# Responses of One First Grade Class to the Representation of AAVE in Picture Books

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*The following article will address the need for classrooms to promote the use of children's literature whose characters speak in a dialect other than Standard English (specifically African American Vernacular English, or AAVE).  It will begin by drawing attention to the lack of authentic representation of African Americans in picture books throughout history, and the potential harm done to children whose home lives are not validated by the materials chosen to line their classroom's book shelves.  The place of central importance that language holds in the lives of children will also be discussed, and an argument for the benefits of incorporating both home and school languages into academic curriculum (specifically through the use of text) will be made.   Finally, the author will share an experience from her own classroom in which she and her students investigated and engaged in stories that revolved around similar plot lines, with one using African American Vernacular English and one Standard English.  Suggestions will be made regarding further steps in making meaningful classroom connections to home language and literacy practices.*

*Keywords: children's literature, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), literacy*

*"We learn or unlearn racism through texts and talk" (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, p. 467).*

Books had a central place of importance in my daily life as a child. I can clearly picture the moment I sat in my kitchen and read to my parents for the first time – their excitement in my accomplishment, and the rush of pride I felt in being able to decipher the words on the page. From this moment on, I carried a book with me wherever I went, and I found comfort in the fact that these characters were a lot like me. We had similar clothing and hairstyles, the cars our families drove were often comparable, and while I didn't realize it then, they oftentimes shared my skin color and dialect, as well. These commonalities were an important part of the connection that I made to these characters, and allowed me to feel that my life was deemed important enough by mainstream culture to be written about.

It was not until I began critically analyzing children's literature that I realized this was not the case, and continues to be a struggle, for youth who are part of parallel cultures, or those cultures outside of the mainstream (Bishop, 2003). Being that the majority of my first grade students are African American, this is of particular importance to me. It's very clear that this minority group has historically found themselves underrepresented in children's literature, and until recently, when they *have* seen characters that look like them, they've often been caricatured and stereotyped through the authors' use of language and/or physical descriptors (Bishop, 2003). These representations run parallel to historical events and mirror dominant ideologies of the time in which they were written. While some scholars have argued that literature, being a form of art, lies outside of the realm of politics and societal viewpoints of its time, I have found that literature and politics are inextricably linked. As Eloise Greenfield (1985) so eloquently stated:

> It is true that politics is not art, but art is political. Whether in its interpretation of the political realities, or in its attempt to ignore these realities, or in its distortions, or in its advocacy of a different reality, or in its support of the status quo, all art is political and every book carries its author's message. (p. 20)

Politics are part of children's literature. In an effort to maintain dominant ideologies, authors have often omitted from their pages (whether consciously or subconsciously) the lives of many from parallel cultures, not the least of which being African Americans; thus, a group with a history of being mistreated by those in power has been silenced in literature (Taxel, 1997).

Therefore, African American youth have traditionally not had the luxury of attending schools that immerse them in literature which validates their lifestyle and beliefs; "In this culture, because of its brutal and persistent racism, it has been painfully difficult for Afro-American young people to affirm and be proud of what they choose as personal history" (Greene, 1993, p. 191-192). Because of this tumultuous past, it's become the focus of many scholars to identify ways in which educators can share with their students books that provide authentic representations of African Americans, and which might help "to recuperate the texts and traditions of ignored groups, [and] to broaden cultural history" (Wong, 1993, p. 109). As Delpit (1995) stated:

> In part, the problems we see exhibited in school by African-American children and children of other oppressed minorities can be traced to this lack of a curriculum in which

they can find represented the intellectual achievements of people who look like themselves. Were that not the case, these children would not talk about doing well in school as "acting white." Our children of color need to see the brilliance of their legacy, too. (p. 177)

As a result of this push, educators have become increasingly aware of the impact their choice of literature has on students' perceptions of parallel culture groups, as well as the perception that minority students have of their *own* lives. I strive (though surely often missing the mark) to be one of these teachers, an example of someone who wants to make the rich experience of *reading* one that is more in tune with, and connected to, the individual lives of the children that I teach.

## What I Missed: The Danger of Underlying Ideologies

Yet, it just recently occurred to me that I've been ignoring one incredibly persistent underlying ideology in choosing books for my classroom. The sly and quiet nature of this particular assumption made it difficult for me to spot, and it almost slipped quietly by as I studied texts for their authenticity. This is exactly what made it so dangerous, in that "ideology is most powerful when it is least visible – when it appears as what is taken for granted and considered 'the way things are'" (Apol, 1998, p. 35). What I found to be so persistent and widespread was the fact that, across children's literature and beyond, Standard English is seen by many as the only acceptable dialect to be used in books or public conversation. The assumed superiority of Mainstream American English (Wheeler & Swords, 2004) is so engrained in society that the absence of African American Vernacular English (the home dialect of some African American children) goes virtually unnoticed in children's books, and the silence of this form of speaking very clearly conveys its place as an inferior means of communication.

The way(s) in which we converse with others are personal to our own lives, backgrounds, and regions in which we live, and the dialect we speak is a reflection of these. What many don't realize is that *any* use of English is a dialect – even Standard English is simply another form of this language (Wheeler & Swords, 2004). Therefore, "the child who speaks in a vernacular dialect is not making language errors; instead, she or he is speaking correctly in the language of the home discourse community" (Wheeler & Swords, 2004, p. 471). Oftentimes, teachers prohibit minority students from speaking in their "primary Discourse," and force them to only use and hear their "secondary Discourse" while in the classroom. As often happens during second language acquisition (with learning another dialect being a form of this), forcing this constant mental attendance to rules inhibits the expression of thought and "typically produces silence" (Delpit, 1995, p. 51). However, this approach is often meant to be helpful; teachers want to prepare their students for speaking in and navigating successfully through mainstream society, and it is unfortunately true that children's intelligence is often judged by their mastery and use of Standard English. It's often the goal of educators to protect their students from "dialect prejudice," which occurs when perceptions of children are clouded negatively by their use of home dialect (Wheeler & Swords, 2004, p. 472).

Yet, in their very attempt to include children in dominant rules of language, educators create a disconnect between the home and school lives of their students. Simply stated, "there can be no doubt that in many classrooms students of color do reject literacy, for they feel that literate Discourses reject them" (Delpit, 1993, p. 290). Often, by nine years of age, children who have

previously been code switchers choose to primarily use their local dialect; this may be due to a sense of loyalty toward their home lives, as contrasted by the lack of validation they've felt in schools (Delpit, 1995). In separating our students' formal education from their background, from their life's experiences, and from the language that has given voice to it all, they become disenchanted with the knowledge that is being presented to them.

While I am not suggesting that educators, in an effort to fight against the dominant ideology of the superiority of Standard English, simply cease teaching children the nuances of this dialect, I do believe it's important to do so while coupling it with validation of their home discourse. "'Instead of seeking to correct or eradicate styles of language, we may *add* linguistic varieties to a child's linguistic toolbox, bringing a pluralistic vantage to language in the classroom' (Gilyard, 1991; McWhorter, 1998)" (Wheeler & Swords, 2004, p. 473).

### Going Outside of the Box: Choosing Multi-Dialectic Literature

In recognizing this disconnect between home and school languages in literature, I was determined to incorporate texts with African American Vernacular English (AAVE) into my teaching, and was interested in hearing the responses of my class to the use of this dialect, as compared to Standard English, within picture books. Therefore, I embarked upon the task of choosing appropriate books with which to make this comparison. While there are still relatively few examples that authentically represent African American characters, those that are present exist primarily thanks to the Civil Rights Movement; "The publication of [Black] work by White publishers resulted in increased sales to schools and libraries as well as increased readership for children's literature by African American authors" (Harris, 1993, p. 176)[1]. Yet, the primary discourse represented in these children's books has continually been Standard English.

Therefore, it was a challenge to find appropriate texts with which to make a comparison between African American Vernacular and Standard English. I felt it was important for the books I read to be alike in content, diverting from these likenesses primarily in usage of dialect, so I chose two texts whose story lines are very similar. In both *Peter's Chair* (Keats, 1967) and *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* (Greenfield, 1974), the main characters are young boys dealing with the impact of gaining a baby sister, while losing their status as only children and, thus, the sole attention of their families. Both Peter and Kevin, though, come to realize their role as older brothers, and they feel genuine responsibility and pride. Thus, both of these stories portray African American children who are dealing with a familiar problem – jealousy over a new sibling.

Yet, while the plots of these stories are remarkably similar in their main points, they are quite dissimilar when analyzed from a more specific stance. Ezra Jack Keats' book *Peter's Chair* (1967) is an example of a melting pot book, meaning that its characters are African American, but display no distinctive traits that would lead the reader to conclude that they are from this cultural group. Being that Keats is a European American author portraying African American characters, this is also an example of cross-cultural literature (Cai & Bishop, 1994). Upon reading *Peter's Chair*, it becomes obvious that the characters within its pages exhibit no broadly defining characteristics of the African American cultural group, and could be easily replaced by

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[1] It should be noted that "African American" and "Black" are used synonymously throughout this article, as are "European American" and "White."

European Americans. Therefore, although Keats' book has been said to have paved the way for later examples of literature about African Americans, his integration of their culture into his books is lacking.

This becomes even more obvious when *Peter's Chair* is compared to *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* (Greenfield, 1974). Eloise Greenfield, herself being African American, wrote a parallel culture picture book, which is an example of "literature written by authors from parallel culture groups to represent the experience, consciousness, and self-image developed as a result of being acculturated and socialized within those groups" (Cai & Bishop, 1994, p. 68). It is also "culturally conscious literature," in that it attempts to "reflect…the social and cultural traditions associated with growing up Black in the United States" (Harris, 1993, p. 177), with one of these traditions being the use of AAVE. Greenfield is able to "capture the orality of Black Vernacular English without resorting to inaccurate dialect" (Harris, 1993, p. 178).

**Maintaining the Status Quo: Considering the Lack of Linguistic Diversity in Picture Books**
Yet, regardless of the authenticity of books like *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl*, some teachers are hesitant to use texts with AAVE in the classroom, which may explain their relative inexistence on library shelves and in classroom bookcases. Research has shown that educators are sometimes nervous that African American children might be embarrassed that they are being portrayed differently than their European American counterparts, and there is a feeling that European American children (or their parents) might be uncomfortable with this alternative way of understanding the world (Wheeler & Swords, 2004). In my six years of teaching, though, I have found very few examples of this occurring, being that young children are eager to learn about people who live differently than themselves. And my experiences with children from parallel cultures are aligned with those of Purves and Beach, who "found that children prefer literary works with subject matter related to their personal experiences, that they engage more with materials related to their personal experiences, and that they seek out works with which they can identify or which contain characters whose experiences reflect their own" (Harris, 1993, p. 180). Keeping this in mind, reading comprehension among African American children might improve if they are able to read about more characters whose experiences in life reflected their own (Delpit, 1995). I once had a conversation with a first grade student who brought up the fact that he, an African American male, felt slighted because "only white people be on TV and in library books." Thus, while I recognize that the use of AAVE is only *one* aspect of a text that makes it an example of culturally conscious literature, its inclusion potentially has the power to affect the academic achievement of African American children. By exploring its effect on my students through the reading of a picture book containing this dialect, I hoped to see if its inclusion made a difference in their engagement in/connection to our reading.

**Thinking Through Possible Responses: A Look at the Demographics of My Class**
While it was very interesting to read articles and texts that argued for the use of linguistically varied children's literature, I found very little written directly about the responses of children to such books. I could not help but wonder how my own class, coming from many backgrounds and home dialects, would react to the reading of picture books that used AAVE in place of the Standard English to which they have become so accustomed to hearing in books. It is one thing to read about the effectiveness of a teaching strategy, and quite another for this same method of instruction to have a positive impact in a particular classroom.

Given the diversity of my student population, though, I felt fairly sure that I would hear a variety of responses to these texts. Out of the eighteen first graders I teach, ten are African American, and most of these children come from homes in which AAVE is the dominant discourse. I teach six European American students, with their primary dialect being Mainstream American English. Finally, the two Latino children in my room speak English as their second language, and in negotiating the particulars of this new way of speaking, I have often heard them code-switch between Standard and African American Vernacular English. In addition to racial diversity, my class is also socioeconomically diverse; 60% receive free and reduced lunch. There is no correlation between the race of these children and their SES, in that all three cultural groups have members who receive free and reduced lunch, as well as members who don't.

To be clear, though, the purpose of my reading *Peter's Chair* and *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* was not to definitively determine the effectiveness of each text among any cultural group; rather, it was my intent to use the responses of my children to these texts as a way to determine further possibilities for usage of books that include alternative forms of dialect. I know that my students' responses are individual to *them* and their very particular lives; I find great validity in Reader Response Theory, which claims that a precise interaction occurs between text and reader that produces all interpretations/reactions (Galda, 1988), and I recognize my students' responses as such. I was sure to keep this in mind as I came to our book discussions armed with my chosen texts, Post-it Notes for recording student thoughts, and a mind I hoped was open to dialogue where not only our ears were listening, but our minds were also prepared for the possibility of current beliefs and thoughts being changed through conversation (Freire, 1968/1972).

### Learning How to Listen: Analyzing Student Engagement with Texts

I was still, though, more than a little apprehensive. I worried that the parents of my children might not understand the purpose I had in introducing their children to AAVE in the classroom. I worried that the students in my class would bring up topics that were outside of the realm of language usage, and that we would be led into discussions that were even more candid than those I'd hoped for; "this is a risky place for…teachers, since we can't always anticipate the questions and issues that students will bring to the table" (Lewison, Leland, Flint, & Moller, 2002, p. 224), and although my class and I have continually entered into conversations around issues of diversity and validation of home cultures, this concern is always in my mind.

Mostly, though, I worried that my kids would have *nothing to say* on this topic, which was a concern that stemmed from a previous reading of *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 1986). Being that this text juxtaposes Standard English (through the fox's voice) against African American Vernacular English (through Flossie's voice), I thought that my students would immediately notice and comment on the differences between the two. As I began to read, I anticipated their reaction, pausing after certain pages in my assumption that a hand would shoot up into the air or a voice would call out, "Hey! She talks like me!" A few pages into the text, though, this had yet to occur, so I began asking pointed questions (I'm not above a little prompting). "So, is there anything *interesting* or *different* you notice about the ways that Flossie or the Fox are speaking?"
　　Nothing.
　　I could hear crickets.

My question was met with silence (which *never* happens in my classroom). They enjoyed the fact that Flossie was able to trick the Fox, who they recognized as generally being the most cunning character in storybooks. Language, though, seemed not to be on their radar, and I left this reading of the text with a sinking feeling in my stomach. While I recognized that my students' lack of recognition of dialectical differences provided me with insight in and of itself, I was hoping for a chance to engage with them in meaningful conversations about a topic which I felt was immensely important – the validation of a language many of them heard at home through the pages of a picture book! I could not, though, seem to ask the right questions to initiate a response regarding dialect usage. I was trying to enter into "third space" with my children, in that I was attempting to bring together the "first space" (knowledge that I control as the teacher) and "second space" (my students' construction of their own knowledge) within my classroom, and to see if we could create dialogue from within this space outside of ourselves (Willis et al., 2008), but to no avail. At this point, it was clear this was not meant to happen…my students' personal responses to the text were not aligned with the connection I was trying to force them to make, and I decided not to press the issue further.

So, then, it was with some trepidation that I entered into the reading of *Peter's Chair* and *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl*. I began by reading *Peter's Chair*, with the understanding that this would not challenge our understanding of literature's use of dialect; being that it is a cross-cultural, melting pot text, it looks and sounds just like most other picture books on the shelves of classrooms and media centers. My reading of this text elicited the kinds of responses that I thought it might, in that my students made personal connections to the text, but did not seem particularly engaged in its message. We spoke as a whole class and in partnerships, and as I listened to the conversations springing up around me, I pondered their very *ordinary* nature. They were important, of course, in that they gave each child a chance to engage in response to a piece of literature and to find similarities between its characters and themselves, regardless of whether they were reflected within its pages. Yet, the kids were not particularly interested in speaking about this topic; after a few whole group responses about instances regarding jealousy and selfishness, the kids were ready to move on.

The next day I began reading of *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl*. It was my prediction that, since the children were able to connect in some ways to *Peter's Chair*, they would also be able to do so with our new text, considering the topics addressed within each were so similar. Through the reading of *this* book, though, I was hoping to "address social inequity and injustices through instruction" (Willis et al., 2008, pp. 98-99); while I would not be doing this overtly, it was my wish that the students would call attention to the fact that there were language differences between this new text and *Peter's Chair*, and that we could be drawn into discussion regarding these differences. I saw this piece of literature as an opportunity for my students and me to move toward a curriculum valuing "diversity and difference. When reading [such] books, it is possible for silenced voices to be heard and for multiple perspectives to be explored" (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 216). The question remained, though: would my students pick up on this in an authentic way, or would my pushing the topic be simply another example of a time when schools did not honor their specific interests and positions in the world?
I did not have to wait long to find out. As soon as I picked up the book, one student asked, "Is that the same character as the other book we read?" Presumably, he'd noticed that both Peter

and Kevin (the main character in this text) were African American, and had recognized a possible relationship between the two.  After I let him know that the characters in these texts did not overlap, I read the title aloud to the class.  "Those words in the title are in a funny order," one European American girl observed, which led to murmurs of assent from some of her classmates.  "What do you mean?" I asked her, as I furiously began to write this down on a Post-It note next to me.  She went on to say that the arrangement of the words made her think of times she had heard classmates say, "I can use that?" in instances where her home dialect (Standard English) would have called for, "Can I use that?"  This child was making a connection between language experiences she'd had in her own life and the order of the words within the title of this unfamiliar text.  I decided to take a quick vote regarding whether or not other children felt the same way.  Using this child's words, we closed our eyes and raised our hands to declare our vote for one of the following categories: 1) "the words sound 'funny,'" 2) "the words sound fine," or 3) "I'm not sure." The voting ended up being almost equal between the first two categories, with the end result being seven votes to six; these perspectives were not split down the lines of whether or not a specific child primarily spoke Mainstream English or AAVE, in that children from both dialectical backgrounds voted for either of these two choices.  This lack of attachment to home dialect caused me to recall Delpit's (1995) claim that children often code switch without resistance until they are approximately eight years old; therefore, the majority of my six and seven year old students were possibly still in the stage of their linguistic development in which they did not have an unwavering attachment to one dialect over another. Both of my Latino students voted for the third category, which made perfect sense considering their lack of familiarity with the intricacies of English in *any* dialect; they often code-switch between Standard English and AAVE, being that their classmates model some of each in the activities of our classroom, and it is my assumption that, because of this, *both* dialects sound "right" to them.

Our conversation snowballed from here.  Observations regarding dialect continued to come up as we read, and at one point I noticed a child who was sitting directly in front of me, waving one hand frantically in the air and pointing the other dramatically toward one of our classroom book shelves.  When I asked him what he wanted to share, he excitedly declared that he had noticed similarities between the way that *Flossie* spoke and the way *Kevin* was speaking.  There had been no indication during our reading of *Flossie and the Fox* that they'd even noticed the dialectical differences between the characters, so this was the last connection I'd expected anyone to make.  I decided to take this moment and run with it.  I pulled up a "translation chart" that I had created (which was a t-chart, with "Flossie" heading one side and "Fox" heading the other), through which I wanted to intentionally explore and compare the dialect of both Flossie and the Fox, being that I had not previously thought they'd picked up on these differences. Obviously, my students had internalized more about the intricacies of this text than I'd realized, and simply chose to bring forth this understanding in their own time.  Allowing this to organically occur, and to present them with multiple examples of text with AAVE, paved the way for rich, and rather unexpected, conversation; I could not help but think that this was Reader Response Theory (Galda, 1988) at its finest.  Thus, the door for this conversation was open, and I decided to walk through it with my students in tow, hoping they would follow me.

Having already made the comparison between Flossie and Kevin, I asked the kids whether they had noticed any characters in recently read books who spoke more like the Fox.  Immediately, hands were raised in the air, and the first that I called on excitedly called out, "Peter!  The Fox

spoke like Peter in *Peter's Chair* and *The Snowy Day*!" We were now in the *third space* of learning, so I decided to let the class show me whether or not they were ready to take this discussion to a more personal level; were we ready to compare our *own* language patterns, or were we relegated at this point to the comparison of dialect within books? They quickly made clear to me that they were able to connect the language patterns of *Peter's Chair* and *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* to those they heard in their classroom, and we jotted down some comparisons. Some of the kids felt Kevin's way of speaking was "normal," while others were more comfortable with Peter's dialect. They brought up the fact that they don't often hear Kevin's dialect in books, but Peter's language patterns are common. One student declared that Kevin's language was "real" to him; yet Peter's way with words showed up on tests, and was thus a form of language we needed to be learning and using in school.

At this point, our conversation turned a corner into possibly rocky terrain. Having made the connection that students in our classroom spoke both Peter's and Kevin's dialects at home, the kids began to feel much more comfortable discussing their own terms for such language use. Not being equipped with phrases like "Standard English" and "African American Vernacular English," they used words they had previously heard in reference to speaking patterns; one student coined these dialects "White" and "Black" talk, and the rest of the group nodded their agreement in the use of this apparently common terminology. All of a sudden, *every* child was actively engaged in this discussion. Thus, I was reminded that "books are important, but only serve as catalysts for conversations about meaningful real-world topics – topics that too often stay outside the classroom door" (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 224), and this was just one such topic.

While I often try to bring in topics of educational equity as they relate to my students' personal life experiences, I began to think that we might be entering into a discussion in which feelings could be hurt. What if someone began speaking about how one dialect or another was unimportant or inferior? What if, by using the dichotomies of "Black" and "White," we began to lump students into groups which they did not feel adequately identified them as learners or speakers of the English language? Willis et al. (2008) said that "language is who we are. If any of us refuse to respect the other's language, it becomes too easy, consciously or unconsciously, to then disrespect the person" (pp. 103-104).

I needn't have worried, though, as they treated one another with the utmost respect. After the initial classroom recognition of the terms "Black" and "White" talk, one of the African American females in our class laughingly stated that she sometimes plays around with her mom at home by talking "White." Most of the class giggled, but some of the students looked indignant. One of our African American males was eager to comment on this. "I know Black people who talk like White people, and White people who talk like Black people – it doesn't matter!" he said. "Yeah!" answered a European American female. "Sometimes I hear us talk the same, and sometimes I hear us talk different!"

At this point, I decided to ask a question of this highly motivated, and now rather independent, discussion group. "What," I posed, "do you mean by 'Black' and 'White' talk?" My intention in asking this question was to break down the binary being casually tossed around; I wanted to continue down the path of Freirian dialogue, in which I was learning from my students and they were (hopefully) being challenged by me (Freire, 1968/1972). This question, though, was met

by silence – the first quiet moment that had punctuated this lively and engaging talk.  One European American male spoke up, saying that it meant people speak differently, but that it's okay to have any skin color and speak any way you want.  As his classmates nodded, he told me that as long as people understand us when we talk to them, that's what is important.  Thus, our discussion served as a way to validate one another's home lives.

At this point, 45 minutes had passed; earlier, the kids had adamantly refused my offer for a break, telling me that they were having too much fun to stop our conversation.  At the conclusion of our time together it was obvious to me that *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* had led to a discussion most picture books could not claim to have done. While helping us to think critically about the language patterns that we hear in school and at home, it also gave us the opportunity to put voice to topics that had obviously been given much thought outside of our classroom walls.  As Lewison et al. (2002) stated:

> Put simply – there is a remarkable vitality, an aliveness, a level of intellectual engagement that occurs when kids have the opportunity to read about and discuss important, controversial topics that intersect their lives.  These "dangerous" real-world conversations stand in stark contrast to the lifeless, routinized discourses that have come to permeate some elementary and middle school classrooms.  When critical conversations become part of the regular curriculum, school has the potential of becoming an exciting place where stimulating, intellectual work is the rule rather than the exception. (p. 216)

I left this conversation rejuvenated by the interest my kids had in discussing the use of language, and rather surprised by their already in-depth knowledge of dialect switching.  If I had halted discussion on this topic after reading *Flossie and the Fox* to my kids, I would not have been able to be part of such an intense learning experience, which is a testament to the necessity of providing children with multiple opportunities to learn about diverse topics in the classroom; there are many reasons that could have contributed to their initial lack of interest in this topic (too little sleep, a full moon, more engagement in the topic of the story than the language usage, the fact that it was read right before lunch), but when they were provided with another opportunity to connect and respond to the use of AAVE in picture books, their conversation exceeded my wildest expectations.

**Continuing to Dialogue: Next Steps**

What, then, can come from these discussions and realizations about language use from within the walls of one first grade classroom?  Of course, no generalizations can be made based on this very limited look of language with my class.  Yet, there is no doubt that the conversation initiated by the reading of *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* was much more rich and connected to the personal lives of many of my students than was that of *Peter's Chair*.  Not all of my children spoke the home dialect of Kevin, but this did not seem to matter, reminding me of the fact that "teaching risky stories…is a matter of structuring a practice among a group of children in which…listeners can claim a story as their own so that they remember this story, and it becomes part of their repertoire of living memories" (Lewison, 2002, p. 217).  Through class discussion, and our explicit attention to various forms of dialect, this particular text was made meaningful to all of my students, and they were able to connect to language in powerful ways.

I now want to return in my classroom to the idea of "Black" and "White" talk. It's important that children do not fall prey to the widespread use of dichotomous terms such as these; real people and situations rarely fit so neatly into the puzzle of life and the interactions we have within it. Now that I know the words my children use to describe Standard English and AAVE, I can more intentionally use them to enter into future conversation about how each dialect is intricately used. It will be crucial, then, to note that race cannot be definitively used as a way to categorize the dialect that individuals speak. In addition to such discussions, I would like to create class books in which there are characters who speak different primary dialects. Modeling this after *Flossie and the Fox*, and Patricia McKissack's (1986) effort to include African American Vernacular English and Mainstream English, my students and I could change the race of the characters speaking each, in order to make the point that there are no clear cut lines regarding the home dialect of individuals. Additionally, the continued use of translation charts, such as the one that we completed regarding the differences in language between the main characters in *Flossie and the Fox*, could provide critical discussion points. In an attempt to draw attention to our home dialects, we could become detectives of language in all areas of our lives, listening for and record interesting examples of speaking while in or out of school, and translating them into other forms of dialect (i.e. translate "home talk" to "school talk," and vice versa). We could also continue to listen to book characters, in order to determine whether language patterns vary as they enter different places in the world, and record this on our charts. "Bidialectical dictionaries [comparing the students'] own language form and Standard English" (Delpit, 1995, p. 53) could be created. By drawing attention to our complex usage of language, we could continue to break down the societal structures that continue to insist on the superiority of Standard English, and move toward recognizing the validity of all forms of speaking.

I wonder, as well, where else books like these can be used. I recognize, and empathize with, the restrictions felt by teachers regarding the necessity of helping their students to master material will be included on standardized tests, as well as the fact that, in society at large, dialects like African American Vernacular English are *not* valued or considered appropriate for use in educational environments. I continually come back, though, to the fact that there are too few connections being made to students' home lives within the walls of classrooms, and this is serving to increase disinterest in and motivation toward learning. When I read *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* and *Flossie and the Fox* to my class, the response and connection to these texts by my African American males and females was one of true engagement, and I am convinced that further usage of similar books would increase the likelihood that they would want to lose themselves within the pages of a story. While I recognize that this would not be the response of all, and that there is a danger in dichotomizing the language patterns of children, I believe that such use of diverse literature is worth trying as teachers continue to work toward increasing student engagement.

Throughout all of this, I clearly saw that my students needed – they *craved* – exposure to texts that mirrored their own culture and the culture of their families and friends. This, then, must be provided to them. After all, what is our job as educators, if it is not to engage students meaningfully with literature? Without this engagement, without students being able to see or hear themselves in literature, how can we hope to see them become lifelong readers? Throughout my own childhood, I sought books that reflected experiences and lifestyles that were familiar to me – and it is now my goal to provide that comfort to the students in my classroom.

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