and five high schools.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), approximately 78,765 individuals

reside in the area of interest. Of that population, 54% are Caucasian, and 38.5% are African American. The median household income for the area is close to \$40,000, which is \$5,000 less than the average state median income. Persons over 25 years of age with a high school diploma from 2010-2014 comprise 84% of the population; however, only 22% of persons over the age of 25 had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The poverty level was estimated to average 21.8% across the two districts.

South Carolina test data from the South Carolina Department of Education (2017) indicate that the trend of lower performance for African-American students continues. The reading assessment in 2015, the SC PASS, indicated a district disparity in the reading achievement of African-American students in relation to their White peers and statewide student achievement. Overall, White students in third through fifth grade performed slightly above the objective score of 640 with an average score of 648, while African-American students in the same grades averaged a below standard score of 618.

### **Limitations**

Creswell (2009) defined the limitations of a study as potential weaknesses. Limitations are factors that may have an effect on the interpretation of the findings or the generalizability of the results and may arise from the methodology, data, or method of analysis. In the current study, a possible limitation was the complexity of the relationship between SES and academic achievement, where SES could become a confounding factor. This limitation was addressed by selecting schools of similar socioeconomic demographic for comparison.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are boundaries imposed by the researcher on the purpose and scope

of the study that pertain to variables that could be affected by circumstances of time, location, populations, or environment. This study was delimited to a small segment of the African-American population within a selected county; specifically, first-grade students in 13 elementary schools. These students were selected as the target of study due to the socioeconomic demographics of the schools, which allowed the researcher to assume that most African-American students were AAE speakers. An additional factor in selection of students was their eligibility for the Reading Recovery program, indicating that students exhibited low literacy skills. This study concentrated on three areas of literacy performance only, as those skills have been identified as significant contributors to overall reading ability and are evaluated in the Reading Recovery program.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**AAE.** African American English. A rule-governed and systematic variety of English that is spoken by many African-American students when they begin formal schooling, which contributes to the cultural identity of individuals in African-American communities (Craig & Washington, 2002).

**Dialect.** A regional variety of language distinguished by features of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation from other regional varieties and constituting together with them a single language (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2016).

**Dialect shifting.** The ability to shift from the use of one dialect to another in a particular context (Connor & Craig, 2006).

**FARL.** Free and Reduced Lunch. A federal school program that provides free or reduced price lunches to children whose family incomes are between 135% and 185% of the federally established poverty guideline for a family of four during the year in which

the data were collected (Washington & Craig, 1998).

**Literacy achievement.** Progress in the six subtests of the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (OSELA): Letter Identification, Ohio Word Test, Concepts About Print, Writing Vocabulary, Hearing and Recording Sound, and Text Reading Level.

**Low income.** Households that would be eligible for free or reduced lunches according to guidelines of FARL.

**MAE.** Mainstream American English. English of the standard variety expected to be spoken in school, business, and professional practice in the United States (Verwys, 2009).

**NCLB.** No Child Left Behind. A standards-based reform movement introduced in 2001 to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice.

**NMAE.** Nonmainstream American English. Versions of American English that have features which differ in type, frequency, and contextual use from MAE dialects (Terry & Connor, 2012).

**Reading Recovery.** A standardized, short-term intervention that supports classroom reading instruction for the lowest achieving students in first grade.

**School demographics.** The demographic composition of the school including, specifically, student race and the SES of the community the school serves.

**SES.** Socioeconomic status. The social standing or class of an individual or group, measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation.

**Title I.** A section of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 enacted to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain

a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments. The overall purpose is to improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged, including high-poverty, limited English proficient children; migratory children; children with disabilities; neglected or delinquent children; Indian children; and young children in need of reading assistance.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 provides the history and consequences of the achievement gap, factors contributing to the achievement gap, and the purpose and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 includes a literature review that examines previous research with purposes similar to that of this study. Specifically, the review of the literature summarizes research relating to characteristics of AAE, NMAE and reading, teacher perceptions of AAE, and dialect shifting as well as an overview of Reading Recovery.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and methods used in this study.

Chapter 4 details the results of descriptive statistics and their analysis.

Chapter 5 analyzes and discusses the results of the study and provides a summary with recommendations and direction for future study.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Overview**

The current study examines the relationship between exposure to different levels of MAE and specific literacy skills for young AAE-speaking students. Chapter 2 establishes a basis for the understanding of AAE and its complicated relationship to literacy achievement. The chapter begins with a description of the history and characteristics of AAE as well as characteristics of the main purveyors of the dialect. Research regarding the connections between AAE and reading achievement, the phenomenon of dialect shifting, and teacher perceptions are discussed. The chapter closes with information about the Reading Recovery program and its efficacy with differing populations.

### **AAE**

AAE is a nonmainstream dialect of English spoken by African Americans in most regions of the United States. The term “nonmainstream” denotes a dialect that diverges in significant ways, particularly grammatical, from the dialect or dialects considered acceptable by those in positions of power (Weaver, 1983). Also known as African American Vernacular English or Ebonics (Wheeler, Cartwright, & Swords, 2012; Wolfram, 1970), the origins of AAE have been traced to Creole English, various West African languages, Eastern European languages, Hebrew, Arabic, and Gullah (Labov, 1998; Pearson, Conner, & Jackson, 2013; Rodekohr & Haynes, 2001; Wolfram, 1970). AAE tends to carry a greater level of social stigmatism due to the negative perceptions of the differences in sound, word, and syntactic pattern which differ from the mainstream variety (Terry et al., 2010; Wheeler et al., 2012). The term “dialect” in itself implies a

way of speaking that is inferior to Standard English. The stigma may also be attributed to the historical social subordination of African Americans, the primary speakers of AAE, in the United States (Conlin, 2009). The history of AAE has been influenced by an array of linguistic and cultural factors related to enslavement and discrimination (Compton-Lilly, 2005). The stigmatization of AAE in schools led to investigation in the 1970s and 1980s, when the “Ann Arbor” decision declared that student use of AAE constituted a disadvantage for African-American students (Labov, 1982). The Ann Arbor School District Board was found in violation of Title 20 in their failure to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that hinder equal participation by its students in instructional programs. The courts determined that

a language barrier existed between the children and the teachers in the Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School because of the failure of the teachers to take into account the home language or dialect of the children in trying to teach them to read Standard English. (*Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School Dist. Board*, 1979, p. 2, para. 5)

This finding launched extensive research into the perceptions of AAE and its impact on education.

Though it has been viewed as a deficient variety of English in the past, AAE is now known to be a complex, rule-governed linguistic system with many elements in common with MAE and other elements that are unique (Pearson et al., 2013; Wolfram, 1970). AAE is distinguished from other English dialects by a number of pronunciation and grammatical features which fluctuate with mainstream English forms in actual speech (Wolfram, 1970). Labov (2010) asserted that the uniform sound system of AAE



is based on a “modification of the Southern States vowel pattern” (p. 15) but departs from sound changes characteristic of surrounding White vernaculars. Studies by Wolfram and Van Hofwegen (2012) and others (Charity et al., 2004; Connor & Craig, 2006; Labov, 1969) described prominent features of AAE including omission of final consonants, optional subject-verb agreement, zero past tense, zero copula, multiple negation, and zero possessive among many other characteristics which may vary according to the speaker.

Table 1

*Prominent Features of AAE*

Feature	Explanation of feature	Example of feature	Researcher
Omission of final consonants	Deletion of the final consonant of a word	I can't fine ( <i>find</i> ) it.	Charity et al. (2004)
Lack of possessive –s	-'s ending may not be used	This my momma('s) sister.	Labov (1969); Connor & Craig (2006)
Multiple negation or double negative	The occurrence of more than one negative in a clause.	He didn't do nothing.	Labov (1969); Wolfram & Van Hofwegen (2012); Connor & Craig (2006)
Habitual “be”	The use of an uninflected “be” to mark habitual or extended actions	When I be by myself, I be scared.	Labov (1969); Wolfram & Van Hofwegen (2012); Connor & Craig (2006)
Zero copula	Omission of <i>is</i> , <i>are</i> , modal auxiliaries <i>will</i> , <i>can</i> , and <i>do</i> are variably included	This ( <i>is</i> ) a frog.	Wolfram & Van Hofwegen (2012); Washington & Craig (1994)
Zero past tense	Present tense form is used in place of past tense forms	He ride ( <i>rode</i> ) his bike.	Connor & Craig (2006); Washington & Craig (1994)
Ain't	Used as a negative auxiliary	He ain't got it.	Connor & Craig (2006); Washington & Craig (1994)
Optional subject-verb agreement	A subject and verb that differ in number and person	They was talking.	Connor & Craig (2006); Washington & Craig (1994)
Zero –ing	Present progressive morpheme – <i>ing</i> is deleted	She was walk( <i>ing</i> ) fast.	Connor & Craig (2006); Washington & Craig (1994)
Zero plural	Variable inclusion of plural marker –s	He had two sandwich( <i>es</i> ).	Connor & Craig (2006); Washington & Craig (1994)
Compleitive “done”	The use of “done” to mark conclusion	She done fixed it.	Wolfram & Van Hofwegen (2012)
Zero preposition	Nonstandard omission of a preposition	They came out ( <i>of</i> ) the house.	Wolfram & Van Hofwegen (2012); Connor & Craig (2006)
Appositive pronoun	Use of a word to rename something earlier in the sentence	The boys they was playing.	Wolfram & Van Hofwegen (2012); Connor & Craig (2006)
Existential “it”	Using “it” instead of “there” to show something's existence instead of its location	It was nothing I could do.	Wolfram & Van Hofwegen (2012)

(continued)

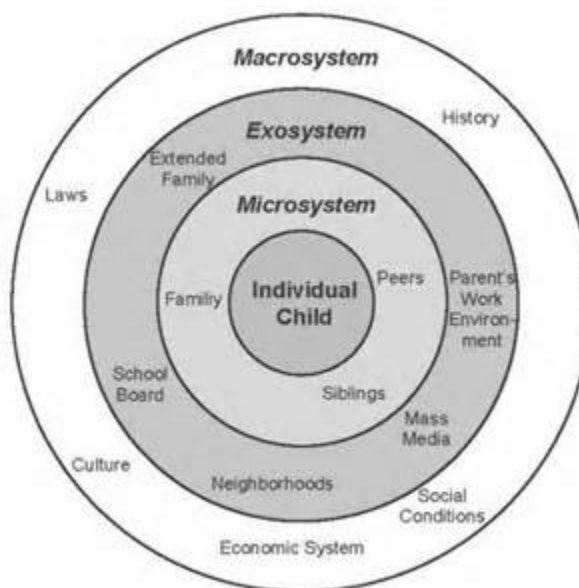
Feature	Explanation of feature	Example of feature	Researcher
Regularized reflexive pronoun	Reflexive pronouns “ <i>himself</i> ” and “ <i>themselves</i> ” are expressed as “ <i>hisself</i> ” and “ <i>theyself</i> ”	He got <i>hisself</i> a car.	Wolfram & Van Hofwegen (2012); Connor & Craig (2006); Washington & Craig (1994)

The use of AAE varies along a continuum within the African-American community, from individuals who exhibit no dialect use to those who use dialect in nearly one half of utterances produced (Washington & Craig, 1998; Wolfram, 1970); however, there are certain factors that appear to increase the probability of dialect variation. SES has overwhelmingly been found to influence AAE usage, perhaps more so than any other factor. Labov (1969) held that middle-class families begin at a higher level of MAE acquisition than working-class families. Wolfram (1970) also asserted that social class (or SES) is the “single most important social factor correlating with speech differences in the black community” (p. 8), such that working-class African Americans regularly exhibit more features than middle-class African Americans. More recently, a study of interviews with 30 middle-class African Americans by Linnes (1998) found that the middle-class groups maintain AAE usage in smaller quantities and more limited speech domains than reported for working-class counterparts who were considered “vernacular dominant” (p. 343).

According to Labov (2010), the majority of the African-American community who consistently showed the defining features of AAE were those who stayed within the African-American neighborhoods daily and communicated mainly with other African-American people to the exclusion of interaction with speakers of other dialects. Children have not escaped the phenomenon of increased dialect variation within African-American neighborhoods and low-income communities in particular. The premise of this

phenomenon can be explained through examination of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Initially proposed in 1979 to explain the process of human development, the theory focuses mainly on the interactions of the individual and his or her context. The original version of ecological systems theory describes the ecological environment in which a child is raised as a set of four nested structures. The innermost level, the microsystem, is the immediate environment or setting containing the developing person, such as the home, community, or school. This setting is comprised of the activities and interpersonal roles and relations in which the individual engages over time. The environmental events that most impact a person's development are face-to-face interactions within the microsystem. This engagement encourages the person to undertake similar activities independently. The next level, the mesosystem, examines the connections between two or more of the individual's immediate environments. The mesosystem is flexible in that it can expand or diminish with the addition or elimination of microsystems. Bronfenbrenner (1996) posited that "within any culture or subculture, settings of a given kind – such as homes, streets, or offices – tend to be very much alike, whereas between cultures they are distinctly different" (p. 4). The third circle of the model, the exosystem, involves a setting in which the individual is not a direct participant but is indirectly affected by its influence. An example of the exosystem would be the happenings within a parent's workplace. Social policies such as availability and type of childcare are created within the exosystem. The final system, the macrosystem, encompasses the historical aspects of the environment such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserted that the hallmark of the macrosystem is its principal belief system or philosophy. As a result of

that common system of beliefs, the daily experiences of children in any given societal, socioeconomic, ethnic, or religious group are likely to be similar. Therefore, the events that and individuals who surround a child must be considered in understanding his or her development. According to Rosa and Tudge (2013), Bronfenbrenner's analyses of social changes and their impact on the development of children, adolescents, and their parents illustrated the importance of social class and race; thus, as children from low-income homes tend to be less mobile and more racially isolated, their speech patterns are learned from within their communities (Conlin, 2009; Washington & Craig, 1994, 1998; Wolfram, 1970). It comes as no surprise, then, that African-American children from low-income communities tend to be the main purveyors of the AAE language system (Wolfram, 1970).



*Figure.* Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

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Labov (1969) indicated that the greatest dialect influence on a child occurs between the ages of four and 13, a period during which the child becomes a native

speaker of said dialect. During the earlier years of that period, most low-income African-American children are exposed primarily to the people and dialect within their home communities; thus, the first dialect of many of these children is AAE (Stockman, 2010). Ward (1986) carried out a comprehensive ethnographic study on acquisition of language and African-American children. Between 1968 and 1969, she followed seven southern, rural African-American families and made observations of the families engaged in daily routines. She discovered that the language interactions of poor African-American children differed significantly from language interactions of White middle-class children. White children had frequent language interaction with parents throughout the day, with parents reinforcing and encouraging their language. In contrast, African-American children rarely engaged in language interactions with their parents beyond being given orders and asked questions. Most of the parents' language was directed towards other adults, leaving peers and siblings to be the primary source of language interaction. Ward concluded that poor African-American children acquired language primarily through peer interaction and observation of adult conversations.

Conlin (2009) later conducted a descriptive correlational study of 694 ethnically diverse first-grade students from 18 schools. Students were assessed twice during the school year in multiple areas, including dialect variation, language skills, semantic knowledge, lexical knowledge, phonological and morphosyntactic skills, word literacy achievement, and overall reading ability. Results indicated that not only were African-American children more likely to use a nonmainstream dialect than White or other children but also that children raised in poverty exhibited more nonmainstream dialect features in discourse than children from higher SES backgrounds. Similarly, results of an

evaluation of AAE-speaking children of varied SES by Washington and Craig (1998) indicated that discourse of children from lower income homes reflected significantly more dialect use than that of children from middle-income homes. Washington and Craig (1998) assessed 66 kindergarten age African-American children, all of whom were dialect users of various amounts. All children came from largely African-American school districts in Detroit. Half of the participants were from low SES and half were from middle SES homes, as determined by federal guidelines of eligibility for FARL. Unstructured, free-play language samples were collected during adult-child dialogue with a female African-American assessor who spoke AAE to the children. Significant main effects for SES were found, with frequencies of AAE being significantly greater for boys than girls. Washington and Craig (1994) noted that the marked occurrence of AAE in the discourse of low-income children, who typically have few opportunities to be exposed to others outside their own linguistic community, may represent the standard for analysis and understanding of AAE. Indeed, Labov (1969) declared that the basic vernacular learned before puberty is the most consistent and regular linguistic system of a speech community.

Charity et al. (2004) agreed that SES and mobility may contribute to the frequency of AAE usage but also allude to race, asserting that “growing up in an African American family or in a community with predominantly African American population may provide fewer opportunities to gain familiarity with Standard English (MAE) through listening and speaking in the early years” (p. 1350). Charity et al. studied children’s familiarity with MAE, rather than focusing on the frequency of AAE usage. Participants were given a sentence imitation task, which was designed to include many

linguistic elements that are often produced differently in AAE and MAE. The evaluation of 217 early elementary age children from low-income communities revealed a wide variation in the extent to which they produced MAE rather than AAE forms during sentence imitation, indicating that the children varied considerably in their familiarity with MAE during the early school years. A majority produced dialect differences and accurate responses in approximately equivalent proportions; however, the children at the schools with the highest percentages of students in the federal lunch program had lower scores, indicating that familiarity with MAE was related to SES. According to Washington and Craig (1998), by definition, middle-class families have the potential for more tangible resources and exposure to the mainstream culture, including its linguistic forms.

Gender has been debated as another, less clear factor in the use of AAE. In 1970, Wolfram's publication describing features of AAE asserted that females in general approximate MAE more so than males. Washington and Craig (1998) discovered similar gender differences in the use of AAE. The study included 65 African-American children between the ages of 4 and 6 years old. All subjects were from low-income homes, as determined by demographic characteristics of the children's communities and participation in a specific school-based program for children growing up in poverty. Language samples were collected during free play and picture description tasks by an African-American female examiner using AAE forms of speech. A hierarchical cluster analysis was applied to the data to examine the variability of AAE use across subjects, resulting in the finding that male subjects differed significantly from the females in the use of AAE forms during free play; however, the gender differences found in free play



did not extend to the picture description activity.

In contrast, other studies (Conlin, 2009; Van Hofwegen & Wolfram, 2010) presented results indicating that gender demonstrates no influence on the use of AAE in children. Conlin's (2009) descriptive correlational study of 694 ethnically diverse first-grade students found no difference in dialect usage among boys and girls. Variation from MAE was evaluated using the DELV-S, an instrument designed to differentiate individuals with language differences due to either typical developmental growth or use of a dialect form from those with clinical language disorders or delays. The study participants were given a variety of assessments to determine variation from MAE, including the DELV-S, and additional assessments to measure reading abilities. While differences in dialect variation between ethnicities were confirmed, there was no variation found in the DELV-S dialect categories among boys and girls. African-American girls were no more likely to speak MAE or any level of dialect variation than African-American boys. The longitudinal study of 32 African-American children examining the trajectory of change in vernacular AAE during childhood and adolescence conducted by Van Hofwegen and Wolfram (2010) resulted in similar findings. A battery of standardized tests, background information, and conversationally based language samples were collected from the children at 1-2 year increments over a period of 17 years to determine the trajectory of their AAE use over the course of that time. Analysis of results indicated that gender was not a significant factor in dialect usage. Gender, therefore, appears to be an unreliable factor in AAE usage and warrants further investigation.

## **AAE and Literacy Achievement**

Dialect variation has long been suspected as a factor in the low academic performance of African-American students, and literacy achievement is of particular concern. Considering the longstanding achievement gap between African-American and White children, it is imperative to discover factors in the poor performance of African-American children. It is widely acknowledged that many African-American children, particularly those from low-income communities, only speak AAE upon school entry (Craig & Washington, 2006; Hwa-Froelich, Kasambira, & Moleski, 2007; Pungello, Iruka, Dotterer, Mills-Koonce, & Reznick, 2009; Stockman, 2010). Multiple studies (Brown et al., 2015; Conlin, 2009; Craig et al., 2009; Kohler et al., 2007; Ortiz et al., 2012; Terry, 2012; Terry et al., 2012; Terry et al., 2010) have discovered a relationship between the use of AAE and poor literacy achievement in young children that may partially explain the differences seen in the achievement of African-American children. Terry et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of 49 ethnically and socioeconomically diverse first- and second-grade students to explore change in dialect use and its relation to reading. The study assessed dialect variation and overall literacy achievement three times throughout the school year using the DELV-S and subtests of a standardized reading achievement test. Results indicated that children who engaged in forms of spoken nonmainstream dialect more frequently in school seemed to be at risk for difficulty acquiring basic literacy achievement in the early elementary years. In short, dialect usage appeared to interfere with the ability to read. Similarly, the longitudinal study by Conlin (2009) found that children who started first grade using dialect more frequently had poorer literacy scores at the end of the first grade than children who

demonstrated less dialect variation at the beginning of first grade. Specifically, NMAE use was negatively associated with children's scores on language and literacy measures. Scores on the picture vocabulary, letter word reading, and passage comprehension subtests in particular decreased with use of dialect features. Other skills were found to be impacted in a study by Terry (2012). The study examined the relationship between differences in spoken dialect use and various emergent literacy skills among typically developing kindergarten children. A battery of assessments measuring vocabulary, dialect use, and emergent literacy skills were administered to 33 prekindergarten children from racially and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds. Results of the dialect variation measure varied widely but ultimately indicated that children who more frequently produced NMAE forms in speech performed more poorly than peers who produced fewer NMAE forms on tasks such as letter naming, sounds, identification of text components, production of the first sound in words, and identification and production of words that rhyme. Ortiz et al. (2012) similarly determined, through secondary analysis of data from 20 classrooms in high-poverty schools, that dialect variation had a moderate correlation with first-grade reading performance, indicating that students who spoke NMAE more frequently at the beginning of kindergarten tended to have weaker first-grade reading performance.

Terry et al. (2010) discovered a somewhat different result in their investigation of the relationship between NMAE dialect use and performance on measures of receptive vocabulary, phonological awareness, and word recognition in first graders. Among the 780 students studied, children who used NMAE forms with moderate frequency achieved lower word reading scores than children who used NMAE forms infrequently or

frequently, demonstrating a nonlinear relationship between dialect variation and word reading. The study also found a significant negative linear relationship between dialect variation and phonological awareness and vocabulary skills, indicating that children who used more NMAE in speech had weaker phonological awareness and receptive vocabulary. Craig et al. (2009) also received interesting results in a study of 165 African American elementary school students examining the relationships between dialect, oracy and literacy tasks, and reading achievement. Reading scores were obtained through standardized test scores and structured oral narratives; and child-centered, written narratives were collected, analyzed, and coded for AAE features. The results did indicate that as student rates of AAE feature production increased, reading achievement scores decreased; however, they further discovered that AAE rates of feature production in the writing task directly predicted reading outcomes, whereas AAE rates in oracy tasks did not.

Several theories have been put forth to explain the relationship between AAE and other NMAE dialects and poor literacy achievement. The linguistic interference or linguistic mismatch theory described by Terry (2012) and others (Goodman & Buck, 1997; Terry et al., 2010; White, 1976) is the oldest of these theories. Linguistic interference posits that difficulties in reading may result in part from mismatches between speech and print. Specifically, AAE-speaking children encounter greater difficulty than most children learning letter-sound correspondences, grammatical forms, and other written forms because spoken AAE forms are not represented in MAE orthography. It would follow that higher rates of AAE use would be associated with poorer literacy skills. The second prominent theory regarding the relationship between NMAE and

reading difficulties is called the teacher bias theory. Terry et al. (2010) and Terry (2012) explained that the teacher bias theory suggests that relationships between dialect variation and literacy achievement are due to negative associations and interactions with teachers who hold deficit views of NMAE. Teachers may view NMAE dialects as “bad English” or hold inappropriate assumptions that children who produce NMAE forms in school are disadvantaged, uneducated, or disabled. The result of these assumptions is altered interactions with students, including overcorrection of dialect use, placement in less challenging reading groups, or provision of instruction not suited to the student’s actual needs. Both White (1976) and Weaver (1983) suggested that what teachers view as phonological or grammatical “miscues” are actually student attempts to read for meaning and reencode that meaning into their own language patterns. Therefore, the language barrier “exists primarily in the minds and attitudes of the teachers” (Weaver, 1983, p. 23).

A third theory, the linguistic awareness theory (also referred to as the linguistic flexibility hypothesis), has recently gained significant support from researchers such as Terry et al. (2010), Terry (2012), Apel and Thomas-Tate (2009), and Conlin (2009). This theory asserts that the “amount of NMAE forms children produce in specific contexts may be indicative of their metalinguistic awareness, which in turn is critical for literacy achievement” (Terry, 2012, p. 74). Linguistic awareness theory considers the importance of metalinguistic knowledge to literacy learning and of social contexts to language variation and usage. The theory recognizes that dialects differ systematically in critical aspects of language, and the differences may have some impact on the development of children’s metalinguistic skills. More simply, differences between NMAE and MAE systems of speech inhibit awareness of MAE’s phonetic and grammatical system, and

this lack of awareness is what impedes progress in reading. Findings from Terry et al.'s (2010) investigation indicated that children who used a greater amount of NMAE forms exhibited weaker vocabulary skills and that frequent NMAE use appeared to compromise phonological awareness in first graders, even when explicit instruction was provided. Terry (2012) went further to state that for some children, "oral language and vocabulary weaknesses make mismatches between NMAE speech and standard orthography even more difficult to resolve" (p. 73). Without awareness of the differences between sounds and letters in NMAE and MAE systems, reading becomes an almost insurmountable task. An additional study by Johnston (2011) sought to determine which instructional strategies elementary school principals and fourth-grade teachers perceive to substantially support the development of MAE language skills and reading proficiency in African-American students. The descriptive case study involved principals and teachers in 10 schools representative of the low socioeconomic regions of the city with a large volume of African-American students. Both teachers and principals agreed that the district-approved language arts curriculum did not effectively meet the language needs of African-American students, largely due to student unfamiliarity with the vocabulary. Multiple teachers indicated that they successfully utilized English proficiency programs with their African-American students to promote growth in literacy achievement. Ten of the 13 teachers agreed that the English proficiency programs were more effective than the standard curriculum. This would indicate that teachers recognize that student language is different from that of the classroom and the text and that the difference hinders advancement in reading. The study concluded that African-American students fall behind due to the discrepancies between the language used at home and the MAE

language used at school. It is interesting to note that over half of the teacher respondents had received professional development designed to increase knowledge of African-American speech.

### **Dialect Shifting**

While AAE tends to be the main vernacular spoken by young children in the African-American community, exposure to the mainstream culture and particularly school language appears to impact language usage of AAE-speaking children. Multiple studies have found that children as young as first grade begin to systematically decrease their dialect feature productions in school settings (Craig & Washington, 2006; Craig et al., 2009; Terry et al., 2012), providing support for the theory that some African-American students independently learn to shift away from AAE toward MAE in literacy tasks across the elementary grades. The change manifests in spoken discourse in first grade and reading aloud in third grade (Craig & Washington, 2006). This phenomenon is referred to as “code switching” or “dialect shifting.”

Recent studies suggest that the ability to dialect shift is beneficial to students in the acquisition of literacy skills, especially for reading and spelling (Craig et al., 2009; Craig, Kolenic, & Hensel, 2014; Terry et al., 2012). The dialect shifting-reading achievement hypothesis posits that “students who adapt to the SAE language of the classroom and curriculum should find classroom learning in general and the acquisition of literacy achievement in particular to be less of a challenge than do those who do not make this adaptation” (Craig et al., 2009, p. 841). A study by Terry et al. (2012) explored whether a change in NMAE use from first to second grade was associated with gains in word reading and reading comprehension skills. Forty-nine NMAE-speaking

students were evaluated three times throughout the school year on the picture vocabulary, letter-word identification, and passage comprehension subtests of the Woodcock Johnson 3. The study found that children's MAE use increased significantly during the first-grade year and that children who increased MAE use more sharply over the year were more likely to show greater growth in letter-word reading and passage comprehension in first and second grade. Similarly, the 2009 study by Craig et al. examined the relationships between the ability to dialect shift from oracy to literacy tasks and reading achievement. The study of 165 first through fifth grade AAE-speaking students confirmed their dialect shifting-reading achievement hypothesis that African-American students who speak AAE but who shift toward MAE in literacy tasks academically surpass students who fail to make the shift. Shifting to MAE in writing positively impacted reading outcomes beyond the influences characterized by superior writing abilities. The study further indicated that many African-American students (85% in the present study) are able to dialect shift.

The environment in which AAE-speaking students are educated is important in the development of the ability to dialect shift. Many studies of dialect variation and literacy skills have not considered the school setting as a factor in rates of AAE feature production. An analysis of the relationship between first-grade student NMAE dialect use and performance on three literacy measures by Terry et al. (2010) is a rare exception. The study cited Wolfram, Adger, and Christian (1999) in its assertion that school context involves factors such as age, race, SES, discourse context, and speech partners, all of which influence dialect use. Terry et al.'s (2010) study of 617 racially diverse children hypothesized that children's acquirement of and adeptness with dialect shifting may be dependent on their sociocultural environment. The study further speculated that children



in more diverse linguistic communities may be presented with more occasions to observe differences between spoken dialects and practice, shifting between them for certain contexts. Study participants were drawn from a larger randomized control field study on literacy instruction and included public school attendees from 18 schools in urban, urban-fringe, and rural communities. The schools varied by the percentage of children who participated in the U.S. FARL program. Forty-five percent of the children qualified for FARL. Additional data were collected on student dialect variation and language and literacy achievement using standardized measures. Results indicated that school context had greater implications for how dialect variation was related to reading achievement than race. Specifically, African-American children who used many NMAE forms in speech at more affluent schools where exposure to MAE is greater outperformed those at lower SES schools. In this study, the school FARL correlated highly with the percentage of African-American children in the school. It is likely that many of the higher SES schools were less racially and linguistically diverse, with most students speaking the mainstream dialect. Children who attended lower SES schools with less linguistic diversity may not have had as many opportunities to notice dialect differences, which could be reflected in poorer word-literacy achievement.

Research by Renn (2010) also found a pattern in dialect shifting among African-American children. The longitudinal study of 88 African-American children, 71% of whom originated from low-income families, attempted to determine the extent to which the formality of the environment affects AAE usage in order to “gain a better understanding of variation in AAE and determine whether young AAE speakers that are more competent at shifting between standard and non-standard speech varieties perform

better academically than those who do not shift” (p. 27). The number of participants increased at the Grade 6 mark, at which time participants recruited a friend of the same age, sex, and middle school in order to increase sample size. This recruitment phase resulted in a total of 70 additional participants who were followed through the completion of the end of the study. The investigators documented the subjects’ language and literacy skills in family and school environments from infancy through high school. Each year, subjects took standardized and nonstandardized language exams, and measurements of subjects’ home and school or childcare environments were collected. Early literacy skills were tested through standardized assessments from age four through fifth grade. Additional measures were added to study the children, their parents, and their teachers beginning in middle school; and several language samples were added to assess formal and informal language use through peer and adult tester interactions. Results point to at least three patterns of style shifting behavior over the course of childhood. First, children at the start of elementary school presented little to no style shifting behavior, suggesting that either children in early grades are not familiar with social cues that signify when it is appropriate to use nonstandard language variety as opposed to standard grammar or grammars of dialect speakers may not be fully developed at this age. The second finding was an overall increase in style shifting during the course of elementary school years. During this time, speakers appear to gain social awareness or develop the ability to adjust their language use in response to the setting; however, the beginning of middle school marks a plateau in ability to dialect shift. These findings indicate the importance of targeting children at early ages in order to maximize their ability to become proficient in the standard dialect.

### **Teacher Perception of AAE**

Teacher perception is widely considered to be an additional complicating factor affecting the academic achievement of children who speak AAE. Growing diversity in public school requires teachers to accept responsibility for the academic success of all students, which necessitates a level of cultural sensitivity and understanding of diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. Wolfram (2013) suggested that children are immersed in language attitudes and that we are socialized to view language forms as either right or wrong; adults tend to label speech as correct or incorrect. Children, particularly those of school age, are directly impacted by such labels. Viewing AAE-speaking student speech patterns as “incorrect” may influence the interactions and expectations of teachers, which can lead to differences in expectations, the delivery of curriculum, and interpretation of assessment. According to Beneke and Cheatham (2015),

Educators’ beliefs and actions about language diversity have important implications for inclusive learning environments, because misperceptions can result in marginalizing children who speak AAE and create barriers to equitable participation in early childhood programs.... Educators’ misunderstandings of AAE can unintentionally interfere with children’s academic success and sense of belonging as well as result in making inappropriate judgments about children’s abilities based on the way they talk. (p. 129)

Many studies support this theory, indicating a “deficit” view regarding dialects that differ from MAE which could be reflected in the classroom (Beneke & Cheatham, 2015; Esselman, 1978; Jones, 2011; Lamb, 1975; Lawson, 2010; McClendon, 2016; Miller,

2012; Postell, 2011; Pringle et al., 2010).

A study by Jones (2011) addressed teacher perceptions and methods of managing AAE usage in the classroom. High school English teachers from 575 randomly selected secondary schools completed surveys regarding their awareness, views, and instructional ideas regarding AAE. Results of the open-ended questions regarding instructional strategies and AAE uncovered three themes which indicated a lack of respect for or negative attitude towards AAE usage in the classroom. The first theme recognized was teachers who utilized correction, only modeling and accepting MAE use in the classroom. One participant forced students to repeat their statements in MAE, while another forbade use of AAE and declared that it was not a “legitimate” dialect. The second theme included teachers who used private conferences to address AAE use in the classroom due to a refusal to acknowledge that AAE is a widely spoken dialect. Students of these teachers were singled out as “different” due to their use of AAE and advised that the use of the dialect form was not acceptable. The third theme discovered was the group of English teachers who did not address AAE usage in the classroom at all, possibly displaying tolerance or avoiding their own inexperience with nonstandard forms of English. Lawson (2010) surveyed 61 teachers from 17 different schools regarding their attitudes toward AAE as related to student achievement in reading. Fifty percent of participants had a negative attitude about structure and usefulness of AAE, while 20% had a neutral attitude. Fifty-seven percent had a negative attitude regarding consequences of using and accepting AAE in the classroom. These attitudes fail to support the language needs of AAE-speaking students and demean the students and their culture.

Research indicates that teacher expectations are one of the multiple factors that impact student achievement. Teachers who hold negative views of AAE as an inferior dialect may believe that students who speak AAE are less intelligent and less academically capable than their MAE-speaking peers, leading teachers to hold lower academic expectations of AAE-speaking students. Miller (2012) asserted that speakers of stigmatized varieties of the English language are often judged as less educated and less proficient than speakers of more esteemed variations. This erroneous judgment can have a profound impact on speakers' academic achievement and language assessment in the school setting. Pringle et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative and interpretive study of African-American high school student perceptions of teacher expectations. Participants included 10 African-American senior students from a majority White school and 38 African-American students from a largely minority populated high school. Researchers utilized a semi-structured interview protocol which involved a series of 15 open-ended questions about their relationships with teachers, grading and instructional policies, and personal interactions. Three fourths of the students reported a perception of lower expectations for them. Over one half of the African-American students interviewed felt that race influenced the way they were viewed by their teachers. Students expressing this view were from both schools and had few, if any, ethnic minority teachers. Flemister-White (2009) researched teacher training, experience, and background in relation to perceptions toward teaching AAE-speaking students. Flemister-White used a qualitative, phenomenological approach, gathering data from nine intermediate-level teachers through observation, interviews, and examples of corrected student texts. Three participants believed that dialect use had a negative impact on student grades and that use

of AAE should be discouraged, despite understanding that dialects are cultural markers and are effective methods of communication. Further, the participants stated that dialect use does a disservice to how people are perceived by society and that this directly affects their chances for success.

A deficit view of AAE and a perception of decreased expectations may also affect teacher-student relationships. Perceptions of AAE are also thought to impact classroom interactions between teacher and student, which can in turn affect student motivation. Children are sensitive to the language they use. Their language is a part of them and is reflective of their family and their community. Negative perceptions of the AAE dialect as inferior and of AAE-speaking students as less capable could be perceived as a form of rejection. Pringle et al.'s (2010) study indicated that students interpreted teacher expectations as an indicator of whether the teacher cared about them. The study ultimately found that a perception of lower teacher expectations decreased student feelings of belonging within the classroom. Davis, Gabelman, and Wingfield (2011) investigated the role of teacher-child relationships as a form of social capital that contributes to student engagement through semi-structured individual interviews of 27 first-grade, African-American students from two low-income public charter schools. More simply, the study evaluated how the children's motivation was affected by their feelings of closeness to and influence by their teacher. Children reported treating students with kindness and respect and providing support as two factors influencing their feelings of closeness to their teacher, while influence was increased by the ability to trust their teacher. Perceptions of equity also influenced the teacher-student relationship, with students indicating a feeling of closeness as a result of being given as much attention as

other students in the classroom and increased influence due to effort to have all students meet performance expectations.

Teacher demographics are often discussed in relation to negative attitudes regarding AAE. In general, factors thought to be related to teacher perception include gender, age, education, race, number of years teaching, exposure to multicultural populations, and grade levels taught. Many assume that negative perceptions are held by “old-fashioned” teachers and those who have less experience in teaching and with children who speak a dialect other than MAE. Flemister-White (2009) researched teacher training, experience, and background in relation to perceptions toward teaching AAE-speaking students. Six of nine participant perceptions about teaching a diverse student body were altered after they engaged with a multicultural student population. Four of the participants indicated that their cultural and linguistic backgrounds along with their personal history with diversity influenced their perceptions. Overall, the factors that showed a direct bearing on participant perceptions included age, years of teaching experience, personal language patterns, cultural background, interactions with diverse populations, participation in credential programs, other educational experiences, beliefs about dialect use, and previous experiences with multicultural education. Gender was the only individual attribute with no bearing on participant perceptions. Fogel and Ehri (2006) engaged 73 teachers in a study to evaluate the process of sensitizing and educating MAE-speaking teachers in the use of AAE dialect forms in the classroom. The study compared three instructional approaches: exposure to text; exposure plus strategy instruction; and exposure, strategies, and guided practice. Results indicated that instruction was effective in modestly improving attitudes towards AAE; however, the

average shift in attitudes moved only from a slightly negative to a neutral position. Jones (2011) found that age of participants had the most discrepancy in responses as related to awareness of AAE, although gender and ethnicity also resulted in statistically significant differences.

Other studies have negated the notion that negative attitudes toward AAE are determined by advanced education level, age, and other personal characteristics. Esselman's (1978) study found a significant inverse relationship between teacher educational level and their perceptions of AAE; that is, teachers with more education presented less negative perceptions of AAE. The study also resulted in a finding that young teachers (less than 41 years old) were more negative in their perceptions of AAE than older teachers. There was no significant difference in attitudes in relation to years teaching. Jones (2011) also failed to find significance in perceptions of AAE as related to teaching experience.

### **Reading Recovery and African-American Students**

Reading Recovery is a standardized, short-term intervention that supports classroom instruction for the lowest achieving students in first grade. Children meet individually with a specially trained teacher for 30 minutes daily for a span ranging from 12 to 20 weeks. The goal of Reading Recovery is to “dramatically reduce the number of first-grade students who have extreme difficulty learning to read and write and to reduce the cost of these learners to educational systems” (Reading Recovery Council of North America, n.d., para. 2). Developed by Marie Clay in New Zealand 30 years ago, Reading Recovery has been adopted in most states within the United States as well as in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia.



In order to provide the most effective intervention, Reading Recovery lessons are individually tailored to each child's unique literacy needs. Reading Recovery teachers initially participate in a yearlong training, then continue to receive mandatory professional development designed to enable teachers to develop optimal learning opportunities for children with diverse literacy needs. The program aims to ensure that the students with the most needs have the most highly skilled and well-trained teachers. Reading Recovery lessons integrate the five essential components of reading instruction: phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Teaching decisions are guided by data gathered from careful observation of the student's reading and writing behaviors during each session. Lessons involve a variety of literacy strategies, including reading familiar books, reading the new book from the previous day, working with letters and/or words using magnetic letters, writing a story, assembling a cut up story, and reading a new book. Every lesson also includes work on letter/sound relationships to aid in decoding.

Entry into the program is determined by performance on Clay's (2013) *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Denton, Ciancio, & Fletcher, 2006), which is composed of six subtests. The six reading and writing subtests include Letter Identification, Word Test, Concepts About Print, Writing Vocabulary, Hearing and Recording Sounds In Words, and Text Reading. The Letter Identification subtest assesses which letters the child knows and determines the preferred method of identification. The Word Test reveals whether the child is building a personal resource of reading vocabulary. What the child knows about the way spoken language is represented in print is determined in the Concepts About Print subtest, while Writing Vocabulary

ascertains if the child is building a personal resource of known words that can be written in every detail. Phonemic Awareness assesses how the child represents sounds in graphic form in the Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words subtest. Text Reading establishes the appropriate level of text difficulty and records what the child does when reading continuous text. The lowest performing first-grade students in the school qualify for Reading Recovery services.

At the end of the program, students are assigned to one of five end-of-program categories. “Successful” or “discontinued” students complete the entire program and meet the criteria for completion. Students who do not meet the criteria after 20 weeks of intervention are “recommended” for further intervention beyond Reading Recovery. Children who remain in the program but do not receive 20 weeks of intervention by the end of the school year are considered to have received an “incomplete” program. Students who move or leave the school are designated as “moved,” and students who are removed from the program under other circumstances are labeled as “none of the above.” Wilson and Daviss (1994) claimed that 75% of children with a complete Reading Recovery intervention meet grade-level expectations and can make progress with standard classroom instruction without aid of further additional support. The alternate outcome advertised is that a student may make significant progress but fall short of grade-level expectations, resulting in recommendation for additional evaluation and further action. Reading Recovery data are reported for ongoing research and evaluation to the International Data Evaluation Center (IDEC), an ongoing research project at the College of Education and Human Ecology at the Ohio State University. Reading Recovery teachers are responsible for entering data through IDEC’s secure website for

each student served. Annual evaluation reports are generated for each training site, school, and school district.

In general, the limited independent research on the Reading Recovery program has shown the program to be effective for a range of students. Burroughs-Lange and Douetil (2007) conducted naturalistic design research with low-income, 6-year-old students over the course of one school year. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of Reading Recovery in achieving literacy gains for struggling readers and explore the overall impact of Reading Recovery on the literacy levels of all students within the classroom setting. The study showed that children who received Reading Recovery operated within average expectations for their age in reading and writing at the end of the school year, while students in comparison schools who did not benefit from the intervention made very little progress in literacy during the school year. Additionally, students in school with Reading Recovery ended the year 4 months ahead of classrooms in schools without Reading Recovery on a test of word recognition and phonic skills, which may demonstrate the impact of Reading Recovery strategies being utilized in the general classroom setting.

Other research has raised concerns about access to and the efficacy of Reading Recovery, particularly for African-American students. Many studies of the effectiveness of the intervention neglect to attend to race and do not address systemic biases that favor some populations and challenge others. A study by Compton-Lilly (2011) evaluated inequities related to the program's success for particular groups of students, specifically the students who are not counted in analysis, to reveal how implementation policies associated with Reading Recovery intersect with race. The quantitative study included

211 students, 135 African American and 76 White, who had participated in Reading Recovery over the course of the school year. Compton-Lilly (2011) examined program outcomes for African-American and White students using raw numbers and percentages and identified success rates for all children for multiple subgroups. Tests were also used to examine delivery aspects of the program, including number of weeks, number of lessons, and student absences. The initial literacy achievement levels of the two groups of students were also documented. Findings revealed that the African-American students had statistically lower success rates in Reading Recovery than their non-White counterparts even though African-American children entered the program with lower scores on reading assessments and that a disproportionate number of African-American students received incomplete programs. The study also found that African-American students moved more often than White students and were unable to complete the Reading Recovery program. African-American children tended to accumulate a greater number of absences over the course of a complete program, thus extending their time in the program. Compton-Lilly's (2011) findings suggested that the current implementation of Reading Recovery for African-American students is somewhat problematic in the particular area studied.

An earlier case study by Compton-Lilly (2005) highlighted the language-based miscues that can decrease scores on Reading Recovery assessments. Compton-Lilly (2005) pointed out that when analyzing the assessments, teachers must pay attention to both the qualitative analysis and quantitative scores and carefully consider the significance of the errors the child made. Dialect-based miscues may not necessarily reflect difficulties with reading; they may be a child's method of making sense of the text

within his/her linguistic background.

### **Research Questions**

The relationship between AAE and early development of literacy achievement, the impact of school context on Reading Recovery intervention progress for AAE-speaking students, and the relationship of teacher perceptions of AAE to school context were the points of focus for the study. The following research questions were given consideration in conducting the study.

1. How does growth in Reading Recovery intervention compare for children who are AAE speakers compared to MAE speakers in general?
2. What is the difference in preintervention literacy skill levels of AAE-speaking students in relationship to school demographics?
3. How does growth in literacy skills of AAE-speaking students during Reading Recovery intervention compare by school demographics?
4. How do teacher attitudes towards AAE differ by school demographics?

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 began with an introduction to AAE and an explanation of its qualities and primary purveyors. The researched relationship between AAE and literacy was examined and studies were presented demonstrating the negative academic outcomes in elementary school. Dialect shifting was defined, and common patterns of dialect shifting in African-American students were identified. Teacher perception was also explored, in addition to the impact of perception on teacher expectations. Finally, Reading Recovery was introduced and the concerns regarding factors that impact student outcomes were discussed. The review of the literature supported the need to investigate the role of AAE usage in literacy progress, the effect of school context on early literacy growth for AAE-

speaking students, and the impact of teacher perceptions of AAE and expectations on student success. By providing information on the relationships between AAE, school context, and literacy growth, teachers will be better able to understand and assist AAE-speaking students in their early literacy development.

Chapter 3 introduces the methods and instruments for gathering data needed to identify these factors. Research questions and the design of the study are presented, and limitations to research are identified and discussed.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Since evidence suggests that MAE students perform significantly better on standardized tests in reading and AAE-speaking students can improve their skills in speaking MAE, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between exposure to varying levels of MAE and specific literacy skills for AAE-speaking students. These associations were explored because American schools have continually become more culturally and linguistically diverse, with growing numbers of children whose primary language is English but whose nonmainstream dialect is significantly different from language encountered in formal settings such as schools. Chapter 3 describes the methods used to address the purpose and research questions of this study. The chapter includes information on research type and design, the advantages and disadvantages of the study design and how they were addressed, rationale for design choice, population and sampling methods, instrumentation, data collection procedures, method of data analysis, and the limitations of the study.

#### **Research Questions**

The relationship between AAE and early development of literacy skills, the impact of school demographics on intervention progress, and the relationship of school demographics to teacher perceptions of AAE were the focal points of the study. The researcher intended to evaluate the relationship between development of literacy skills and school demographics through the use of school demographic information and pre and postintervention data collected for the Reading Recovery program. Teacher perceptions were analyzed by collecting survey information from Reading Recovery and first-grade teachers at each of the schools in the study. The following questions were given

consideration in conducting the study.

1. How does growth in Reading Recovery intervention compare for children who are AAE speakers compared to MAE speakers in general?
2. What is the difference in preintervention literacy skill levels of AAE-speaking students in relationship to school demographics?
3. How does growth in literacy skills of AAE-speaking students during Reading Recovery intervention compare by school demographics?
4. How do teacher attitudes towards AAE differ by school demographics?

### **Study Design**

The comparative study utilized a quantitative research method of data collection through standardized instruments and surveys. The need to compare progress in literacy intervention for African-American students in relation to different school demographics supported the use for quantitative research for this study. A quantitative design was employed to ensure objectivity. A comparative group design was used to explore the differences in preintervention literacy skills, growth in literacy skills, and growth in literacy skills in relation to dialect. Descriptive and inferential statistical procedures served to analyze data. Independent variables were dialect and school demographics. Dependent variables included growth of literacy skills and teacher attitudes toward AAE.

The advantages of the quantitative design included increased objectivity and accuracy of results. The use of standardized instruments increased the reliability of the resulting scores. The disadvantages of the design were the lack of detail on motivation and behavior of subjects. The quantitative design did not allow for contextual factors to interpret results or explain variations in student scores or teacher responses.



**Data Sources**

Data for the study were collected from multiple sources. Reading Recovery assessment data provided information on student literacy achievement. The assessments were administered and scores calculated by the Reading Recovery teachers. Student demographic information was gathered from school records and coded by school district personnel to protect student identity. Teachers provided their own demographic information via electronic surveys, through which the information on teacher perception of AAE was also collected.

**Participants**

The participants included first-grade students, first-grade teachers, and Reading Recovery teachers from 13 elementary schools in two adjacent public school districts in South Carolina. The poverty index for the schools ranged between 61-86%, with 11 of the 13 schools qualifying for Title 1 funding. The lowest African-American population per school was 11%, and the highest was 72%. Schools from each district qualified for inclusion in the study based on proximity, poverty index, and use of the Reading Recovery program as intervention for first-grade students. A total of 47 classroom teachers and 13 Reading Recovery teachers were invited to participate in the study. All teachers were female and predominantly White. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics on each school's demographics.

Table 2

*School-Wide Demographics*

Schools (n=13)	Total school enrollment	School FARL percentage	Title I status	Percent African American	Percent White	Percent Other
A	408	72.6	Yes	27	62	11
B	449	86.2	Yes	27	56	17
C	408	67.1	No	11	89	0
D	447	61.9	No	15	70	15
E	498	82	Yes	22	64	14
F	532	75.4	Yes	55	27	18
G	387	77.3	Yes	43	35	22
H	348	83.4	Yes	72	22	6
I	492	61.8	Yes	39	52	9
J	592	72.1	Yes	34	39	27
K	493	66.5	Yes	70	27	3
L	558	66.6	Yes	36	37	27
M	377	77.4	Yes	53	33	14

Student participants included approximately 61 typically developing first-grade students between ages 5 and 6 years old. This final student sample was culled from a larger population of 109 students who received Reading Recovery services during the school year. Student selection for the final sample was dependent upon participation in the Reading Recovery program, qualification for FARL, and completion of a full Reading Recovery program. Students receiving formal speech language intervention and students described as having English as a second language were excluded from participation. Descriptive statistics for the initial student population and final student sample are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

*Student Sample by Ethnicity, FARL Status, and Reading Recovery Program Status*

	African American			White			Other (Hispanic)		
	FP	R	FREE	FP	R	FREE	FP	R	FREE
Original Population (n=109)	8	1	61	7	0	28	0	0	4
Students with complete RR programs (n= 74)	3	0	42	7	0	19	0	0	3
Final Student Sample (n=61)	0	0	42	0	0	19	0	0	0

*Note.* FP= Full Pay; R= Reduced Pay; FREE= Free.

Children in the final student sample were ethnically diverse, with the highest percentage being described as African American (69%) and the remainder of the sample (31%) being White. Information on race was collected from individual school records by school personnel. Codes were assigned to each student by school personnel to assure that students would not be identifiable to the researcher, and classroom teachers were given the task of confirming the use of dialect (AAE or MAE) spoken by students in the classroom by listening to daily verbal intercourse of students. Teachers received a list of common indicators of AAE speech (Appendix A) to help them make their confirmation.

### **Instruments for Data Collection**

**Literacy achievement.** Literacy achievement was assessed using the OSELA (Clay, 2013). The OSELA is a standardized screening and instructional tool that uses six subtests to measure letter identification, word reading, phonemic awareness, writing vocabulary, concepts of print, and text reading level. The OSELA abides by established standards of assessment, including content and construct validity and reliability (Denton et al., 2006). Students in this study were administered the entire assessment both before

the intervention period and immediately following Reading Recovery intervention.

Scores from individual tasks were recorded for this study to represent student beginning and postintervention literacy skills.

**Teacher perception.** The AAE Teacher Attitude Scale (AAETAS, Appendix B) was used in this study to assess teacher perceptions of AAE. The AAETAS is a 4-point, 46-item Likert scale created by Hoover, McNair-Knox, Lewis, and Politzer (1997). The instrument has been used in teacher workshops throughout the United States to discover teacher attitudes toward AAE and has been utilized in several other research studies such as Seay Oliver (2012) and McClendon (2016). The AAETAS has 23 pro and 23 con statements, resulting in scores ranging from 46-184. The researcher requested permission to use the instrument (Appendix C) and received permission from author Dr. Faye McNair-Knox (Appendix D).

### **Data Collection**

Permission to complete the study, including collecting student data and surveying teachers, was secured from each school district (Appendix E). Schools were assigned to one of two groups based on the school demographics, specifically the African American to White population ratio. Schools with greater than 50% White population were considered high exposure (HE) to MAE, while those with 49% or less were assigned to the low exposure (LE) group. For purposes of this study, exposure referred to the amount of MAE that students experience during the school day. As a result of the grouping, the HE group contained six schools, while the LE group included seven schools. First-grade classroom teachers were provided a list of common features of AAE and asked to identify whether or not AAE is spoken by students through daily discourse. African-American

students who did not display features of AAE were included in the MAE category. Classroom teachers screened first-grade students at the beginning of each school semester to identify the students with the lowest literacy achievement for recommendation to intervention. Reading Recovery teachers then administered OETAS in full to each student to determine entry into the program. The six subtests scores were recorded to indicate entry literacy levels. Each Reading Recovery teacher implemented intervention for at least four students each semester. Each student received between 12 to 20 weeks of intervention, with length of intervention dependent upon individual progress, attendance, and date of entry into intervention. Once the intervention period ended, Reading Recovery teachers repeated the OETAS with each student. Final subtest scores were recorded by Reading Recovery teachers and students were assigned an end-of-program status. All measures were administered and scored in standardized format by trained Reading Recovery teachers. In order to protect student identity, school personnel in each district assigned each Reading Recovery student a code and compiled student data including race, FARL status, dialect, and OSELA scores into a spreadsheet.

A letter of introduction and purpose, including informed consent (Appendix F), was provided to first-grade classroom teachers and Reading Recovery teachers. Teachers responded to the teacher demographic survey, in addition to completing the AAETAS electronically. Responses from the survey were transmitted directly into an electronic spreadsheet, with no identifying information other than the demographics included in the teacher demographic survey. All responses were anonymous.

### **Analysis**

A *t* test for independent samples was used to compare data for each research

question. The test compared OSELA subtest scores of the AAE and MAE student groups as well as the preintervention literacy skills of HE groups to LE student groups. A separate  $t$  test examined the difference in average growth in literacy skills of AAE-speaking students in the HE and LE student groups. A  $t$  test was also utilized to compare teacher attitudes toward AAE by school demographics.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of the study included the relatively smaller number of participants for a quantitative analysis and potential response bias. Quantitative studies typically involve large numbers of participants. This study involved a smaller number of participants; however, the sample was sufficient for the statistical analysis selected. Response bias on the AAETAS was a possibility, as teachers may have attempted to respond in a favorable manner. This limitation was addressed through the removal of identifying personal information on survey responses in order to provide individual anonymity.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 described the methods used to address the purpose and research questions of this study. The chapter explained the quantitative design of the study and its selection as an objective design choice. The population included first-grade students and first-grade teachers from 13 public elementary schools in South Carolina. Students were selected based on their participation in the Reading Recovery intervention program. Student data were collected by trained Reading Recovery teachers using the results of the OSELA, and teacher data were collected with the AAETAS by electronic survey. Data were collected into two distinct groups, high MAE exposure and low MAE exposure. Group data were averaged and analyzed using  $t$  tests. Limitations of the study

methodology included the small number of participants for a quantitative study and the possibility of response bias for teacher participants.

Chapter 4 includes a review of the purpose of the study, research questions, research design, population and methods of sampling, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and an analysis of the data. Findings regarding individual students and teachers as well as group findings are presented and explained. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings of the study.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship between exposure to MAE and Reading Recovery intervention literacy skills for AAE-speaking first-grade students and the perceptions of the teachers who instruct these students. The research was conducted because of the increasing number of students whose primary language is English but whose nonmainstream dialect is significantly different from the formal language encountered in the school setting.

In Chapter 4, the results of the student data collection and teacher survey relating to the research questions posed in the study are reported. This chapter is divided into four sections to present the data collected in this study. The first section titled Research Questions describes the purpose of the study and presents the research questions. In the second section titled Research Design, the researcher briefly reviews the methodology and the rationale for the instruments utilized in the study. The third section presents findings from the study conducted which address the research questions. The final section concludes and summarizes the chapter.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between exposure to MAE and growth in Reading Recovery literacy skills for AAE-speaking students and to determine the attitudes toward AAE of teachers who instruct those students. The following research questions were utilized in the study.

1. How does growth in Reading Recovery intervention compare for children who are AAE speakers compared to MAE speakers in general?
2. What is the difference in preintervention literacy skill levels of AAE-speaking



students in relationship to school demographics?

3. How does growth in literacy skills of AAE-speaking students during Reading Recovery intervention compare by school demographics?
4. How do teacher attitudes towards AAE differ by school demographics?

### **Research Design**

The study was conducted using a quantitative method design. The quantitative approach allows for examination of the relationship between variables (Creswell, 2009). This design was chosen due to the numerical quality of the resulting data, in addition to the structured methods used to gather data. The study included numerical data from the OSELA (Clay, 2013) used in Reading Recovery for entry and exit assessment. The study also utilized the AAETAS (Hoover et al., 1997), which consists of close-ended questions with response options on a Likert-type scale. A *t* test for independent samples was used to determine the effect of exposure to MAE on AAE-speaking student growth in Reading Recovery literacy skills. The effect of school student demographics on teacher attitude towards AAE was measured using a *t* test for independent samples as well.

### **Data Findings**

Relationships between exposure to MAE and growth in Reading Recovery literacy skills were examined, while controlling for SES. The selected districts provided Reading Recovery intervention to 109 (N=109) first-grade students in the 2017-2018 school year. Of those students, 65 students were African American, three students were Hispanic, and 41 students were White. Fifteen students were eliminated from the study due to their full pay lunch status, which could indicate they were not living in low-income homes or the free lunch application was not completed by the family. The three

Hispanic students were not considered in the analysis due to the possibility that English was not the primary language in their homes. One student was not included due to incomplete entry and exit scores. Twenty-nine additional students who did not receive a full Reading Recovery program, either due to time or transience, were also eliminated from analysis involving growth. The remaining 61 students' data were utilized in data analysis for the study, including 10 African-American students from predominantly White schools, 32 African-American students from predominantly African-American or racially balanced schools, and 19 White students from predominantly White schools. All students included in the study received free or reduced lunch. Demographic information for each school included in the study is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*2017-2018 School Racial and Socioeconomic Demographic Information*

Group	School #	African-American students	White Students	FARL percentage
High Exposure to MAE	1	111	253	72.6
	2	122	250	86.2
	3	45	362	67.1
	4	65	314	61.9
	5	109	321	82
	6	190	257	61.8
Low Exposure to MAE	7	290	145	75.4
	8	167	136	77.3
	9	252	75	83.4
	10	203	230	72.1
	11	346	135	66.5
	12	201	207	66.6
	13	199	123	77.4

### **AAE versus MAE Growth**

The first research question compared growth in Reading Recovery literacy skills for AAE-speaking and MAE-speaking students. An independent samples *t* test was

performed to determine whether there was a significant difference between the group means of the AAE-speaking students and the MAE-speaking students for each of the subtests on the OSELA. The independent samples  $t$  test compares the means of the same variable for two independent populations to determine whether there is statistical evidence that the associated population means differ significantly (Trochim, 2006). Subtests included Letter Identification, the Ohio Word Test, Concepts About Print, Writing Vocabulary, Hearing and Recording Sound, and Text Reading Level. Entry and exit OSELA subtest mean scores for AAE-speaking students and MAE-speaking students are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

*OSELA Subtest Mean Entry and Exit Scores*

	AAE-Speaking Students (n=42)		MAE-Speaking Students (n=19)	
	Entry	Exit	Entry	Exit
Letter Identification	47.2	53.1	45.1	51
Ohio Word Test	5.8	16.1	4.3	14.1
Concepts About Print	12.1	18.6	11.8	17.6
Writing Vocabulary	17.5	42.6	10.2	28.9
Hearing and Recording Sound	20.5	34.1	19.4	32.1
Text Reading Level	2.6	13.1	2.3	12.3

Entry scores refer to the scores collected prior to Reading Recovery intervention, while exit scores were collected after the full program of Reading Recovery was administered. The descriptive statistics for each of the subtests indicated no apparent difference in mean entry and exit scores for AAE and MAE students. Upon preliminary examination, average pre and postintervention scores are similar for the groups. More specifically, mean entry and exit scores for each subtest were within two points between the groups. Table 6 shows descriptive statistics for the mean growth on OSELA subtests

for AAE-speaking students and MAE-speaking students.

Table 6

*Mean Growth on OSELA Subtests*

Subtest	AAE-Speaking Students (n=42)		MAE-Speaking Students (n=19)	
	Mean Growth	Standard Deviation	Mean Growth	Standard Deviation
Letter Identification	5.93	8.34	5.68	6.33
Ohio Word Test	10.38	4.20	9.79	5.23
Concepts About Print	6.69	3.97	6.32	4.76
Writing Vocabulary	25.19	9.50	18.79	8.28
Hearing and Recording Sound	13.31	10.02	13.11	9.51
Text Reading Level	10.50	3.43	10.32	5.37

Mean growth differences for the groups ranged between 0.15 and 0.66. The exception was Writing Vocabulary, which exhibited a mean growth difference of 6.4 between the groups. The researcher noted that on the Writing Vocabulary subtest, the AAE-speaking student group (range= 7-41) displayed a wider range of growth scores than the MAE-speaking student group (range= 4-27). Table 7 shows the results of analysis comparing the growth of the AAE-speaking group to that of the MAE-speaking group using the independent samples *t* test for each subtest.

Table 7

*Comparison of AAE-Speaking and MAE-Speaking Student Growth on Subtests*

	Mean Difference	Standard Error of Difference	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Letter Identification	.244	2.15	.114	59	.91
Ohio Word Test	.591	1.26	.471	59	.639
Concepts About Print	.375	1.17	.321	59	.750
Writing Vocabulary	6.40	2.53	2.531	59	.014
Hearing and Recording Sound	.204	2.73	.075	59	.941
Text Reading Level	.184	1.14	.162	59	.872

The difference in growth for the AAE-speaking group and the MAE-speaking group was not found to be significant ( $p > .05$ ) on most of the subtests; however, a significant difference was found upon analysis of the Writing Vocabulary subtest. The mean difference of 6.40 between the groups indicated that the AAE-speaking students improved substantially more in written vocabulary skills than the MAE-speaking group during the course of Reading Recovery intervention ( $t(59)=2.531, p=.014$ ).

The researcher also compared program outcomes between AAE and MAE students to evaluate for differences. Program outcomes are listed in Table 8.

Table 8

*Reading Recovery Program Outcomes*

	AAE-Speaking Students	MAE-Speaking Students
Students starting program	61	28
Students completing program	42 (69%)	19 (68%)
Complete program students who discontinued	28 (67%)	12 (63%)
Complete program students who were recommended for further intervention	13 (31%)	6 (32%)
Complete program students who finished in none of the above categories	1 (2%)	1 (5%)

Outcomes were similar between the groups, with 66.7% of AAE students completing the program successfully and 63.1% of the MAE group completing the program successfully. Percentages of students recommended for further intervention were equally similar. There was one student in each population who completed the program, but neither discontinued nor was recommended for further intervention.

### **Preintervention Literacy Skills of AAE Speakers**

Entry scores for African-American students who completed Reading Recovery intervention were used to analyze the difference between preintervention literacy skills of AAE-speaking students at high MAE exposure schools and low MAE exposure schools. Student groups included 10 African-American students from predominantly White schools (high MAE exposure) and 32 African-American students from predominantly African-American or racially balanced schools (low MAE exposure.) Preliminary examination of data from OSELA subtests indicated similar entry scores for both groups in most subtests, although the low MAE exposure sample scored slightly higher on five of the six subtests. Group means and standard deviations for preintervention scores are shown in Table 9.

Table 9

*Preintervention Mean OSELA Subtest Scores*

OSELA Subtest	High MAE Exposure (n=10)		Low MAE Exposure (n=32)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Letter Identification	41.6	14.63	48.94	4.86
Ohio Word Test	3.70	4.55	6.41	5.67
Concepts About Print	11.70	3.56	12.25	4.06
Writing Vocabulary	11.80	11.38	19.22	14.86
Hearing and Recording Sound	20.20	10.35	20.59	11.91
Text Reading Level	1.90	2.13	2.81	2.62

The most apparently disparate subtests were the Letter Identification (high MAE exposure mean=41.6 and low MAE exposure mean=48.94) and Writing Vocabulary (high MAE exposure mean=11.8 and low MAE exposure mean=19.22), suggesting that the low MAE exposure students entered intervention with higher overall scores on those subtests. An independent samples *t* test was utilized to determine whether the difference between the groups was significant. The results of the analysis are listed in Table 10.

Table 10

*Statistical Comparison of AAE-Speaking Students' Preintervention OSELA Scores*

	Mean Difference	Standard Error of Difference	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Letter Identification	7.34	2.95	2.48	40	.017
Ohio Word Test	2.71	1.97	1.37	40	.177
Concepts About Print	0.55	1.43	0.38	40	.703
Writing Vocabulary	7.42	5.13	1.45	40	.156
Hearing and Recording Sound	0.39	4.19	0.09	40	.926
Text Reading Level	0.91	0.91	1.00	40	.323

Upon statistical analysis, only one of the six subtests returned a statistically significant difference ( $p > .05$ ) in preintervention literacy skills. The analysis for the Letter Identification subtest resulted in a mean difference of 7.34, which proved to be a

significant difference between the high MAE and low MAE exposure groups ( $t(40)=2.48$ ,  $p=.017$ ).

### **Growth in Literacy Skills of AAE Speakers**

Only AAE-speaking students who completed Reading Recovery intervention were included in analysis of growth in Reading Recovery literacy skills. Ten students comprised the high MAE exposure group, while the low MAE exposure group contained 32 students. For the purposes of the current study, growth was defined as the difference between pre and postintervention OSELA subtest scores. Raw scores indicated that the high MAE exposure group exhibited slightly higher growth on four of the six subtests, while the low MAE showed slightly greater growth on Writing Vocabulary and Concepts About Print. The range of growth, mean, and standard deviation for each subtest are listed in Table 11.

Table 11

#### *OSELA Subtest Growth*

	High MAE Exposure (n=10)		Low MAE Exposure (n=32)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Letter Identification	11.3	14.23	4.25	4.57
Ohio Word Test	11.6	4.17	10	4.2
Concepts About Print	5.8	2.74	6.97	4.28
Writing Vocabulary	20.4	8.53	26.69	9.41
Hearing and Recording Sound	13.9	9.62	13.13	10.28
Text Reading Level	10.7	3.3	10.44	3.52

The most notable differences were on the Letter Identification and Writing Vocabulary subtests. The high MAE exposure group showed the greatest mean growth on the Letter Identification subtest ( $M=11.3$ ); however, the mean was inflated by one



outlying growth score of 49. The remaining growth scores for individuals in the group ranged from zero to 16. While the group means showed slight differences in growth on all subtests, the analysis found significant difference ( $t(40)=2.48, p=.018$ ) between high MAE exposure and low MAE exposure student groups on the Letter Identification subtest only.

### **Teacher Attitudes**

The researcher secured permission to conduct the study from the superintendents of the selected districts. Superintendents were provided a copy of the informed consent, the teacher profile form (Appendix G), and the AAETAS electronically and by physical postal mail. The AAETAS was sent electronically to 60 first-grade and Reading Recovery teachers at the 12 elementary schools that offered Reading Recovery within the specified districts. The researcher confirmed with district personnel that all possible participants instructed students in either a first-grade classroom or Reading Recovery intervention during the school year in which the selected student group received Reading Recovery instruction. A total of 32 ( $N=32$ ) first-grade and Reading Recovery teachers responded to the teacher survey. All respondents were female and the sample was predominantly White, with only three African-American teachers participating. Two responses from White teachers were omitted from group comparison because the teachers were unable to specify the racial demographic of their schools. This brought the total of responses used for analysis from 32 to 30. Of the respondents, 14 identified as working at predominantly White schools, and 16 identified as working at schools that were either predominantly African American or had an even distribution of White and African-American students.

The AAETAS (Hoover et al., 1997) was utilized to determine the perceptions of the first-grade and Reading Recovery teachers who instructed the students included in the study. The AAETAS contains 23 positive and 23 negative statements. The AAETAS is comprised of statements made by teachers in the 1970s, thus the language is reflective of that era. A summary of the responses to each question is provided in Table 12.

Table 12

*Summary of AAETAS Responses (n=32)*

Question	SA	MA	MD	SD	NR
1. African Americans need to know both standard and Black English in the school in order to survive in America.	4	11	11	6	0
2. African American English is a unique speech form influenced in its structure by West African languages.	4	16	7	1	4
3. African American English is a systematic, rule-governed language variety.	3	9	13	3	4
4. African American English should be eliminated.	0	4	18	10	0
5. African American English should be preserved to maintain oral understanding and communication among Black people of all ages and from all regions.	2	12	15	2	1
6. It is racist to demand that African American children take reading tests because their culture is so varied that reading is an insignificant skill.	0	0	4	28	0
7. African American English should be promoted in the school as part of African American children's culture.	1	6	18	7	0
8. Standard English is needed to replace African American English to help with worldwide communication.	3	12	15	2	0
9. It is not necessary for Black children to learn anything other than their own dialect of African American English in school.	1	0	13	18	0
10. There is no such thing as African American English.	1	5	17	9	0
11. The use of African American English is a reflection of unclear thinking on the part of the speaker.	0	3	18	11	0
12. African American children's language is so broken as to be virtually no language at all.	0	1	17	14	0
13. African Americans should talk the way everybody else does in this country.	1	6	21	4	0
14. African American English is principally a Southern speech form.	1	12	14	4	1
15. The African American community concept of discipline involves not letting children "do their own thing" and "hang loose."	0	4	23	4	1
16. African American kids have trouble learning because their parents won't help them at home.	1	9	15	7	0
17. When a child's native African American English is replaced by Standard English, she or he is introduced to concepts which will increase his learning capacity.	4	19	6	3	0

(continued)

Question	SA	MA	MD	SD	NR
18. The home life of African American children offers such limited cultural experiences that the school must fill in gaps.	2	7	15	8	0
19. African and African American hair and dress styles are very attractive.	9	19	3	0	1
20. African American kids would advance further in school without African American English.	1	12	17	2	0
21. African American English has a logic of its own, equal to that of any other language.	5	11	14	1	1
22. African American children can't learn to read unless African American Vernacular English is used as the medium of instruction in the schools.	0	0	12	20	0
23. African American people have their own distinctive pattern of speech which other people in this country should accept.	4	15	12	1	0
24. African American English was produced by its history in Africa and this country and not by any physical characteristics.	3	16	11	0	2
25. African American English can be expanded to fit any concept or idea imaginable.	6	11	15	0	0
26. Most African American people's major potential is in music, art, and dance.	0	1	14	17	0
27. African Americans should try to look like everybody else in this country rather than wearing Budas and Afros.	0	1	14	17	0
28. The home life of African American people provides a rich cultural experience directly connected to African origins.	2	16	12	1	1
29. The reason African American children have trouble learning in school is that they are not taught properly.	1	3	12	16	0
30. African American English is basically talking lazy.	0	6	14	12	0
31. African American children can be trained to pass any test written.	15	13	4	0	0
32. African American children can read in spite of the fact that most Basal readers are written in Standard English.	17	14	1	0	0
33. African American children have the same potential for achievement in math and science as any other people.	21	10	1	0	0
34. African American children are advantaged through African American English; it makes them bi-dialectal just as Chicanos are bilingual.	6	6	16	4	0
35. African American English is misuse of standard language.	0	16	11	5	0

(continued)

Question	SA	MA	MD	SD	NR
36. African American children should be allowed to choose their own course of study and behavior in school from an early age and should not be directed by the teacher.	0	0	5	27	0
37. Standard English is superior to nonstandard English in terms of grammatical structure.	9	19	2	2	0
38. African American English should be preserved because it creates a bond of solidarity among the people who speak it.	3	17	11	0	1
39. Acceptance of nonstandard dialects of English by teachers would lead to a lowering of standards in school.	6	14	8	4	0
40. African American English should be preserved because it helps African American feel at ease in informal situations.	3	19	9	1	0
41. African American English enhances the curriculum by enriching the language background of the children.	2	10	16	4	0
42. African American English expresses some things better than Standard English.	3	8	19	2	0
43. The reason African American people aren't moving as fast as they could is that they're not as industrious as they should be.	0	4	15	12	1
44. Since only Standard English is useful in getting a job, it should always be preferred over African American English.	5	17	9	1	0
45. African American English should be abandoned because it does not provide any benefits to anybody.	1	5	19	7	0
46. The reason African Americans aren't moving as fast as they could is that the system discriminates against them.	0	9	13	10	0

*Note.* SA=Strongly Agree; MA=Mildly Agree; MD=Mildly Disagree; SD= Strongly Disagree; NR=No Response Given.

The 46 items on the AAETAS result in a possible range of scores from 46 to 184 when scored. According to Hoover et al. (1997), a score above 160 points is considered a positive attitude toward the African-American dialect and the achievement potential of African-American students, while scores below 120 tend to indicate significant negative attitudes. For the purposes of this study, scores were reported as high, neutral, and low based on the statistical analyses of data in the current study. The 4-point scoring system used in the original AAETAS was applied in the current study. This system assigned numerical values to responses as follows:

- a) 4 points for strong agreement with a positive statement;
- b) 3 points for mild agreement with a positive statement;
- c) 2 points for mild disagreement with a positive statement;
- d) 1 point for strong disagreement with a positive statement
- e) 4 points for strong disagreement with a negative statement;
- f) 3 points for mild disagreement with a negative statement;
- g) 2 points for mild agreement with a negative statement;
- h) 1 point for strong agreement with a negative statement.

Scores were calculated by adding the assigned values of each question for each participant to give a total AAETAS score. The mean and standard deviation of the completed surveys were used in placing scores in categories of low, neutral, and high.

Table 13 compares previous survey construct and the new ranges based on data from the current study.

Table 13

*Comparison of Concepts for the Previous and Present AAETAS Studies*

Hoover et al. (1997) Original Study		Current Study	
Deficit	Below 120	Low	Below 109
Difference	120-160	Neutral	109-143
Excellence	Above 160	High	Above 143

The scores in the present study were divided into categories relative to the standard deviation (SD=16.57). Scores below 109 points are considered low, neutral scores are between 109 and 143 points, and scores above 143 points are considered high. In comparison, the original Hoover et al. (1997) study designated scores below 120 as significantly negative or deficit and scores above 160 as favorable towards AAE.

Mean responses to the individual items on the AAETAS in the current study

ranged from 1.5-3.875. The highest means were associated with statements 6, 22, and 36, with means of 3.875, 3.625, and 3.844 respectively. It is interesting to note that these questions were negatively framed, and the responses indicated mild to strong disagreement with these statements. The lowest means were assigned to statements 9 and 29, with means of 1.5 and 1.656 respectively. The statement with the most strongly agree responses was statement 33, “African American children have the same potential for achievement in math and science as any other people,” with 21 respondents. Conversely, 28 participants answered strongly disagree to statement 6, “It is racist to demand that African American children take reading tests because their culture is so varied that reading is an insignificant skill.”

Teacher attitude scores were evenly distributed within the categories, regardless of school student demographics. Table 14 displays the distribution of total scores.

Table 14

*AAETAS Total Score Distribution*

	High	Middle	Low
High MAE (n=14) Exposure	2	9	3
Low MAE (n=16) Exposure	2	10	4
Total	4	19	7

Four participants fell into the high category, indicating a positive attitude towards AAE and African-American student achievement. The largest number of respondents was in the neutral category, while seven participants were in the low category, indicating a negative attitude towards AAE and African-American student achievement potential. Three of the seven teacher participants worked in high MAE exposure schools with a majority of White students, and the remaining four worked in schools with low MAE exposure with predominantly African-American students. Had the researcher used the

original Hoover et al. (1997) constructs, four additional teachers would have fallen into the deficit category. The lowest individual score of 100 was submitted from a high MAE teacher participant; the highest individual score, 160, also came from a high MAE teacher participant.

Group means were calculated in order to determine difference in overall attitudes between groups. Descriptive statistics for the AAETAS analysis are displayed in Table 15.

Table 15

*AAETAS Descriptive Statistics*

	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
High MAE Exposure (n=14)	100-160	126.07	16.71
Low MAE Exposure (n=16)	103-148	125.94	17.41
Whole Group (n=30)	100-160	126	16.79

There was minimal difference in the group means; the high MAE group scored a mean of 126.07 (SD=16.71), and the low MAE group mean was 125.94 (SD=17.41).

The school group means deviated very little from the whole group mean of 126 (SD=16.79). An independent two-sample *t* test for comparison of the groups showed no significant difference between the school groups, with  $t(28)=0.21$ ,  $p=.983$ .

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the results of the data analysis regarding AAE, school racial demographics, and Reading Recovery literacy skills growth. The researcher utilized descriptive statistics, including the *t* test (Trochim, 2006), to determine whether findings were significant. Analysis of the student data indicated there was no statistical difference in AAE-speaking and MAE-speaking student growth in Reading Recovery literacy skills or between the preintervention scores or growth of African-American



students who experience HE or LE to MAE. Individual subtests showed greater discrepancies but failed to reach the level of significance. Teacher attitude was also evaluated and did not return significant results. Teacher attitude was found to be equal across environments and did not depart from the whole group mean according to school racial demographics. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the data and analysis and provides implications of the study, conclusions, and any further recommendations.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The achievement gap in the United States educational system has been studied and debated for decades. African-American students continue to lag behind their White counterparts in literacy, and use of the AAE dialect has been suggested as a possible impediment to learning key literacy skills. Numerous studies (Brown et al., 2015; Gatlin & Wanzek, 2015; Terry et al., 2012; Wolfram, 1971) have established a relationship between the use of AAE and reading difficulties. Brown et al. (2015) suggested that children who speak AAE but are expected to use MAE in reading have substantially more to learn than children who use only MAE. According to Charity et al. (2004), the results of their study correlating reading achievement with children's familiarity with MAE

are consistent with the longstanding view that learning to read may indeed be more difficult for this population of students, and they raise questions about the sources of variation in familiarity with MAE and about mechanisms by which reading acquisition may be impeded for those children who are less familiar with MAE when they enter school. (p. 1349)

Studies have shown that use of AAE may interfere with acquisition and use of spelling-sound knowledge (Brown et al., 2015), metalinguistic abilities (Charity et al., 2004), and letter-word reading skills (Terry & Connor, 2012) and may also impact teacher perception and assessment of student ability (Brown et al., 2015). In more simplistic terms, use of dialect makes interpreting sounds to spelling correctly, thinking about words, and reading words and letters markedly more difficult. The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between growth in Reading Recovery literacy skills and school demographics for AAE-speaking students. The following research questions were

used to guide the study:

1. How does growth in Reading Recovery intervention compare for children who are AAE speakers compared to MAE speakers in general?
2. What is the difference in preintervention literacy skill levels of AAE-speaking students in relationship to school demographics?
3. How does growth in literacy skills of AAE-speaking students during Reading Recovery intervention compare by school demographics?
4. How do teacher attitudes towards AAE differ by school demographics?

### **Research Question 1**

**How does growth in Reading Recovery intervention compare for children who are AAE speakers compared to MAE speakers in general?** The findings of previous research support the expectation of differences in literacy skills in the current study. The researcher expected MAE-speaking students to exhibit higher levels of growth in Reading Recovery intervention than AAE-speaking students, based on studies suggesting that African-American children tend to speak more AAE in the early years of school and also considering the inverse relationship reported between AAE and literacy skills (Charity et al., 2004; Terry et al., 2010). Analysis of student data in the current study found that the only skill on which AAE-speaking students and MAE-speaking students differed significantly was Writing Vocabulary assessment, on which AAE-speaking students outperformed MAE-speaking students. The mean growth of the AAE-speaking groups was 25.19 points, which was 6.4 points above the mean growth of 18.79 of the MAE-speaking student group. The AAE-speaking students also displayed a wider range of scores and earned higher preintervention scores. Previous research has produced

inconclusive results for the relationship between dialect use and specific literacy skills such as spelling and vocabulary. Vocabulary seems to be directly related to use of dialect. Charity et al. (2004) conducted an investigation of familiarity with MAE among African-American students in kindergarten through second grade and found that students who were more familiar with MAE earned higher scores on vocabulary measures than those who were less familiar with MAE. Apel and Thomas-Tate (2009) found similar results and concluded that this pattern of performance appears to be affected by the amount of dialect used by students. A meta-analysis of studies investigating the relationship between dialect use and literacy skills by Gatlin and Wanzek (2015) discovered a negative and significant, although small, relationship between dialect use and the written production of language; however, Terry (2012) found that AAE-speaking students misspelled more words than MAE-speaking students in general, including words that would not be affected by AAE features. The current finding does not fit either pattern, suggesting that the use of AAE dialect is not related to writing of known words. AAE-speaking students knew more words prior to entering intervention and learned a larger bank of words during intervention.

The current investigation failed to find a significant difference in growth in Reading Recovery literacy skills between MAE-speaking students and AAE-speaking students on the remaining five subtests of the OSELA. There are several possible explanations for these findings. First, the sample size was relatively small for each group and the samples were unequal, which may have limited the validity of the study. Another factor that could have affected outcomes is the White student population included in the study. The current study was implemented in a small southeastern area, where the

Southern American English (SoAE) dialect is often spoken. AAE and SoAE both depart from MAE (Terry et al., 2010), which is the standard language of instruction in American schools. In addition, AAE and SoAE share various features, which would make the AAE and SoAE populations more linguistically similar than different. If White students in the studied schools speak SoAE, their exposure to MAE may be limited as well, which could impact literacy skills. An additional factor in the study could be SES. All of the students included in the study lived in low-income homes, as defined by their FARL status.

Additionally, more than half of the schools in the study were designated as Title 1 schools, and all of the schools had poverty levels above 60%. High poverty rates are strongly related to low achievement, and the students who qualify for Reading Recovery are the lowest performing students in the first grade. Many studies have established that SES has a great impact on academic skills, particularly on reading ability (Center on Education Policy, 2009; Terry et al., 2012). It is reasonable to assume that students who live in similar socioeconomic circumstances and speak a dialect other than MAE could experience difficulties with literacy, regardless of their race.

## **Research Question 2**

**What is the difference in preintervention literacy skill levels of AAE-speaking students in relationship to school demographics?** Several studies have also concluded that exposure to and familiarity with MAE enhances literacy achievement (Charity et al., 2004; Craig et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2014; Terry et al., 2012). In a study of 217 African-American students, Charity et al. (2004) confirmed a “large” and “educationally meaningful” (p. 1341) relationship between familiarity with MAE and early reading achievement, while Craig et al. (2014) found that African-American

students who were more familiar with MAE demonstrated higher performance than students who strictly used AAE. Charity et al. reported how social factors such as exposure to speakers of other dialects are linked to familiarity with MAE in their 2004 study. Terry et al. (2012) suggested that “children in more diverse linguistic environments may have more opportunities to notice differences between dialects and to practice shifting between them” (p. 57). It would follow that students who are exposed to more MAE would be more familiar with MAE and perform better on literacy tasks. The results of the current study are not consistent with that hypothesis. The African-American students who attended high MAE exposure schools did not demonstrate higher preintervention literacy skills as compared to African-American students who attended low MAE exposure schools as expected. Instead, scores were similar across the groups, which would suggest that neither group was more familiar with MAE than the other. In fact, students in the low MAE exposure group entered intervention with significantly higher letter identification scores overall than the students in the high MAE exposure group. These findings could have occurred due to the small sample size and uneven student groups. The low MAE exposure group was significantly larger than the high MAE exposure group in the study. The limited sample size and disparity in groups may have affected the ability to detect differences between the groups. Additionally, dialect density, or the amount of AAE produced by an individual, was unknown. Not all African-American people speak AAE, and there is a wide variation in dialect density within the AAE-speaking population. Student production of AAE features can differ substantially in the early school years. This study did not measure production of AAE features for each student, creating a possibility that the levels of AAE spoken between the

two groups did not vary as presumed.

Another consideration is the level of MAE exposure for each group. There was no measure of the level of exposure to MAE included in the current study. As mentioned previously, the study location was in an area known for SoAE, which departs from MAE and shares features with AAE, thus students may not have been exposed to varying levels of MAE as assumed. It is likely that fewer models of MAE were available in the school and community than were necessary to impact student knowledge of MAE positively. Student enrollment history could be an additional factor in the study results. The hypothesis that students with greater exposure to MAE would exhibit higher preintervention literacy abilities is based on the presumption that they attended a high MAE exposure school the previous year as well. While the researcher confirmed the students attended the selected schools during the year intervention was received, it is unknown which school the students attended the previous year. Low-income families tend to be more transient than middle- to upper-income families, which would lead to school transitions for children living in those households. Students may have attended a school with a different demographic profile at any point prior to intervention. Any of the factors mentioned could mask or reduce differences in the sample studied.

### **Research Question 3**

**How does growth in literacy skills of AAE-speaking students during Reading Recovery intervention compare by school demographics?** The third research question focused on the growth in literacy skills of AAE-speaking students during Reading Recovery intervention. According to Terry and Connor (2012), children's MAE use increases significantly during first grade, and this growth continues through the end of

second grade. As such, it is reasonable to assume that students who are exposed to greater levels of MAE during first grade have a greater opportunity to become familiar with standard language and will in turn be able to increase their personal use of MAE features. As mentioned previously, increased use of MAE features is associated with increased literacy achievement. The findings in the current study, however, failed to support previous research findings. The AAE-speaking student groups did not display differences in growth of Reading Recovery literacy skills in relationship to school demographics on five of the six subtests. The exception was Letter Identification, on which the high MAE exposure subgroup showed significantly greater growth than the low MAE exposure group. This finding was complicated by one outlying score that may have inflated the overall growth of the group during analysis. Mean growth of the high MAE exposure sample would have been greatly reduced without the outlying score.

Several of the aforementioned factors could have contributed to the results, including individual student dialect density, actual levels of exposure to MAE, and student enrollment history. An additional, and possibly major, confounding factor not previously discussed is variations in quality or quantity of instruction. The students in the study attended 12 schools across two adjacent school districts. While literacy instruction may be somewhat standardized within districts, methods of instruction may vary across districts. Differences in quality or quantity of reading instruction may explain achievement differences between groups. Instructional factors may be important in regard to individual differences; within a school or even a single classroom, “the quality or quantity of reading instruction may vary across individual students” (Charity et al., 2004, p. 1352). This may explain the minimal level of variance in preintervention



and growth scores between groups.

#### **Research Question 4**

##### **How do teacher attitudes towards AAE differ by school demographics?**

Instructional quality can also be affected by teacher perceptions of AAE. Research consistently reports that speakers of MAE are rated more favorably in respect to their cognitive abilities than speakers of AAE (Charity et al., 2004). Even Disney animation reinforces the negative perception of AAE; mean or ignorant animals tend to speak in AAE or similar dialects (Wolfram, 2013). Existing research demonstrates the impact that negative perceptions of AAE can have on instruction and assessment. A study by Champion, Cobb-Roberts, and Bland-Stewart (2012) suggested that negative attitudes towards AAE should be a grave concern since teacher expectation has been shown to contribute significantly to the underachievement of African-American children, especially in the area of reading. Teacher bias theory (Charity et al., 2004; Terry et al., 2010) puts forth that teacher negative perceptions of AAE affect how teachers relate to and instruct students and lower teacher expectations of students. The current study sought to determine whether teacher attitudes towards AAE differed by school demographics.

Contrary to expected outcomes, the results indicated there was no significant difference between teachers who taught a large number of AAE speakers and those who came into contact with few AAE speakers. Both the lowest and highest score came from the same group, suggesting that differences in attitude were not related to exposure to children who spoke AAE. It is possible that individual traits such as age, race, education, exposure to AAE and geographic background impacted teacher attitudes to a greater

extent than the work environment. Prior research suggests that race relates to attitudes significantly, with African-American teachers exhibiting more positive attitudes toward AAE than their White counterparts (Jones, 2011). It is likely that African-American teachers are more sympathetic towards young AAE speakers as a result of greater familiarity with AAE, perhaps spoken by friends or family members. The current study did not request demographic information other than race. Since the number of African-American teachers who responded was limited, this researcher chose not to analyze race in relation to attitudes toward AAE.

While there was no apparent pattern to the responses from teachers, it was concerning that any teacher indicated any level of agreement to Question 10, “There is no such thing as African American English.” Failing to recognize differences in the way a child communicates could result in punitive scoring of assessments that involve language. It is important to acknowledge these differences in dialect in order to fully understand the way a child learns. Question 16 indicated that “African American kids have trouble learning because their parents won’t help at home.” Ten teachers either mildly or strongly agreed with that statement, which implies that they believe African-American parents are uninterested in supporting their children’s education. This is a very damaging pattern of thought. There are numerous reasons that are irrespective of race why a parent may be unable to assist a child with schoolwork at home. The statement also reinforces the stereotype that a lack of emphasis on education occurs in all African-American homes. Generalization of negative stereotypes is the cornerstone of racism, so it is extremely disappointing to see that teachers in the public school system hold such a belief. Responses agreeing to Question 26, “Most African American people’s major

potential is in music, art, and dance,” and Question 43, “The reason African American people aren’t moving as fast as they could is that they’re not as industrious as they should be,” were also disheartening. Negative perceptions such as these could certainly contribute to teacher bias in expectations, instruction, and assessment of African-American students.

### **Limitations**

There were some limitations to the study which could have affected the data received. Low rates of response to the teacher survey limited the amount of data collected. It is probable that some teachers declined to participate due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Of the teachers who chose to respond, several elected not to answer one or more questions on the survey. Teachers could have been sensitive to some of the items on the AAETAS, causing either a refusal to respond or inaccurate responses. In the survey research, participants fully control what they share. Information can be withheld or misrepresented, or participants can attempt to answer in a manner they believe would be favorable. The researcher attempted to address this issue by ensuring anonymity of the survey responses, in order that even the researcher did not have any demographic information that would identify individual teachers and encourage teachers to respond honestly.

Differences in scoring and record keeping of OSELA scores between the two districts included in the study were a concern. One of the districts calculated a total score in addition to subtest scores to determine outcomes for students. The total score is a global ability score for the OSELA, providing one number that gives a picture of the student’s performance on the test as a whole. The second district scored subtests only

and did not utilize a total score. In order to standardize the data, the researcher discarded the total scores and included only subtest scores in the analysis.

Sample sizes in the current study were considerably smaller than desired. The schools with high levels of MAE exposure served a smaller number of African-American children than expected, while the schools designated as low levels of MAE exposure served only African-American students, resulting in a limited population of students with high MAE exposure for the study and a significant imbalance between the groups. A significant number of students also moved or had incomplete Reading Recovery programs, which further limited the final sample sizes. Larger sample sizes would allow greater reliability in detecting differences and thus increase the level of confidence in results. In short, larger samples provide more reliable results, while small samples often support the null hypothesis. Replicating the study with larger sample sizes may yield different results.

An additional limiting factor in the study was the informal verification of AAE for students. Numerous studies (Craig & Washington, 2002; Stockman, 2010; Washington & Craig, 1998; Wolfram, 1970) have established that many African-American children enter school speaking AAE and that children residing in low-income homes produced more AAE than their peers from middle-income homes in the early grades. All of the African-American students included in the study came from low-income homes as identified by their FARL status and were assumed to speak AAE based on their FARL participation. Teachers were also asked to verify that they had observed students in their classrooms speaking AAE; however, individual verifications of AAE usage and specific rates of AAE usage were not measured. Dialect variation and dialect

density could affect growth in literacy skills, as shown by Charity et al. (2004). There are established measures of dialect variation available that assess the production of dialect and reliably measure the rate of dialect production. Use of such a measure would have provided more information about individual levels of AAE usage, which could be important in the comparison of growth in literacy skills.

The generalizability of the study was limited by several factors. First, all of the students in the study were from low-income homes as determined by participation in the FARRL program. Results may not be generalizable to African-American children from other socioeconomic backgrounds. It is also important to reiterate that not all African-American children speak AAE. Additionally, the current study was conducted in one region of a southeastern state. Other regions or states may not yield similar results.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The current study sought to determine whether growth in Reading Recovery literacy skills is related to the level of exposure to MAE for AAE-speaking students. It is well established that the use of AAE could be a factor in the reading difficulties of African-American children (Brown et al., 2015; Gatlin & Wanzek, 2015; Wolfram, 1971; Wolfram et al., 1999). The results of the current study indicate that AAE may not interfere with reading skills as much as previous research suggests. The researcher found that there were no differences between students who have high levels of exposure to MAE and those who have experienced low levels of exposure to MAE in preintervention or growth of Reading Recovery literacy skills. The African-American students showed similar growth and program outcomes as experienced by their White counterparts. This would suggest that there is little reason for concern about students speaking AAE upon

entry into the school system. If use of dialect does not interfere with specific literacy skills, it is likely inconsequential in learning to read and thus inconsequential in narrowing the achievement gap between African-American and White students. Perhaps SES is more of a concern in reading achievement than the use of nonstandard dialects, as the vast majority of the students selected for Reading Recovery intervention, regardless of race, were participants in the free lunch program. Socioeconomic factors have long been found to be related to reading achievement (Hernandez, 2011; Portes, 2008), with children from low-income homes lagging behind children from middle- and upper-income homes. If SES is the main factor in accelerating reading achievement, perhaps there should be more focus on implementing successful reading programs in schools that serve children from low-income homes. Instead of waiting until first grade to provide intervention, programs designed to address literacy deficits could be initiated from school entry. Creating early childhood or 4-year-old kindergarten programs specifically for students in low-income areas could also begin to mitigate some of the economic factors impacting literacy, possibly leading to a narrowing of the both the racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. An increase in early childhood programs for low-income students would introduce literacy and print-rich environments at an earlier age and enhance early literacy skills such as letter recognition, vocabulary, and concepts about print. Such targeted intervention may provide a more solid foundation for building strong literacy skills in the early years of elementary school, which could be an important strategy in improving overall reading achievement for AAE-speaking students.

The results also raise questions about the impact of nonstandard dialects in general. The White students in the study did not display better program outcomes or

higher subtest scores than the AAE-speaking students at any point in intervention. If the White students in the study speak SoAE rather than MAE, it could indicate that use of any nonstandard dialect affects the acquisition of reading skills in the early years. If so, it would be important to recognize students who speak a nonstandard dialect upon school entry. Schools could include a dialect screening in school entry screenings to identify students who may be at risk of experiencing reading difficulties due to an alternate dialect, similar to those that speech-language clinicians use to detect language variation or those used for bilingual students. Once the presence of a dialect is detected, dialect density tools could be administered to determine the student's level of dialect usage and familiarity with MAE. Numerous studies have shown that AAE-speaking students who exhibit greater familiarity with MAE have better academic outcomes than those with less MAE familiarity (Craig et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2014; Terry et al., 2010). This familiarity does not naturally increase with progress through the early grades. Students exhibiting high dialect density could receive interventions aimed at increasing familiarity with and usage of MAE in the school setting, otherwise recognized as style shifting or dialect shifting. Students can and should be taught to become more aware of dialect differences and to shift their dialect usage early in elementary school to improve literacy outcomes. Craig et al. (2014) stressed the importance of this skill, indicating that style shifting to MAE uniquely contributes to an important aspect of reading beyond factors from family circumstances. Renn (2010) suggested that African-American males, especially, remain relatively consistent in their level of style shifting once they reach middle school, emphasizing the need for early intervention and instruction in this area. Interventions involving dialect shifting may impact reading achievement significantly

and could be another vital approach in addressing the achievement gap that has plagued the American educational system for so long.

The analysis of teacher data determined that there was no difference in attitude towards AAE between teachers who work in schools with high concentrations of African-American students and those who work in schools with low populations of African-American students. Teachers with higher levels of exposure to AAE in the workplace did not exhibit more positive or more negative attitudes towards the dialect, indicating that exposure to AAE within the school environment is not a significant factor in teacher attitude. If exposure to AAE in the school environment is not important, perhaps traits that develop prior to working in a school have the most impact on teacher personal views of AAE. Misperceptions of language diversity can result in marginalizing students who speak AAE and unintentionally interfere with student academic success and sense of belonging (Beneke & Cheatham, 2015). Additionally, making inappropriate judgments about student abilities based on the way they talk can create low expectations among teachers and inequitable learning opportunities for African-American students. In order to mediate this possibility, teacher education programs could provide in-depth instruction on NMAE dialects to prevent or correct a deficit view of dialect speakers. Fogel and Ehri (2006) found that having teachers participate in a study on AAE and exposing them to different dialect forms were sufficient to change attitudes in a positive direction. This specific diversity training could have important implications for creating inclusive learning environments in American classrooms, where ethnic diversity is increasing exponentially. In many areas, especially urban school environments, it is common for students to speak nonmainstream dialects of English such as AAE, but few teachers have



been taught to recognize the features of these dialects. This lack of awareness hampers their ability to support student learning. Teachers who recognize AAE as a valid form of speech, identify student strengths, and create a sense of belonging for AAE-speaking students build trust with students and can assist significantly in developing linguistic flexibility and awareness. Helping future educators to recognize and address their own biases is a step toward creating more culturally sensitive school environments and enhancing success for all students.

Further research could address the aforementioned limitations of the current study. The findings indicated that there was no difference in teacher attitudes toward AAE in relation to the school environment; however, several key demographic factors were not considered in the data analysis. More information on the relationship between attitude and other demographic factors such as age, education, geographical background, and knowledge of AAE needs to be gathered to assess which characteristics are most closely related to impressions of nonstandard dialects. Individual demographic factors and personal history heavily influence the way a person interacts with and views the world, making it vital to study which individual factors are consistently associated with negative attitudes toward AAE. Race, for example, has been found to be a significant factor in attitude towards AAE, with African-American teachers demonstrating less negative attitudes towards AAE than their White counterparts (Champion et al., 2012). Knowledge about AAE has also been related to teacher attitudes. Teachers who know more about AAE tend to exhibit more positive behaviors in response to children's use of AAE during instruction (Lawson, 2010.) Specific personal characteristics may contribute to the teacher bias theory of AAE and reading failure, wherein teachers view AAE as an

incorrect form of MAE and penalize AAE speakers for using their dialect in reading-related activities. There is limited research available on the individual factors most related to teacher bias theory, and this information could be helpful in addressing the bias that has been uncovered by previous research. Further research could also incorporate observations and personal interviews with teachers in conjunction with survey methods in order to more accurately gauge teacher attitude and limit response bias. A mixed-methods approach would provide more in-depth information regarding teacher attitudes and behaviors in the classroom.

A more comprehensive view of AAE-speaking students would provide useful information in the development of literacy skills. The current study included limited information about the student sample. Further research could utilize a longitudinal approach from school entry, following students from the first formal educational setting. While a limited number of longitudinal studies have examined the relationship between NMAE and early reading achievement, there is no research that includes information on student abilities upon school entry, instructional and intervention strategies, the progression of student AAE usage, and progress in literacy skills. A compilation of such information would create a more complex understanding of AAE-speaking students and might allow researchers to determine optimal educational settings and instructional and intervention techniques to improve reading achievement.

The findings of the current study indicate that SES may be a more important factor in reading achievement than dialect. There has been limited research on SES in relation to AAE and literacy. Further studies are needed to compare low-income and middle-income dialect speakers to determine the interaction of SES and dialect usage.

Although it is known that low-income African Americans are the main purveyors of AAE, many middle-income students speak the dialect to some extent as well (Charity et al., 2004; Conlin, 2009; Craig & Washington, 2002). More thorough investigation of the differences between low- and middle-income speakers of AAE may offer insight into important factors that support dialect shifting and provide further information regarding the differences in linguistic and metalinguistic skills upon school entry. Each of these factors has been noted as predictive for children's literacy performance and could be vital to alleviating the racial achievement gap.

The current study focused on a comparison of AAE-speaking students and MAE-speaking students from a specific school year; however, there is a historical view of the selected districts that was neglected. The national history of differences in achievement between African-American and White students is widely documented, but disparities within districts are often buried in district and state annual report cards. Information on the history of achievement gaps and student progress in Reading Recovery in the specific area was not gathered, and thus it is unknown whether the current findings reflected typical outcomes for the district. Determination of a history of reading failure or poor progress in Reading Recovery intervention in African-American students would support the need for further study into the factors affecting reading achievement. Alternately, if the districts demonstrate a history of similar literacy and intervention outcomes between African-American and White students and display progress for both populations, further study into the strategies being used in these districts would be beneficial to minimizing the achievement gap in other areas. Extending the current study to include historic information of district performance could provide explanation for the unexpected

findings and lend to greater reliability of the results.

Differences in the progress of bilingual and bidialectal students could also provide important information in the struggle to close the achievement gap. Nationally, Hispanic students, including those who come from Spanish-speaking homes, continue to graduate high school at higher rates than African-American students (Civic Enterprises, 2015). Many Hispanic students are from low-income homes, similar to African-American students. Discovering what is propelling Hispanic students to achieve at higher rates than African-American students could be pivotal in understanding differences between bilingual and bidialectal students and in beginning to narrow the achievement gap for this population of African-American students. Differences in services extended to bilingual students may be a key factor in the disparity in achievement, as students who are bilingual often receive extra support and interventions to support language learning. It is possible that similar programs are needed for bidialectal students upon school entry. Further research into the differences in these populations could increase understanding of the needs of African-American student populations.

## **Conclusion**

The Black-White achievement gap continues to plague the American school system, and researchers have struggled to address the key factors in the troubling disparity between the academic performance of African-American students and their White counterparts. This is a concern not only for public schools but for American society, as students who fail to master essential reading skills are four to six times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers (Hernandez, 2011). The rate is slightly higher for poor African-American and Hispanic students. It is a disturbing trend

that leads to gross disparities in both educational and economic outcomes (Portes, 2008).

As a growing number of students enter the classroom speaking nonmainstream dialects, the educational system must learn to accommodate and support these students' acquisition of essential skills. While this research has not been able to establish that the use of nonmainstream dialects such as AAE causes difficulties in reading, much of the research available indicates that there is a clear relationship between the two. It is important to learn more about this relationship and to apply that knowledge in working with children on literacy skills. There is too much at stake to continue to ignore the diverse needs of the dialect-speaking children in our classrooms.

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## Appendix A

### Common Indicators of African American English

Feature	Example
Omission of final consonants	AAE: I can't fine it. <i>(I can't find it.)</i>
Lack of possessive -s	AAE: This is my momma sister. <i>(This my momma's sister)</i>
Multiple negation or double negative	AAE: He didn't do nothing. <i>(He didn't do anything.)</i>
Habitual "be"	AAE: When I be by myself, I be scared. <i>When I am by myself, I am scared.</i>
Omission of is, are, will, can, and/or do	AAE: This a frog. <i>This is a frog.</i>
Using present tense form in place of past tense	AAE: He ride his bike. <i>He rode his bike.</i>
Use of ain't	AAE: She ain't home. <i>She isn't home.</i>
Optional subject-verb agreement (subject and verb differ in number and person)	AAE: They was talking. <i>They were talking.</i>
Nonstandard omission of a preposition	AAE: They came out the house. <i>They came out of the house.</i>
Using "it" instead of "there" to show something's existence rather than its location	AAE: It was nothing I could do. <i>There was nothing I could do.</i>
"Himself" and "themselves" expressed as "hisself" and "theyself"	AAE: He got hisself a car. <i>He got himself a car.</i>

## Appendix B

### African American English Teacher Attitude Scale (AAETAS)

The African American English Teacher Attitude Scale (AAETAS)  
 Hoover, R.M., McNair, F., Lewis, S.A.R., & Politzer, R.L. (1997). African  
 American English Attitude Measures for Teachers. In R. L. Jones (Ed.),  
*Handbook of Test and Measurements for Black Populations* (pp. 383-393).  
 Hampton, VA: Cobb.

Please indicate your opinion by circling your response.

1. African Americans need to know both standard and Black English in the school  
 in order to survive in America.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

2. African American English is a unique speech form influenced in its structure by  
 West African languages.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

3. African American English is a systematic, rule-governed language variety.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

4. African American English should be eliminated.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

5. African American English should be preserved to maintain oral understanding  
 and communication among Black people of all ages and from all regions.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

6. It is racist to demand that African American children take reading tests  
 because their culture is so varied that reading is an insignificant skill.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

7. African American English should be promoted in the school as part of African  
 American children's culture.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

8. Standard English is needed to replace African American English to help with  
 worldwide communication.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

9. It is not necessary for Black children to learn anything other than their own  
 dialect of African American English in school.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

10. There is no such thing as African American English.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

11. The use of African American English is a reflection of unclear thinking on the part of the speaker.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

12. African American children's language is so broken as to be virtually no language at all.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

13. African Americans should talk the way everybody else does in this country.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

14. African American English is principally a Southern speech form.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

15. The African American community concept of discipline involves not letting children "do their own thing" and "hang loose."

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

16. African American kids have trouble learning because their parents won't help them at home.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

17. When a child's native African American English is replaced by standard English, she or he is introduced to concepts which will increase his learning capacity.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

18. The home life of African American children offers such limited cultural experiences that the school must fill in gaps.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

19. African and African American hair and dress styles are very attractive.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

20. African American kids would advance further in school without African American English.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

21. African American English has a logic of its own, equal to that of any other language.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

22. African American children can't learn to read unless African American Vernacular English is used as the medium of instruction in the schools.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

23. African American people have their own distinctive pattern of speech which other people in this country should accept.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
24. African American English was produced by its history in Africa and this country and not by any physical characteristics.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
25. African American English can be expanded to fit any concept or idea imaginable.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
26. Most African American people's major potential is in music, art, and dance.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
27. African Americans should try to look like everybody else in this country rather than wearing cultural styles.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
28. The home life of African American people provides a rich cultural experience directly connected to African origins.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
29. The reason African American children have trouble learning in school is that they are not taught properly.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
30. African American English is basically talking lazy.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
31. African American children can be trained to pass any test written.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
32. African American children can read in spite of the fact that most Basal readers are written in Standard English.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
33. African American children have the same potential for achievement in math and science as any other people.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly
34. African American children are advantaged through African American English; it makes them bidialectal just as some Hispanics are bilingual.  
 Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly



35. African American English is misuse of standard language.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

36. African American children should be allowed to choose their own course of study and behavior in school from an early age and should not be directed by the teacher.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

37. Standard English is superior to nonstandard English in terms of grammatical structure.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

38. African American English should be preserved because it creates a bond of solidarity among the people who speak it.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

39. Acceptance of nonstandard dialects of English by teachers would lead to a lowering of standards in school.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

40. African American English should be preserved because it helps African Americans feel at ease in informal situations.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

41. African American English enhances the curriculum by enriching the language background of the children.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

42. African American English expresses some things better than Standard English.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

43. The reason African American people aren't moving as fast as they could is that they're not as industrious as they should be.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

44. Since only Standard English is useful in getting a job, it should always be preferred over African American English.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

45. African American English should be abandoned because it does not provide any benefits to anybody.

Agree Strongly      Agree Mildly      Disagree Mildly      Disagree Strongly

46. The reason African Americans aren't moving as fast as they could is that the system discriminates against them.

Agree Strongly

Agree Mildly

Disagree Mildly

Disagree Strongly

## Appendix C

### Request to Use the AAETAS

Brandynne Thompson  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

January 5, 2018

Dr. Faye McNair-Knox, Ph.D., Executive Director  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

Dear Dr. McNair-Knox,

My name is Brandynne Thompson and I am a doctoral candidate at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. I am conducting research on African American English, School Context, and Literacy Achievement in Reading Recovery. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I am requesting permission to utilize your research instrument.

I will extend all credit to you and the researchers who developed the instrument, African American English Attitude Measures for Teachers. Development will be attributed to Hoover, R.M., McNair, F., Lewis, S.A.R., & Politzer, R. L. (1997) of the instrument located in Reginald L. Jones (ed.), Handbook of Tests and Measurements for Black Populations (p. 383-393). Hampton, VA: Cobb.

Additionally, statements on the AAETAS will not be significantly modified. A limited number of terms have been modernized and/or modified for continuity. The modified instrument is enclosed. If you would prefer for me to use the original AAETAS in an unmodified format, I will do so.

I would appreciate your permission to use the AAETAS for my research. I respectfully request a written letter or electronic communication from you giving me permission to use the modified questionnaire for purposes of my research. Please send the letter to my address listed above (self-addressed envelope enclosed) or to XXXXXXXXXXXX.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Brandynne Thompson  
Doctoral Candidate  
Gardner-Webb University

## Appendix D

Permission to Use the AAETAS from Dr. Faye McNair-Knox

DrFaye McNair-Knox <XXXXXXXXXXXX>

Fri 2/9/2018 1:22 AM

To:Brandynne Thompson <XXXXXXXXXXXX>;

Cc:Shirley A. R. Lewis <XXXXXXXXXXXX>; Dr. Faye McNair-Knox <XXXXXXXXXXXX>;

1 attachments (3 MB)

Research Request\_020718.pdf;

Hello Brandynne Thompson -- I am responding to your letter dated January 5, 2018 (see attached), which I only recently received because the address it was sent to no longer exists. It's good to know that our African American English Teacher Attitude Scale (AAETAS) is once again being used to support contemporary doctoral research pursuits.

My colleague, Dr. Shirley A. R. Lewis, and I are happy to give you permission to use the AAETAS (as published in the Handbook of Tests and Measurements for Black Populations edited by Reginald Jones) in your doctoral dissertation. However, we prefer that you use the original AAETAS in an unmodified format.

Please adhere to the fidelity of the instrument and give full credit to all of the authors.

Shirley A. R. Lewis, Ph.D., 57 Christopher Street, Montclair, New Jersey 07042

Faye McNair-Knox, Ph.D., 161 Daphne Way, East Palo Alto, California 94303

Please let me know if you have questions or need additional information. Meanwhile, I wish you every success in completing your doctoral studies and look forward to the new knowledge your work will contribute to the field.

## Appendix E

### District Permission to Complete Study

RE: Research request

Hello Ms. Thompson,

Your request has been approved by [REDACTED]. Your contact will be [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] is the Director of Early Childhood / Elementary / GT & ESOL Programs with [REDACTED]. Her telephone number is [REDACTED] and email address: [REDACTED].

Thank you,

**From:** Brandynne Thompson [REDACTED]

**Sent:** Wednesday, May 30, 2018 10:36 AM

**To:** [REDACTED]

**Subject:** Research request

Good morning,

My name is Brandynne Thompson and I am a doctoral student at Gardner-Webb University and an employee of [REDACTED]. In March I sent a written request to [REDACTED] for approval of research in your district. I am following up on that request electronically, as well as attaching the original letter and supporting documents for your review. I hope to receive approval to survey select first grade teachers and all Reading Recovery teachers, as well as to gain access to Reading Recovery scores. I would be happy to meet with Dr. Prosser or other personnel to further explain the purpose of my research and my methods. I appreciate your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Brandynne Thompson

[REDACTED]



### Request for District Collaboration for Doctoral Candidates

The [REDACTED] District has set up a means of support for individuals who are seeking doctorate degrees who agree to develop a dissertation on a topic that is mutually agreeable and beneficial to the individual and District.

To be eligible, a person must:

- have been an employee of the [REDACTED] District for at least six months;
- select a topic approved by the District;
- orally present topic to district committee; and
- commit to completion of the data collection and analysis submitted to the District within an allotted time.

Employees who are interested in being considered for this opportunity may complete the form below and submit related documents to the Associate Superintendent for Instruction, Dr. [REDACTED]

Name	Thompson Brandynne		
	Last	First	Middle
Address			
	Street	City	State/Zip
School/Location	[REDACTED]		
Current Position	Counselor		
College/University	Glanier Webb		
Doctoral Program of Study/Expected Date of Completion	Dec. 2018		
Suggested Dissertation Topic (Attach the research proposal)	African American English School Demographics & ...		
Expected Completion Date of Data Analysis	Fall 2018		

By my signature below, I agree to complete the data collection and analysis for my dissertation within \_\_\_\_\_ months and submit it to the District by \_\_\_\_\_. I also agree to maintain the confidentiality of the data provided to me by the district and will remove personal and school identification from all published work.

Signature [Signature]

Date 06/12/2018

District Response: Approved ☒

Denied ☐

Comments:

Signature [Signature]

Signature

Associate Superintendent 6-13

Signature

Date

Appendix F

Informed Consent

## Gardner-Webb University

### Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: African American English, School Demographics, and Growth in Literacy Skills in Reading Recovery

Researcher: Brandynne Thompson, Doctoral Student

#### **Purpose**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Brandynne Thompson, a doctoral student in the School of Education at Gardner-Webb University. The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship for African American English-speaking students between exposure to varying levels of mainstream American English and specific literacy skills. These associations are explored because American schools are culturally and linguistically diverse, with growing numbers of children whose primary language is English but whose nonmainstream dialect is significantly different from language encountered in formal settings such as schools.

#### **Procedure**

Your participation will involve confirmation of the use of African American English in your classroom and completion of a survey. A list of 11 common features of African American English is provided to assist in recognizing the dialect in your classroom. Teachers will complete a brief profile and the African American English Teacher Attitude Scale electronically. During completion of the African American English Teacher Attitude Scale, you can skip any question that causes discomfort and you can stop the survey at any time. Responses from the survey will be transmitted directly into an electronic spreadsheet. Each response will be assigned a code to ensure confidentiality.

#### **Time Required**

Review of the features of African American English will take approximately 5 minutes. Completion of the teacher profile and the African American English Teacher Attitude Scale will take approximately 20 minutes. Your total participation in this project is expected to be 25 minutes. We anticipate that 3-5 individuals will participate in this research study at your school site, and that a total of 60 individuals will participate among all 13 sites.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

### **Confidentiality**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number and all identifying information not related to school demographics will be removed. Your name will not be collected, retained, or used in any report.

### **Risks**

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

### **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may help us to understand whether the level of mainstream American English experienced within the school setting relates to literacy success for African American English-speaking students. The Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

### **Right to Withdraw from the Study**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you want to withdraw from the study, you may stop the survey and exit at any time. There is no penalty for withdrawing, and your data will not be collected. If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact:

Brandynne Thompson  
School of Education  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

### **If you have questions about the study, contact the following individuals.**

Brandynne Thompson  
School of Education  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

Dr. Philip Rapp  
School of Education  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

**Voluntary Consent by Participant**

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me.

By continuing to the survey link below, I agree to participate in this study. Agreement indicates that I understand the risks and benefits of participation, and that I know what I will be asked to do. I also agree that I have asked any questions I might have, and am clear on how to stop my participation in the study if I choose to do so.

Please be sure to print and retain a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix G  
Teacher Profile Form

Please complete the form by selecting your response from the options provided.

**1. My school:**

- A Has more White students than Black students
- B Has more Black students than White students
- C Has about an equal number of White and Black students

**2. I would describe my race as:**

- A White
- B Black
- C Other
- D I would prefer not to answer

**3. The socioeconomic status of the majority of families my school serves is:**

- A Middle income (non Title I)
- B Lower income (Title I)

**4. I have observed one or more of the features of African American English being used by a student in my classroom. (Please refer to the list of features of African American English to make your determination.)**

- A Yes
- B No