

[Home](#) > Providing access to standard and nonstandard writing conventions: How a teacher encouraged his students' use of literate identity

---

## PROVIDING ACCESS TO STANDARD AND NONSTANDARD WRITING CONVENTIONS: HOW A TEACHER ENCOURAGED HIS STUDENTS' USE OF LITERATE IDENTITY

K. Dara Hill

### Abstract:

*Grounded in integrated and excerpt style (Emerson, et al., 1995), this article chronicles Mr. Lehrer, an English teacher who provides his students access to standard and nonstandard writing conventions. Student writing samples and discursive practices illustrate enhanced awareness of distinctions between nonstandard language (African American Vernacular English and European American Vernacular English) and Standard English, against the backdrop of a suburban school experiencing problems of residency. Also examined is the historical construct that shapes current conditions and disparities between neighboring urban and suburban boundaries. In a climate where many teachers assume the home language of working class Detroit children is deficient, Mr. Lehrer's practices are improvisational, based on changing demography in his classroom, for he assumes competence and a space for all students to recognize that they appropriate a deviation from Standard English.*

### Introduction

"Mr. Lehrer, this is bold! You put down the way you wanted me to write, not the way I want to write it, in my own words!"

This comment was bellowed in frustration by Kiki, a focal African American student from Detroit in Mr. Lehrer's 7th grade classroom at Barrington Middle School in Oak Valley, an affluent suburb. She was responding to the comments Mr. Lehrer wrote on her paper, which suggested necessary changes she needed to make, in order to employ standard writing conventions in her essay. Mr. Lehrer's comments were intended to be a non-threatening space for students to respond to written feedback and acquire standard writing conventions by submitting a revised draft. In spite of Mr. Lehrer's intentions, Kiki's intonation suggested that her voice had been violated and she was deeply offended. Kiki and her peers had numerous opportunities to appropriate their home language and nonstandard writing conventions in Mr. Lehrer's classroom. However, her response suggested her desire to utilize her voice in all writing contexts, for her voice was linked closely to her identity. Moreover, what was at stake for Kiki was her need to preserve her identity in an academic world that demands Standard English, which presupposes that there are necessary contexts that require compromising voice and identity.

Unfortunately, when the incident with Kiki occurred, Mr. Lehrer was conferencing with another student. As a participant observer in the classroom, I decided to intervene and explain to her the reasons for Mr. Lehrer's feedback. I told her that the poem she wrote during the previous week was a nonstandard assignment, one where she could use her voice. She calmed down when I explained that Mr. Lehrer's comments were intended to prepare her for academic writing, a necessary ingredient for success as she moved forward in school. She exerted an even better understanding when I told her that every writer compromises their voice when they write for academic purposes. It was necessary for Kiki to understand this because she expressed many instances in school where she was made to feel that she and her Detroit peers were singled out as only ones who spoke a deviation from Standard English. I am uncertain about Mr. Lehrer's approach to this dilemma, had I not intervened. What I do know for certain, however, was that it was important for Mr. Lehrer to value his students' home language, while simultaneously providing them with access to standard writing.

Particularly salient was the manner in which I worked with Mr. Lehrer and his students during the previous year. A significant change in demography from one year to the next led to pedagogical changes to teach and differentiate to the needs of all students. Changes, as improvisation, are important because many teachers in this context were unprepared to modify their teaching, in accordance with an unexpected demographic shift. Before I illustrate Mr. Lehrer's pedagogical approaches, I will describe the cultural and historical context underlying Barrington Middle School in Oak Valley Schools, to explicate the controversial climate and residency issues in which Mr. Lehrer's instructional decisions were situated. In addition, I will describe the theoretical frame, which underlies the context and nature of his pedagogical decisions.

Grounded in integrated and excerpt style (Emerson, et al., 1995), this article chronicles Mr. Lehrer, an English teacher who provides his students access to standard and nonstandard writing conventions. In a climate where many teachers assume the

home language of working class Detroit children is deficient, Mr. Lehrer's practices are improvisational, based on changing demography in his classroom, for he assumes competence and a space for all students to recognize that they appropriate a deviation from Standard English.

### **A teacher in a racially polarized school in a cultural and historical context**

These interactions occurred in a racially polarized school, in a controversial climate where suspicions were heightened about legal residency of students who transferred from Detroit. Mr. Lehrer represents a minority of teachers who welcome this nature of discourse, in a manner that provides activity with linguistic mediation toward what Dewey called curricular "ends in view" (1938). This provides a social and linguistic place where activity can become an educative experience and, ultimately, cognitive development (Florio-Ruane and Rosaen, in press).

Because he represents a minority of teachers, the discomfort with increasing diversity among the majority warrants investigation. It is necessary to understand the context and the circumstances that shape why teachers and community members sustain perceptions about diverse populations that are regarded as outsiders. In a school district that is gradually recognizing that pedagogical changes are needed to teach its increasingly diverse population, transformation cannot occur unless there is full recognition about existing biases held by many teachers and willingness to take risks to draw on teachers' knowledge in new ways.

Against a climate of uncertainty surrounding changing demography, this article will document the focal teacher's enactment of providing access to standard and nonstandard writing conventions. During his act of improvisation, the article will additionally illustrate Mr. Lehrer's pedagogical decisions, which provided every student a welcoming place to appropriate their literate identity and the culture of the home.

### **Oak Valley School District**

The Oak Valley School District is an affluent school system outside of Detroit which has a largely struggling school system. Tensions have amassed in the Barrington Middle School community in Oak Valley, as the number of Black children from Detroit precipitously increased during the 2004-05 school year. Prior to this school year, the phenomena of a gradual influx occurred as a result of parent dissatisfaction, perceived and/or experienced, with educational offerings in public schools within Detroit city limits. The mid year influx was synonymous with the announcement that Detroit Public Schools would be closing 34 schools at the end of the academic year, due to declining enrollment. The increased influx was also synonymous with suspicion that new enrollees were border cheaters who were stealing from residents by not living in the district or paying property taxes, as an affordance of privilege to attend a top notch school district. Traditionally, Oak Valley received transfer students at the beginning of the school year, due to families who moved during the summer months to ensure a smooth transition. Hence, midyear enrollment was an unusual occurrence. As an affluent district that enrolls by appropriate residency, students faced a community that questioned the legitimacy of residency status. Although many families moved into nearby apartments that fed into the district, some were speculated of signing illegal lease agreements, while continuing to live in Detroit.

Speculation that many students were illegally enrolled in Oak Valley led 3000 parents to sign a petition requiring all Oak Valley students to re enroll and confirm residency status. Although proponents of this requirement claimed that race was not the issue, opponents suggested that poor and minority students were disproportionately investigated. Ultimately, what arrived at the forefront was a community that was pushed to confront its discomfort with diversity, rooted in intergenerational divisions of race and class. The re enrollment procedure that ensued was reminiscent of Detroit during the late 1940s to the 1970s, in which European ethnics ascribed in solidarity surrounding issues of bussing and residency in order to preserve the racial homogeneity of their neighborhoods and schools (Sugrue, 1996; Mirel, 1993). Many families eventually left Detroit and moved to neighboring suburbs, including Oak Valley. Many teachers in Southeast Michigan are descendants of families who moved out of Detroit during this time. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that many teachers would be uncomfortable with diversity.

The range of settings where the situation is occurring is in the neighboring school districts, the school, classrooms, and in the community. Dilemmas that are not fully identified and understood are embedded in historical and current divisions of race and class. To illustrate, these divisions historically define where people reside, and consequently, where children attend school, and where teachers prefer to teach. Currently, Oak Valley is predominantly White and affluent, bordering Detroit, which is disproportionately African American and poor. The school enrollment mirrors these populations.

### **Mr. Lehrer's approach to teaching in a diverse classroom**

In an environment where teachers were uncertain about modifying instruction, Mr. Lehrer was an experienced 7th grade English

teacher who identified demographic change as an opportunity toward improvisation in a culturally responsive manner, among 29 racially and ethnically diverse students, including five African American students from Detroit. He was capable and motivated to change his pedagogy within the limits of the district's seventh grade standards by working with his class as a developing community, in which adaptations and improvisation played important roles in the mediation of experiences by language. It is in this way that he transformed the community norms for students to study language in the upper grades as a literature based experience. He was able both to respond to the cultural differences among his students, especially those who were border crossers. He creatively improvised curriculum in a manner that prompted students to investigate social stratification by identity, or even by culturally familiar or unfamiliar curriculum, as one way a group can enact a theory critical of race as the essential characteristic of a person. He and his students confronted social justice in the community as a key learning challenge.

An examination of Mr. Lehrer reveals his expertise as a literacy teacher, his ability to finesse (Pardo, 2005) book choices as the basis of instruction, and his knowledge and experience of the borderland where families are coming into contact by means of de facto "school choice," a value that is neither universal nor easy to enact.

Diversity workshops were attempting to raise awareness of difference, but in a fashion that did not address teacher concerns about effectively teaching the unexpected influx of students. Mr. Lehrer's expertise was such that he was able to employ culturally responsive practices on his own volition, based on his background and awareness of language varieties. He relied on his own professional literature and on-going reflection to facilitate writing instruction.

Professionals, teachers, administrators, and policy makers alike may learn from Mr. Lehrer, and perhaps others, (Cohen, 1990) that change cannot be predicted or controlled, that people negotiate change, and good teaching is decision making often moment to moment and in complex, indeterminate circumstances.

Given a culturally responsive teacher, against the backdrop of changing demography and residency issues, I asked: What opportunities does Mr. Lehrer provide for students to appropriate standard and nonstandard writing conventions? How do practices align with curriculum standards? In what ways are his practices improvisational? How do students respond to Mr. Lehrer's instructional decisions? What implications do Mr. Lehrer's pedagogical decisions pose for professional development?

In the next section, I will provide the theoretical underpinnings that I observed to be manifest in Mr. Lehrer's instructional decisions.

## Theoretical framework

In recent years, the desire for more equitable schooling has resulted in working class parents who exert their agency to rent housing in the neighboring suburb and enroll their children in its schools. The unintended consequences are that a cultural mismatch occurs and teachers often assume a deficit when students' linguistic and cultural differences do not align with school (Delpit, 1995, 2002; Purcell-Gates, 2002). Furthermore, Decuir and Dixon's (2004) work in an affluent elite institution reveals that African-American students experience isolation and a sense of being othered.

The body of knowledge surrounding culture and linguistic diversity inform about the consequent cultural mismatch between teachers and students, existing language attitudes, and educational consequences for students when their home language is not utilized as a foundation for literacy learning. The ability of students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE), for example, are largely misinterpreted by teachers as deficient, resulting in underachievement and improper placement in special education programs (Cazden, 2001; Delpit, 2002, 1995; Vaughn-Cooke, 1999; Smitherman, 1999). Additionally problematic is the act of regarding vernacular differences in writing as developmental errors (Dyson and Genishi, 2005). Delpit (1995) and Purcell-Gates (2002) assert that to assume a child's linguistic diversity and culture as deficient is to suggest that something is wrong with the families, to which children are intimately connected. Teachers who exert language attitudes and forbid home language as a foundation to read and write impede children's access to the world of print (Purcell-Gates, 2002).

AAVE can be differentiated from other dialects of English. Therefore, its systematic features define AAVE as a variety of the English language (Adger, et al., 1999). AAVE is recognized as the "primary language of African American students", which should be taken into account in "facilitating mastery of English language skills" (Rickford, 1999, p. 1).

Codeswitching pedagogies call for employing students' home language to facilitate Standard English acquisition (Delpit, et al., 2002, Adger, et al., 1999) in an effort to preserve identity and provide Standard English in a non-threatening manner (Delpit, 1995; Wolfram, 1999; Harris-Wright, 1999; Smitherman, 1999). Hence, students should not eradicate the features of their nonstandard home language and have opportunities to appropriate them, but also require intervention for formal writing contexts. By balancing opportunities in school to enact nonstandard and Standard English, children are aware of distinctions and appropriate contexts (Delpit, 1995, p. 53). In order for non dominant speakers to better achieve in school, their home language, literacy, and culture must be appropriated as a foundation to acquire standard forms of literacy acquisition.

Carrie Secret (1997) is a noted fifth grade teacher who explicitly embraces codeswitching pedagogies by employing contrasting codes in Ebonics and Standard English. Among several strategies, she has students memorize poems by African American poets who write in standard in nonstandard styles. This is helpful to students and parents, who have unlearned shame of their home language. Hence, teachers must unlearn language attitudes and provide students with access to writing and speaking the standard form of English, as the language of power (Adger, et al, 1999; Delpit, 1995; Gee, 1996).

Delpit (1995) challenges teachers' held assertions that African American children and children from non dominant groups do not have fluency. She problematizes holistic literacy teaching that focuses on fluency with the abandonment of skills, which undergird standard written and spoken language conventions. Delpit (1995) suggests the need for balance between skills and fluency, by recommending the integration of skills in meaningful contexts, while taking culture of the home into account.

At the same time, Delpit (1995) and Meier (1999) acknowledge the importance of establishing a familiarity with students' linguistic traditions, as a manner of building on students' cultural linguistic resources and strengths. Teachers must acknowledge the cultural literary traditions that have sophisticated distinction, rather than assume nonstandard language usage as a mistake (Delpit, 1995).

Baugh (1999), Wolfram (1999), and Meier (1999) explicate the need for teachers to understand that standard varieties of English are not superior. Nonstandard varieties are devalued in the dominant culture, but are rule governed as a language and are as complex as standard dialects.

Speech genres posit the primary home genre and the secondary genre, which is standard (Bakhtin, 1986). Bakhtin (1986) suggests that there is an inadequate understanding of their nature and classification, but an understanding is needed to address the problem, and to overthrow false notions. According to Bakhtin, (1986) the appropriation of speech genres are context driven, whether one is at home, in school, at church, and so on.

Wolfram (1999) suggests that it is necessary for African American students to identify that they are not the only students who speak a deviation from Standard English. Hence, pedagogical decisions must be aligned with Gee's (1996) notion that people of varying races and backgrounds are tied to varying literacies that are connected with varying Discourses.

Judith Baker (2002) is a high school teacher who enacts triangualism: formal, professional and home discourses. The discursive project is one in which students examine the dialects of their classmates, and each student presents a conversation in the context of their home language. Students value each others' discourse, with respect, in a low stakes, non threatening manner. Baker's (2002) work posits that standard language is a choice, not an imposition. Establishing an interest in the standard form is exerted first before rules are enacted.

Calkin's (1994) and Atwell's (1987) work embodies the enactment of the writer's workshop, which comprises of prewriting, drafting, peer-led conferring, revising, and editing. Teachers are encouraged to know students well and foster a home and school connection. Calkins (1994) and Atwell (1987, 2002) have been criticized for reifying optimal implementation in affluent contexts, without taking into consideration diverse populations (Dyson, 2004).

Classrooms with increasing diversity result often in a cultural mismatch when cultural norms are misinterpreted by teachers. Teachers must therefore assume culturally responsive classroom management (Weinstein, 2004).

Although Sachs (2004) identifies attributes of successful urban teachers, they are relevant to suburban contexts and teachers, when urban populations and dilemmas enter into the context. Teachers must view students as valuable and meaningful, integrating realities of students' lives, experience, and culture into the classroom and subject matter (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Morris, 2004). Teachers must affirm their own cultural identity and the cultural identity of their students. They must exhibit strong contextual interpersonal skills. Teachers must collaborate with colleagues and community to develop support systems for student needs and professionalism (Guyton & Hidalgo, 1995). They must sustain self understanding and positive self ethnic identity, and engage in risk taking with optimal challenges (Sachs, 2004). It is important to develop a sense of connectedness with students and students' communities (Foster, 1997; Irvine, 1990; Sachs, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000; Morris, 2004).

Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) asserts the importance of teaching that is culturally relevant. Teachers must view students as valuable and meaningful, while integrating students' lives, experience, and culture into the classroom and subject matter. Weinstein (2004) suggests the importance of maintaining a commitment to building caring classroom communities, for students to respond better upon knowing that teachers treat them like people and care about them personally and educationally.

Weinstein (2004) informs about five essential components embedded in teachers who sustain culturally responsive classroom

management. Teachers must recognize their own ethnocentrism, sustain knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds, and understand the broader social, economic, and political context that shapes the school context. Teachers must also exhibit the ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate management strategies, and a commitment to building caring classrooms. Weinstein (2004) suggests the importance of maintaining a commitment to building caring classroom communities, for students respond better upon knowing that teachers treat them like people and care about them personally and educationally.

In order to unlearn bias, teachers must recognize their own ethnocentrism (Weinstein, 2004). Bank's (1994) term, cultural encapsulation, posits that white teachers are unaware of their racial identity or the pervasiveness of whiteness. They consider cultural norms to be neutral, and European middle class structures are regarded as normal and right (Weinstein, 2004). According to Florio-Ruane (2001), lack of cultural understanding reinforces European American teachers' sense of "us" as normal and "them" as abnormal. In addition, Dyer (1997) asserts that race is applied only to nonwhites, and that Whites are not racially named, but function as the human norm. It is therefore important for teachers to examine these taken for granted assumptions and the hand in history (Anyon, 1997) that defines this racially segregated region. Notions of cultural encapsulation are important to mention because they have persisted over time, and underlie educational disparities that exist in racially polarized regions.

## **The school and students**

Barrington Middle School enrolled 776 students in grades 6-8 in 2004-05. 87% of the students were European American, compared to 92% during the previous school year. The current state average during that time was 77% in schools enrolling grades 6-8. African American students made up 9 percent of the population, which is above the district's average of 6%, and an increase from the school's 6% during the previous year. The current state average is 16%. Asian American students made up 2%, aligned with previous year's enrollment and the state average. 1% of students were Hispanic. No Hispanic students were enrolled during the previous year, and the state average was 4%. 3% of the entire school population received free or reduced-price lunch, up from the previous year's 2%, and is below the 31% state average. Census data reveals that the median household income in Oak Valley in 1999 was \$79,199.00.

Standardized test scores among grade 7 students in 2002 exceeded state averages in reading, writing, and math. 70% of 7th graders met or exceeded standards in reading; 88% did the same for writing, and 80% in math. State averages are 49% in reading, 63% in writing, and 50% in math.

I was a participant observer, Mr. Lehrer, a 7th grade English teacher, was the focal teacher, and the class comprised of the most racially and ethnically diverse class of Mr. Lehrer's teaching career.

I was a reading specialist at Burns, a neighboring Oak Valley middle school and doctoral candidate. I had 10 years of teaching experience during the time, which included six years in Oak Valley and four years in Detroit. As a Detroit resident, graduate, and former teacher, I am deeply concerned about the normalized stigma that most of its schools are no longer desirable and that students are unteachable. I was an insider in Oak Valley and one of its few African American women teachers. I am racially ambiguous, due to my Jamaican and German ancestry and was regularly questioned about my race affiliation. Many colleagues would express surprise that I considered myself African American and claim that I was so articulate. This affirmed for me that I was in a climate where many teachers did not expect African Americans, including their students, to be articulate. Therefore, I experienced firsthand many teachers who were uncomfortable with unexpected demographic changes.

I wanted to chronicle a teacher who was willing to modify instruction to teach all learners in this context. A colleague referred me to Mr. Lehrer as a teacher who worked tirelessly to teach all of his students. Mr. Lehrer lived in Huntington, a nearby less affluent suburb, and was a former Detroit resident who maintained close ties to the city. He is European American, of German descent with 18 years of teaching experience during the time of the study. Our shared fondness for Detroit and beliefs about culturally responsive literacy instruction was an impetus for a collegial bond. Mr. Lehrer and I deliberated regularly about improvising his practice. In addition, determining shared pedagogical beliefs during our collaboration from the previous year established trust.

Mr. Lehrer informed the students that I would be observing his teaching. We collectively expressed the nature of my involvement with the students. Students were aware that I would be jotting down pertinent observations and that I would occasionally interact with them. I observed Mr. Lehrer during one 46 minute period, 3-5 days per week over a 5 month period, from February to June 2005. I took fieldnotes, talked frequently with Mr. Lehrer about his teaching, and interviewed his students. In addition, I employed integrated and excerpt style (Emerson, et al., 1995) to support assertions surrounding standard and nonstandard writing conventions. I integrated fieldnotes and student writing samples in standard and nonstandard contexts. I provide excerpts from discussions with Mr. Lehrer, interviews with students, and teacher-led discussion.

Although I was an outsider to the school, students were informed that I was also a teacher at Burns, the neighboring middle school, so I was an insider in the school district. I taught in the morning and would arrive in time for the 6th period class. Looking like a teacher on the basis of my attire would align with what Dyson and Genishi (2005) cite as helpful to being regarded as an insider and establishing trust.

The class enrolled 29 students. 21 students were European American; 5 were African American; 1 was Asian American; 1 was a French student; 1 was an Ethiopian student. There were 15 girls and 14 boys. The participants in the class were the most racially and ethnically diverse class of the focal teacher's career. At the same time, the composition in Mr. Lehrer's classroom corresponded with a typical classroom at Barrington Middle School.

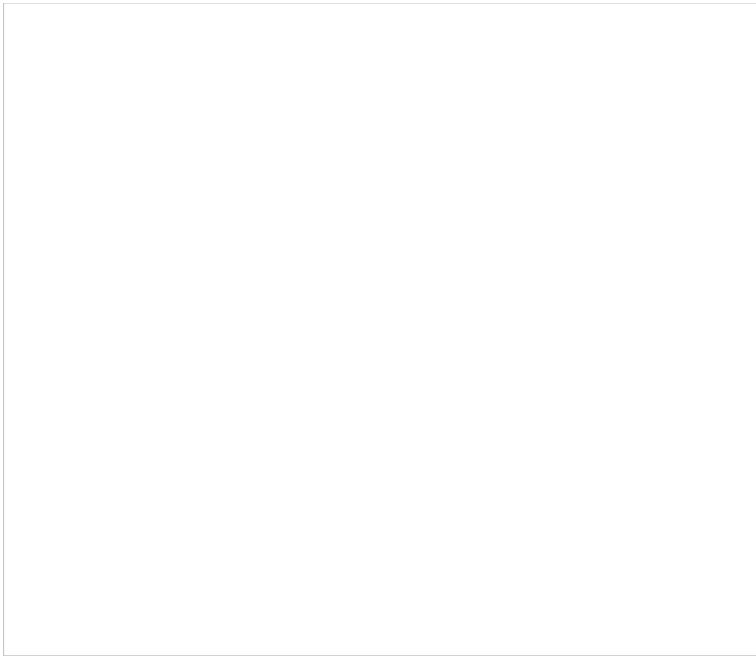
The French, Ethiopian, and Asian students represented the third culture students at Barrington, whose parents immigrated to Oak Valley within the last decade. These students were the first generation in their families to attend school in the United States. Although their families might not have the same economic capital as their European American counterparts, their cultural norms aligned with what was recognized at school, in a manner similar to what is described by Lareau (1989). Hence, parents were in regular contact with Mr. Lehrer and the students spoke European American Vernacular English, a form of English that was valued by teachers. Although the Ethiopian student was considered a Black student, he fit into this category. Third culture students were additionally not scrutinized for residency requirements.

The working class African American students, on the other hand, were scrutinized about residency requirements. Similar to working class families cited by Lareau (1989), they tended to be disconnected with school and students spoke African American Vernacular English, which was devalued by many teachers. Children were also regarded as having behavior problems and minimal literacy skills. For instance, Black students' familiarity with call response, a more active participatory pattern in which students demonstrate engagement by commenting and reacting was misinterpreted as rude and disruptive (Weinstein, 2004; Cazden, 1999, 2001). Teachers often expressed concerns about the lack of parental involvement, in and out of school. In many instances, families did not share the same economic capital as their counterparts. Residing in rental property did not warrant the privilege that was traditionally afforded by home ownership.

The European American students represented the majority of students and were not scrutinized about residency requirements. The reenrollment procedure was intended to protect their interests, for legal enrollment was traditionally manifest in home ownership and high property values and taxes. According to Weinstein (2004) and Delpit (1995), middle class White teachers are used to the "passive receptive" discourse pattern as a cultural norm, and expect students to learn quietly while the teacher is speaking and respond individually to teacher initiated questions. In addition, their use of European American Vernacular English was valued by teachers and similar to Lareau (1989), parents were involved with the school.

### **Writing practices that Mr. Lehrer uses to provide standard and nonstandard conventions**

In accordance with Grade Level Content Expectations, students employed nonstandard and standard writing conventions, positing the emic perspective (Figure 1). Nonstandard conventions are embedded in appropriating a personal style, by exhibiting individuality to enhance the written message ([www.mich.gov/edu](http://www.mich.gov/edu)). To account for the emic perspective, reference and analysis of student writing samples that posit individual style and voice deviating from standard conventions will be termed nonstandard. Simultaneously, writing that Mr. Lehrer accepts and appropriates as nonstandard will be taken into account.



**Figure 1.** Nonstandard and standard conventions, embedded in Grade Level Content Expectations.

According to Grade Level Content Expectations, standard writing espouses standard and grammar usage, where students must appropriate a variety of grammatical structures (Figure 1; [www.mich.gov/edu](http://www.mich.gov/edu)) . Writing samples that focus on standard grammatical usage in the context of expectations of a grade 7 English class will be termed standard and will account for the emic perspective. To account for etic perspectives, the nonstandard and standard conventions appropriated in class will be interpreted and defined in relation to societal constructs and research.

Within the frame of the writing workshop approach, writing practices provided opportunities for students to access standard and nonstandard conventions of writing and speaking. Access to standard conventions will be explicated through the enactment of a vignette with Kiki and the writing of the “Letter to Future Self” assignment. In addition, the Letter to Future Self samples will include Mr. Lehrer’s written feedback to provide an emic perspective. This is intended to illustrate the manner in which students are expected to respond to feedback and submit final drafts with standard conventions.

Access to nonstandard conventions will be explicated through poetry and student *Seedfolks* chapters, and salient written samples will be provided. Moreover, to account for emic perspectives, nonstandard and standard writing conventions will be defined within the realm of Grade Level Content Expectations and Mr. Lehrer’s acceptance and expectations of conventions in student writing. Etically, the nonstandard and standard conventions appropriated in class will be interpreted in a manner in which practices intersect with research and societal constructs.

### **Letter to future self**

The “Letter to Future Self” was a writing assignment and genre that posited standard writing conventions, in the context of topics that mattered to the students. Students were required to write a letter to the person they would become when they are a senior preparing to graduate from high school. Student letters would be mailed to them near the end of their senior year of high school. The letter was Mr. Lehrer’s signature assignment.

The guidelines embodied the letter format. Each paragraph manifested topics that were appropriate to the student during their grade 7 year. Topics included physical appearance, favorite things, and important people. Additional topics included things that have happened this school year and hopes and dreams for the future.

It is important to note the manner of standard conventions that are sustained with the writing of student social worlds (Dyson, 2002) and experiences. Cited drafts are rough drafts, and include Mr. Lehrer’s feedback for the final edited version, to be placed in stamped envelopes and mailed in five years.

To illustrate, the following writing samples illustrate focal students who utilized salient standard features in their writing. Samples include Mr. Lehrer’s recommended feedback, to reify standard conventions for students’ final drafts.

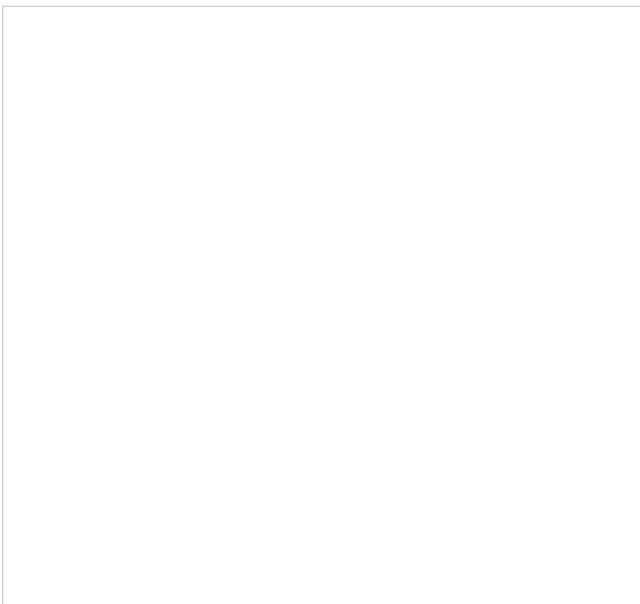
Kiki wrote about her physical appearance (Figure 2):



**Figure 2.** Kiki's writing that illustrates standard conventions: "Normally you see me wearing jeans, button-ups, skirts, and a lot of t-shirts. My hair is like a silky black with a tint of brown. Well, that's only when the sun comes out."

Mr. Lehrer did not identify any corrections in this area, indicating Kiki's awareness of writing standard conventions. Comments indicate spelling clarification and including more detail in another paragraph. It is important to note that Kiki appropriated standard conventions in her writing, without Mr. Lehrer's prompting, a significant change from earlier in the school year. More than one month prior to this enactment, she was confrontational about preserving her nonstandard conventions in the aforementioned essay. Hence, utilizing standard conventions on her own suggests that she became more aware of distinguishing from standard and nonstandard conventions.

To express hopes and dreams for the future, Monet, another focal student from Detroit wrote the following, utilizing standard conventions (Figure 3):



**Figure 3.** Standard conventions embedded in Monet's text include: "My hopes and dreams for the future are to be a famous singer, and if that doesn't work I want to be a pediatrician. When I finish college, I want to make good money and be a very rich person. That would make me happy."



Very few corrections were made to Monet's draft, illustrating her awareness of appropriating standard conventions. Mr. Lehrer noted spelling errors and punctuation to help Monet prepare for her final draft.

The expectation for writing standard conventions and appropriating skills in meaningful contexts reifies Delpit's (1995) assertion that intervention is needed to write in standard contexts.

Mr. Lehrer actively sustained an awareness and balance of standard and nonstandard contexts for writing in meaningful contexts. Sustaining this awareness aligned with grammar and usage embedded in the Grade Level Content Expectations.

During a formal interview, Mr. Lehrer acknowledged the importance of sustaining skills in meaningful contexts, for it was an integral facet of standard acquisition and usage:

*Mr. Lehrer:* Yeah, sure, because that's the basis of the class. I mean, really, this kind of class revolves around the idea that those skills, and I think there's a lot of truth to this, those skills exist, within the context of important language usage.

*Mrs. Hill:* Right

*Mr. Lehrer:* So if you're using language in an important way which is to say that you're using it to express meaning

*Mrs. Hill:* True, so, you put skills in meaningful contexts, not finding the subject and the predicate

*Mr. Lehrer:* Even though occasionally I will do that if I really want to mention some things that they don't have, I think it's such a vacuum.

*Mrs. Hill:* So that would make you a little less approachable if you were just

*Mr. Lehrer:* I think so, I think they know as the year goes on that I care about that stuff a lot. I really do. I demonstrate that when I get their paper and mark them up and when I talk to them about their writing, but it would have to be in a meaningful context

This excerpt reveals that Mr. Lehrer's written comments are intended to provide skills in meaningful contexts, in a manner that is non-threatening. He considers on-going written feedback an impetus to talk to students about their writing, in an effort for them to acquire standard conventions in meaningful contexts.

Providing on-going, written feedback for 137 students across all of his class sections is a time consuming task, and, as previously illustrated, poses constraints for meeting each child personally to address his comments. However, each student is at least provided with written feedback and opportunities to confer with a peer. He exerts for them an expectation that they must assume responsibility and respond to written feedback until the draft is errorless.

The transformation from one year to the next is indicative of more evidence of student writing samples exhibiting attempts at standard grammar usage. As an end of the year assignment, samples illustrate transformation, for students responded more readily to Mr. Lehrer's more explicit directives to distinguish between standard and nonstandard conventions.

### **Nonstandard writing conventions: Poetry writing**

In addition to writing standard conventions, students had opportunities to appropriate nonstandard conventions during poetry and narrative writing practices. Focal students displayed numerous nonstandard conventions in their poetry writing, and it was encouraged and valued on a regular basis. To illustrate nonstandard conventions as a deviation from standard conventions, it is necessary to account for emic perspectives. Therefore, integrated writing samples will include illustrations of how Mr. Lehrer might have corrected, had he called for standard conventions.

Kiki's poem comprised of numerous nonstandard conventions to express sadness surrounding her cousin who died, including:

"Leaving Elementary that's when she left me...We were close friends also cousins did everything for one another... But now I got to live and make it somehow...I know I got to move on and realize that she is gone." (Figure 4)



**Figure 4.** Kiki's poem with evidence of nonstandard conventions accepted by Mr. Lehrer

Kiki spoke strongly about preserving her voice in her writing. Allowing her to write about her loss, while sustaining her voice is an example of valuing her manner of speaking that is intimately connected with her family. By providing Kiki and other students these writing opportunities, she is able to build on her cultural linguistic strengths. Had standard conventions been required, it would have read: "She left me in elementary school...We were close friends and cousins and did everything for each other. Now I've got to live and make it somehow. I know I've got to move on and realize that she is gone."

Monet was another student who was aware the distinction between her voice and what she regarded as slang, and what was considered "proper." The following excerpts in her poem about a surprise party for her uncle illustrate a strong sense of voice:

"...My uncle say's "Where the kids at." She say's "They busy." He said, "What is a two year old and a two month old 'busy' doing. She say's "Whateva, but how did you do at the casino?" Uncle tried to say good but we lef out about as fast as an alkaseltzer when it drops into water." (Figure 5)



**Figure 5.** Monet's poem with nonstandard conventions accepted by Mr. Lehrer

The examples that represent her relatives speaking naturally are an accurate depiction of how they would speak. To write their voices in a standard form is an inaccurate depiction and diminishes who they are. Monet's appropriation of their voices is a manner of acknowledging strength in cultural linguistic tradition. If standard conventions were required, it would have read, "My uncle says, "Where are the kids?" My aunt says, "They're busy." He said, "What is a two year old and a two month old busy doing?" She says, "Whatever, but how did you do at the casino?" Uncle tried to say "Well," but we left as quickly as an Alkaseltzer when it drops into water."

The translation of Monet and Kiki's writing underscores the absence of their identity and voice in their writing, and the importance of providing students opportunities to employ these features in their writing. All in all, the writing samples divulge that poetry writing practices provided students with opportunities to appropriate the language that is valued at home and accounts for their personal style, embedded in the Grade Level Content Expectations.

Mr. Lehrer enacted similar practices during the previous year, but writing samples did not indicate significant evidence of students' home language. This transformation was likely a result of Mr. Lehrer's more explicit emphasis and encouragement for students to appropriate their voices in their writing.

## **Seedfolks**

Another pertinent example of the enactment of nonstandard conventions was the writing of the *Seedfolks* (1997) chapter, which was influenced by Mr. Lehrer's decision to read the novel aloud to the class. Mr. Lehrer did not implement this novel during the previous year. During an informal conversation, he revealed that changing demography influenced his decision to appropriate *Seedfolks* as a read aloud. In addition to linking students' experiences, it connected multicultural curriculum titles that students were reading in class. Ultimately, the enactment of *Seedfolks* was transformative, given the teacher's awareness of the changing circumstances in the community, school, and his classroom.

*Seedfolks* is a novel that is based on a Cleveland community where a variety of people from varying ethnicities and races self segregate into their own enclaves and maintain stereotypes about each other. The community's transformation of a vacant lot into a garden becomes the force that pushes members to confront their ethnocentrism and to unlearn their b i a s . It is important to note that students were encouraged to write a character into the text, and to write in accordance with their voice and culture. Each chapter in the novel was based on a character that depicted their ethnic group. Because each character's voice illuminated a different variety of English, students became aware that they would be able to write in accordance with their voice.

One chapter that was especially salient, regarding the notion of voice and language acquisition was “Sae Young’s” chapter. Mr. Lehrer’s read aloud and discussion prompted students to take their language varieties into consideration with the writing of their *Seedfolks* chapter. During the excerpted teacher-led discourse that occurred prior to reading the chapter aloud, Mr. Lehrer noted why he likes this book so much at the end of May:

“I would like to say something about this book. This book I really like a lot. I think it does celebrate multiculturalism, for sure. This is an interesting thing because when you’re talking about new cultures, and writing about them, you also want to be careful not to be too stereotypical, which is to say, people of this culture are that way. I think that Paul Fleischman walks that line. But I really think that the things that are stereotypical about this book are really mostly getting across the beauty of differences...the next Chapter, Sae Young, is a Korean person. Here’s her picture...now I would like to say this, too. On the board you see the words that say style of narration? Paul Fleischman uses a different narrator for each chapter. You notice so much how they speak and have different voices, but it really is. Because Sae Young is a Korean American with broken English, and that’s the way it reads. But I think it’s part of the views of the chapter.”

The premise behind the chapter is Sae Young, from Korea, who owns the cleaners in the community. After her husband died of a heart attack, she no longer desired to go out, and was afraid to walk alone. In the two years since her husband died, a robbery where she was assaulted forced her to hire a Korean man to run the cleaners. Her life is reclusive until she notices a Vietnamese girl picking lima beans, and notices other people working there. Being near people was helpful when she decided to join them, even if she didn’t talk to them. It made her feel safe to see people: Next day I go back and dig small garden. Nobody talk to me that day. But just be near people, nice people feel good, like next to fire in winter” (p. 38). After the read aloud, the following excerpt illustrates the teacher-led discourse that occurred at the end of May:

*Mr. Lehrer:* You know, I don’t know this, but I’m sure Paul Fleishman looked into this when he wrote this chapter. I do remember that many of the Asian students I had, this is a general recollection, many times when they were trying to learn English from their native language, articles were a problem for them. And the, very often. That’s probably something Paul Fleishman knew, and took into account.

*Unnamed:* um, when you’re saying about the “and” and

*Mr. Lehrer:* mm hmm

*Unnamed:* maybe it’s because the language they had they didn’t use them much

*Mr. Lehrer:* Oh, you know I think they’re being very insightful in that because I remember reading somewhere that there are many different dialects, for instance, Chinese, in Chinese languages that many of them don’t have articles. So when you’re going from language to another, the parts that are going to be hard are the parts that there’s no translation for in your own language. Because how do you understand that concept? You never know, and it doesn’t necessarily, you know, language makes sense without these things. So I think you’re right on with that.

This pattern of teacher-led discourse transitioned into directives and expectations for the *Seedfolks* chapter that students were preparing to write. Guidelines called for students to pre-write their ethnicity and taking into account the appropriation of their voice, as they would speak at home. Students were required to indicate the two chapters they envisioned their chapter to fall between. Students were expected to weave in their ethnic background rather than dumping it on the narrator at once. The narrator’s tie to the neighborhood and garden was required, along with a connection to one of the other characters in the story. Lastly, students were expected to ask themselves if the chapter conveyed how the narrator is affected by the garden and/or how the narrator affect the garden or the people involved in it (Figure 6).



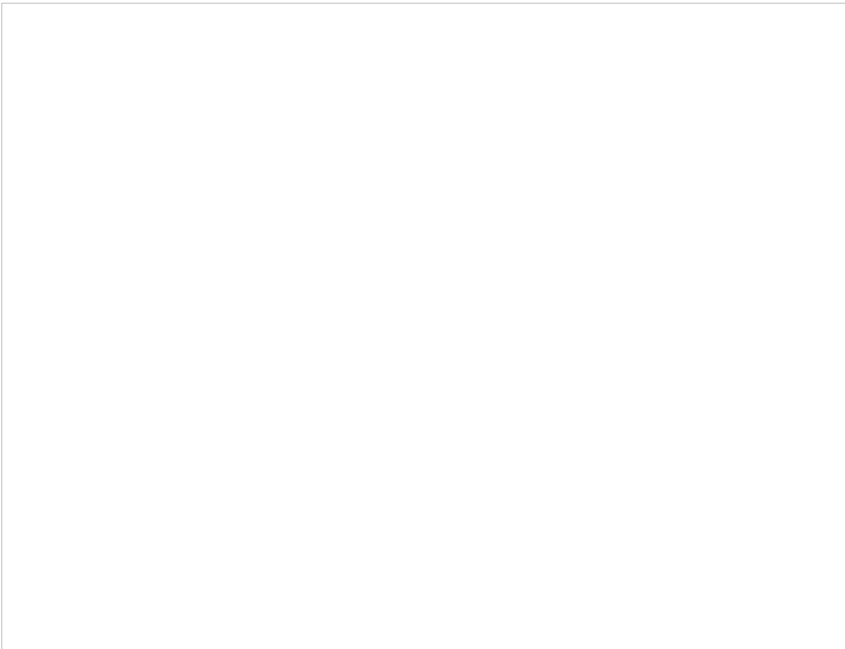
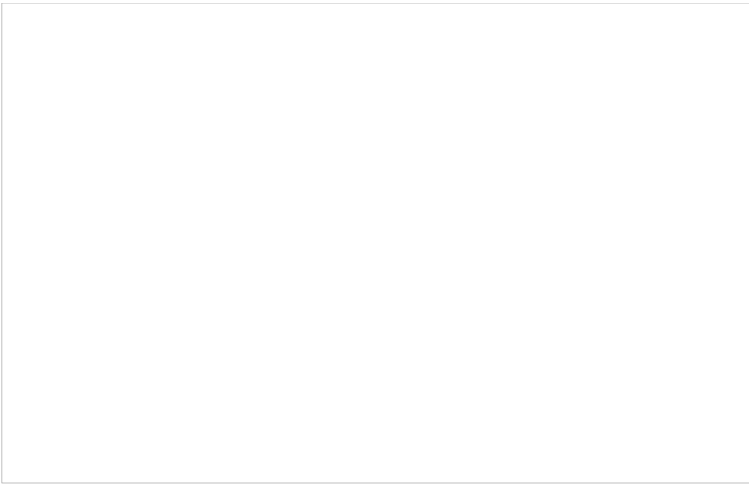
**Figure 6.** Guidelines for *Seedfolks* chapter

To clarify the assignment, Monet quietly approached Mr. Lehrer after class that day. She expressed that she wrote proper, but that she speaks slang. She wanted to know if she could write the way that she spoke without being marked down for it. Mr. Lehrer welcomed her idea, expressing that that was what he wanted her to do. At the same time, given that her poetry writing was valued, it seems ironic that she expressed uncertainty about her voice.

Soon after, in early June, Abe, a focal student from Oak Valley, asked the same question in front of the whole class. Mr. Lehrer's welcoming of non standard voices explicated for Monet that her appropriation of African American Vernacular English was not the only deviation from Standard English. Therefore, Mr. Lehrer affirmed that people of varying races and backgrounds are tied to varying literacies that are connected with varying discourses.

These interactions were transformative in nature, for they were the most explicit observations of explicit directives for students to draw from their cultural and linguistic strengths in their writing. In this instance, Mr. Lehrer openly welcomed the sophisticated distinction of students' cultural literary traditions, rather than assume nonstandard language as a mistake. Moreover, promoting a balance between standard and non standard writing conventions suits Delpit's (1995) notion that students should not eradicate the features of their non standard home language and have opportunities to appropriate them. At the same time, intervention is required for formal writing contexts. Students sustain awareness that different language forms are appropriate in different contexts. The nature of Mr. Lehrer's open interactions with students surrounding language varieties provide a possible explanation for students' appropriation of salient home language features during the poetry writing and other nonstandard writing contexts.

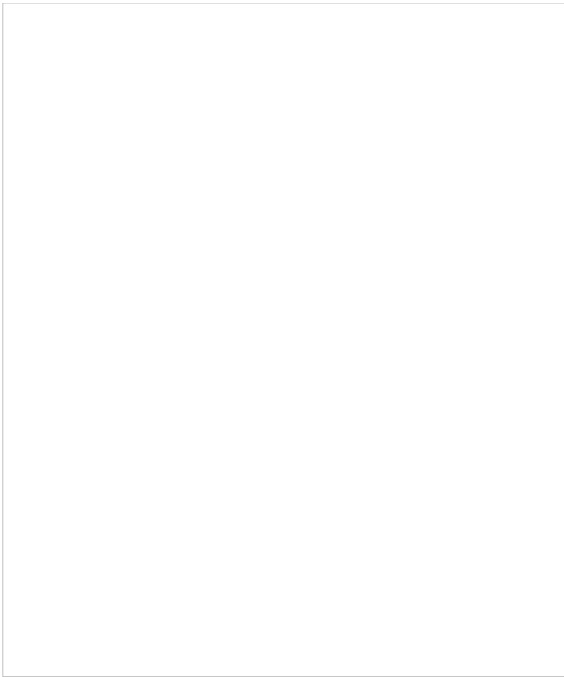
The following writing sample was written by Kim, another focal Detroit student. Kim's draft, titled "Kimberly" included nonstandard features of African American Vernacular English spoken at home, incorporating sophisticated cultural literary tradition (Delpit, 1995) and a Terry McMillan flavor, "...I quickly pulled out my new cell phone and chirped my best friend Monique, that girl has good timing because when I called she was just getting out of the shower. In addition, exaggerated intonation could be detected in "all that trash had dumped their cans directly on ALL of MY plants. I was so mad I took my phone out and called the police right then and there (Figure 7)."



**Figure 7.** Kim's nonstandard conventions, drawing from cultural literary tradition

Had standard conventions been required, her draft would have read, "I quickly pulled out my new cell phone and called my best friend Monique. That girl has good timing because she was getting out of the shower when I called." In addition, it would have been written as "I took my phone out and called the police."

Helena was a focal student from France. Helena's chapter, titled "Helena" seemingly embodies French, as a foundation for Helena's use of English, "I walk to the store and try to look for some fresh tomatoes, onions, olives to make a gateau au olive. This is French meal. The next day I wake up and Patrick has already gone to work...I walk over to the vacant lot and see the man working (Figure 8)."



**Figure 8.** Helena's use of nonstandard conventions, grounded in French as it translates into English

Helena's mother visited Mr. Lehrer on many occasions, and her French accent could be detected. Her appropriation of a French accent would be based on her mother's voice.

Had this writing been appropriated with standard conventions, it would have read:

"I walked to the store and tried to look for some fresh tomatoes, onions, olives to make a gateau au olive. This is a French meal...The next day I woke up and Patrick had already gone to work...I walked over to the vacant lot and saw the man working."

Detroit focal students, Monet and Kiki did not submit their *Seedfolks* chapters, so their use of African American Vernacular English could not be detected for this assignment.

However, aforementioned integrated examples illustrate a comfort level utilizing nonstandard language conventions, without the threat of correction or of being marked down.

In addition, Monet and Kiki affirmed their awareness of writing nonstandard conventions in a manner they would speak during an interview:

Mrs. Hill: Monet, when you asked Mr. Lehrer if you could use your voice, he said of course you can, without being marked down. Do you realize how amazing that is?

Monet: Because I did spell words how I would say 'em, and, like aight (alright),

Kiki: y'all!

Monet: stuff like that, and y'all, because we don't talk like, yeah, you guys are, we don't talk like that, so it's just how I was raised and where I came from, they talk like that.

Kiki: It's not basically street talk,

Monet: It's how we were raised

Mrs. Hill: And that's very important, that Mr. Lehrer sees that as important too, because that's your voice. If you read Maya Angelou, or even Mildred Taylor, there's so much of that rich language, even Joyce Hansen. It's really an important technique of writing, and it's important for you to be able to do that. I can give you the authors if you want, because it's important to be able to read them

Monet: Because he said it was important to write about us, and it would have been hard to write about me talking in someone else's voice

Mrs. Hill: Absolutely. Imagine, he let you do that. I can't think of other teachers that would do that

Monet: If he didn't do that I probably wouldn't have got a good grade because I wouldn't have known what to say,

but like y'all, I would have been like, what's another word that I could use for y'all that I could spell right?  
Mrs. Hill: Hey, you! [laughter]

This excerpt reveals that Monet and Kiki are openly aware of the distinctions between standard and nonstandard conventions of writing and speaking, along with the perception of their home language as street talk in the dominant culture and in school. Both girls grappled with their identity in school, and knew that standard writing conventions was a skill they needed, although it meant that it required them to compromise their identity. For Monet especially, there was no standard convention that could illustrate her true voice, and she knew that there were standard writing contexts where she would not be able to fully illuminate who she was. Therefore, Monet and Kiki sustained awareness in Mr. Lehrer's class that different language forms are appropriate in different contexts.

From the beginning of school, Mr. Lehrer reifies the value of language varieties by reading aloud *Nightjohn* (1993). In a formal interview, he conveyed the importance of language in the novel:

"I always start out reading purposely *Nightjohn* because I love the way it does so much about first of all multiculturalism and secondly history and slavery, but also it's about words and language and the power of language."

In the following excerpt, he also suggested the nature of approving for students the notion of voice to accurately depict the way a person or character would speak:

Mrs. Hill: Abe and Monet being able to write in their own voices. Can you speak a little bit to that?

Mr. Lehrer: Uh, again, it comes from literature, in *Nightjohn*, the narrator Sarny has an uneducated way of telling the story, with her terms. Right away they notice that and obviously I'm standing up there reading that and that must be some sort of stamp of approval

Mrs. Hill: right. You do give a stamp of approval, don't you?

Mr. Lehrer: You know, if you're a language artist, which is to say writer, you use languages in a natural way of conveying the way someone would speak.

Therefore, in addition to Mr. Lehrer's interactions with students about language varieties, the stamp of approval and notion of language artist suggests that Mr. Lehrer sustains early on a level of comfort for students to utilize nonstandard contexts for writing. In addition, student writing and Monet and Kiki's excerpts, illustrate their level of comfort that is manifest in Mr. Lehrer's facilitation of offering on-going opportunities to write nonstandard conventions to convey their manner of speaking.

In spite of validating a context for nonstandard conventions on numerous occasions during the course of the year, it is seemingly problematic that Abe and Monet expressed uncertainty about appropriating their voices later in the year. Perhaps their concerns were a matter of being marked down upon writing nonstandard conventions when an assignment called for writing standard conventions, as experienced by Kiki. It is also possible to interpret that they may have been conditioned to being marked down for writing nonstandard conventions on numerous occasions during experiences with different teachers over the duration of their schooling.

Additionally problematic, is that Kiki and Monet did not take the time to complete and submit their *Seedfolks* chapters. It is possible to interpret that turning in assignments and being high achieving is aligned with Ogbu's (2003) findings among African American students' refusal to turn in work, due to their perceptions of "acting White". For Monet and Kiki, it is possible to interpret that acting White and turning in all of their assignments meant changing who they were. Monet and Kiki were entrenched in preserving their identity, and vocalized in the following excerpt that they were not interested in changing:

Mrs. Hill: So when you're in a classroom and when you're writing you know how to write formal and

Monet: Right, I write formal

Kiki: But it's different for me because when we moved over here my mother, my sister, my brother they were all changed, but it's hard for me

Monet: I didn't change at all

Kiki: Like my whole family changed when we moved over here

Monet: I won't change my way of speaking. I would use better words but I wouldn't try to change

Given the nature of what students revealed about their culture and ethnicity in their *Seedfolks* chapters, it is also possible to interpret that in spite of revealing much about their backgrounds on many occasions, they did not have enough trust in Mr. Lehrer to submit thoughts that divulged too much in-depth treatment about their families. This notion aligns with Ogbu's (2003)



argument of student discomfort when an assignment risks too much openness. On the other hand, in spite of their admission that they welcomed having the opportunity to inform about who they are in their writing, it is possible to conclude that they might sense that they should not have to be told that it is acceptable to write the way they want to. These reasons for resisting the *Seedfolks* chapter are merely speculative. Whatever the reason, their choice to not submit their work presents the potential for future research from the perspective of students, regarding why they did not turn in assignments. Unfortunately, not submitting culturally relevant assignments was endemic of several students in the class throughout the study, in spite of Mr. Lehrer's high expectations.

## **Discussion**

Mr. Lehrer enacted culturally relevant writing practices as a response to changing demography in his classroom, within the parameters of Grade Level Content Expectations. While engaging in these practices, students who did not sense belonging in other contexts of school felt that they belonged in his classroom. He provided for students non-threatening opportunities to write standard and nonstandard contexts for writing and valued their home language. For many students, he provided access to the culture of power (Delpit, 1995; Gee, 1996; Cazden, 1999, 2001; Smitherman, 1999; Vaughn-Cooke, 1999) through the enactment of providing written feedback and requiring students to resubmit revisions. Throughout his decision-making, he improvised and negotiated dilemmas that resonated with increased class sizes, heterogeneous learning abilities as a result of increasing diversity and student responsibility. In spite of providing opportunities for all students to balance their home and school literacies and maintaining high expectations, not all students submitted required assignments. Mr. Lehrer's practices also required on-going reflection through professional development opportunities. Although professional development was provided by the district, much of his transformative practices were enacted on his own volition, through professional literature, and agreeing to work with me, then a doctoral candidate.

For Oak Valley, Detroit, and everywhere else, Mr. Lehrer's on-going pedagogical decisions are an example of the commitment that is needed in an effort to teach all of our children. Current circumstances, in the wake of changing demography, require systemic change and deliberation.

## **Implications for practice**

While Detroit attempts to retain its students, Oak Valley's re-enrollment procedures attempt to keep non-residents, including students speculated to be Detroiters, out. Whether or not Detroit retains and attracts students, minority students will continue to enroll in suburban districts, including Oak Valley. Teachers in suburban districts must accept that demographic changes are inevitable. The notion of the racially homogeneous school is at a gradual decline. The act of sustaining and normalizing deficit views about "those" students, and of improperly placing students in special education based on linguistic differences is problematic (Delpit, 1995, 2002; Cazden, 1999). These matters, along with the act of not making pedagogical changes and ignoring the changing population, pose implications for the effective teaching of all students. In the past, limited diversity has presented for teachers an argument against culturally relevant pedagogy. Current circumstances, however, present an argument for culturally relevant pedagogy.

Although culturally relevant pedagogy is intended to cultivate high achievement, its enactment must become the norm in schooling rather than the exception. The enactment among few teachers is not enough to counter the culture of schooling. In other words, a few teachers who maintain high expectations and draw from students' cultural and linguistic resources are not enough to unlearn students' commonly held perceptions that schooling is detached from their experiences. Ultimately, the lived experience in school is not always supportive of completing assignments. To that end, Mr. Lehrer's class is one of seven required courses, and although he urged students on a regular basis, their remaining teachers may not have been as supportive in that endeavor. Beyond the parameters of their seventh grade year, there is potential that in their lived experience in school, they may have had enough teachers in grades 1-6 to shape a perception that it is acceptable to underachieve. Similarly, I suggest in the interview excerpt with Monet and Kiki that I couldn't think of other teachers that would enact Mr. Lehrer's pedagogical decisions. In the broader context of schooling, perhaps it is difficult for students to be trusting when they encounter teachers who are sincere in their efforts.

## **Implications for professional development**

"The lot was big, there was plenty of room. But when newcomers joined, at least at the beginning, they could usually get a spot near people they knew. One Saturday, when the garden was fullest, I stood up a minute to straighten my back. And what did I see? With a few exceptions, the blacks on one side, the whites on the other, the Central Americans and Asians toward the back. The garden was a copy of the neighborhood. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. A duck gives birth to a duckling, not a moose. Each group kept to itself, spoke its own language, and grew its own special crops. One man even put a pole and flew the Phillipine flag above his plot" (Fleischman, 1999,

This excerpt from *Seedfolks* emanates the time in the community when members were beginning to move out of their residential enclaves and into the garden. Rather than utilize the land best suited for their purposes, they patterned their garden plots by race and ethnicity. The members eventually cultivated the garden in a more integrated fashion, but their degree of comfort needed to be disrupted in order for them to confront their own ethnocentrism and bias. In order for teachers in Oak Valley, Detroit, and everywhere else to transform, on-going professional development must cultivate a space to disrupt one's comfort zone. The circumstances in *Seedfolks* embody the need for conflict to allow growth.

Oak Valley Schools have attempted a diversity professional development initiative, but the nature of the one time workshop approach rendered that presenters were unable to effectively address teacher concerns. Professional development, as it stands in Oak Valley, might be conducive to reflecting on existing disparities across groups, but is not conducive to influencing transformative practices or confronting held biases. One time diversity workshops, in particular, that do not account and provide support for teacher dilemmas in the context of their practice (Anyon, 1997; Putnam & Borko, 1997; Ball & Cohen, 1999; Wilson & Berne, 1999), will only enable the district to announce that they paid attention to diversity. Diversity awareness does not translate to transformative teacher practices that take into account the culture of the home (Heath, 1983; Delpit, 1995), nor does it facilitate the value in acknowledging and valuing students when making pedagogical decisions (Tyack, 1974; Paley, 1979; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Florio-Ruane and Williams, 2004; Irvine, 2003; Delpit, 1995, 2002; Purcell-Gates, 2002). Workshops posit valuing students and their differences, but does not account for pedagogical decisions.

Enacting the familiar color-blind approach and claiming to teach all students in the same manner, regardless of background (Tyack, 1974; Purcell-Gates, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Florio-Ruane and Williams, 2004; Irvine, 2003) has good intentions, but does not account for students' funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). This poses implications for student achievement, and sense of belonging in the district. Professional development must foster unlearning the taken for granted assumption that middle class pedagogy is normal and right (Weinstein, 2004). Only then will professional development that is on-going and relevant to dilemmas of practice (Erickson, 1986; Ball & Cohen, 1999; Wilson & Berne, 1999; Putnam & Borko, 1997; Anyon, 1997) facilitate significant pedagogical change that takes the language and culture of the home into account to facilitate literacy acquisition (Heath, 1983; Delpit, 1995, 2002; Gee, 1996; Purcell-Gates, 2002). Only then will students perceived as "those" kids sense that they are one of "our" kids.

To support a transformation, visitation and working with successful teachers of all students, through teacher networks (Anyon, 1997) are an important component in professional development that are relevant to the experiences and circumstances that teachers face (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Wilson & Berne, 1999; Putnam & Borko, 1997; Anyon, 1997). School districts desiring to meaningfully reach its student populations must seek partnerships with universities that strive for promoting exemplars of on-going professional development and educational parity. The university partnership (Flores, et al., 1991; Raphael, Florio-Ruane, and George, 2001), given that children are the focal concern of the school, is a necessary venue that would promote transformative changes in the best needs of all our children.

It is necessary for teacher collaboratives to engage in dialogue surrounding difficult topics. Dialogue in response to multicultural autobiography should be utilized to openly challenge and reflect on teachers' existing belief systems, and create a space where they can acknowledge it in their practice (Florio-Ruane, 2001). In addition, dialogue can be a powerful vehicle for teachers to comprehend the social conditions that shape urban centers, challenge the status quo, and understand how this structure shapes their beliefs about themselves and others (Freire, 1970; Zeichner, 1998, Ladson-Billings, 1995). Sugrue's (1996) work and Mirel (1993) warrant attention, based on the Detroit context. Dialogue can serve as an impetus for teachers to examine Whiteness and develop ways to think critically about race and racism in their practice (McIntire, 1997). Culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995) should be emphasized, which undergirds the cross cultural knowledge to align instruction with children's interests, background, and strengths. Discussion of such topics would likely elicit a sense of discomfort among participants. However, transformation cannot occur unless one's comfort zone has been disrupted. See Table 1 for recommended literature.

Table 1.

*Recommended discursive topics in teacher education and key references*

---

Autobiography

Richard Rodriguez (1982) *Hunger for Memory*

Maya Angelou (1997) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Historical constructs that shape current conditions

Jeffrey Mirel(1993) *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-1981*

Thomas Sugrue (1996) *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*

---

Teacher identity/notions of White privilege

Susan Florio-Ruane (2001) *Teacher Education and the Cultural Imagination*

Alice McIntire(1997) *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers*

Culturally relevant pedagogy

Lisa Delpit (1995) *Other People's Children*

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*

Mike Rose (2001) *Possible Lives*

---

In school districts such as Oak Valley, the minority teachers, including Mr. Lehrer, must be sought in collaborative efforts, to inform about practices for all students, in the era of changing demography and declining resources. They must be identified at all grade levels, to support the potential and possibility in modifying pedagogy to teach students. There are benefits in learning from teachers who share similar circumstances, and the potential for change is illuminated. In addition to revealing benefits, collaborative efforts are a venue for recognizing the potential for problems of dilemma management (Lampert, 1987), and that practices require a great deal of work and deliberation.

It is important to note that Mr. Lehrer did not draw from this body of literature to inform his practice. Instead, his professional references included Atwell and Calkins, surrounding poetry writing and conferring within the writing process. These resources have been criticized for appealing to affluent suburban contexts (Dyson, 2004). However, Mr. Lehrer negotiated his pedagogy in a manner that coincided with his willingness to know all of his students and draw from his knowledge, within the realm of the controversial and historical underpinnings shaping the context in which the community was situated.

On-going efforts and changes in Oak Valley, surrounding suburbs, and Detroit will diminish the phenomenon of students whose needs are not being met at either end, and establish a foundation for equitable opportunities. Outcomes suggest that focal students felt a sense of belonging in Mr. Lehrer's class. Students, in contrast, are aware when teachers are not welcoming. Thus, unlearning deficit views will establish for students a sense that they are cared about and respected. A welcoming environment is conducive to high expectations and achievement, regardless of the school context.

## References

Adger, C.T., Christian, D., and Taylor, O. (1999). *Making the connection. Language and academic achievement among African-American students*. IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and by Delta Systems, Co.

Angelou, M. (1997). *I know why the caged bird sings* New York: Bantam.

Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling. A political economy of urban educational reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Atwell, N. (1987). *Understanding writing: Ways of observing, learning, and teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Atwell, N. (2002). *Lessons that change writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Baker, J. (2002). Triangualism. In Delpit, L, and Dowdy, J.K. (Eds.). *The skin that we speak. Thoughts and language and culture in the classroom*. NY: The New Press.
- Bakhtin. M. (1986). *Speech genres and other essays*. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Ball, A.B. (2000). Teachers developing philosophies on literacy and their use in urban schools: A Vygotskian perspective on internal activity and teacher education. In Lee, C.D. and Smagorinsky, P. (Eds.). *Vygotskian perspectives on literacy research: Constructing meaning through collaborative inquiry*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Ball, D.L. and Cohen, D.K. (1999). Developing practice, developing practitioners: Toward a practice-based theory of professional education. In Darling-Hammond, L. and Sykes, G. (Eds.). *Teaching as the learning profession. Handbook of policy and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Banks, J.A. (1994). *Introduction to multicultural education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Baugh (1999). Considerations in Preparing Teachers for Linguistic Diversity. In Adger, C.T., Christian, D., and Taylor, O. (Eds.). *Making the connection. Language and Academic Achievement Among African-American Students*. IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and by Delta Systems, Co.
- Borko, H., Davinroy, K., Bliem, C. and Cumber, K. (2004). Changing instructional and assessment practices through professional development. In Poulson, L. and Wallace, M. (Eds.). *Learning to read critically in teaching and learning*.
- Calkins, L. (1994). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cazden, C. (1999). The Language of African American Students. In (Eds.) Adger, C.T., Christian, D., and Taylor, O. (1999). *Making the connection. Language and academic achievement among African-American students*. IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and by Delta Systems, Co.
- Cazden, C. (2001). *Classroom discourse*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cohen, D.K. (1990). A revolution in the classroom: The case of Mrs. Oublier. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 12, 311-330.
- Decuir, J. and Dixson, A. (2004). So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there: Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(3).
- Delpit, L. and Dowdy, J.K. (2002). *The skin that we speak. Thoughts and language and culture in the classroom*. NY: The New Press.
- Delpit, L. (2002). No kinda sense. In Delpit, L, and Dowdy, J.K. (Eds.). *The skin that we speak. Thoughts and language and culture in the classroom*. NY: The New Press.
- Delpit, L.D.(1995). *Other people's children*. NY: The New Press.
- Delpit, L.D. (1986). Skills and other dilemmas of a progressive black Educator. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(4), 379-385.
- Delpit, L.D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58, 280-298.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier Books.

Dyer, R. (1997). *Whiteness*. London: Routledge.

Dyson, A.H. (2002). *The brothers and sisters learn to write. Popular literacies in childhood and school cultures*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Dyson, A.H. (2004). Personal communication.

Dyson, A.H. and Genishi, C. (2005). *On the case*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Emerson, R.M. , Fretz, R.I., and Shaw, L.L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Erickson, F. (1986). *Teacher's practical ways of seeing and making sense*: East Lansing, MI: Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University.

Fleischman, P. (1997). *Seedfolks*. NY: Scholastic.

Foster, M. (1997). *Black teachers on teaching*. New York: The New Press.

Florio-Ruane, S. and Rosaen, C. (Ed.) (forthcoming). Changing teaching and teaching change.

Florio-Ruane, S. & Williams, L.(2004). More than culture: Race, ethnicity, and teacher stories. *Urban Review*.

Florio-Ruane, S. (2001). *Teacher education and the cultural imagination. Autobiography, conversation, and narrative*. NJ: Erlbaum and Associates, Publishers.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.

Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses, 2nd Edition*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Goddard, R.D., Hay, W.K., Woolfolk, A. (2004). Collective efficacy beliefs: Theoretical developments, empirical evidence, future directions. *Educational Researcher*, 33(3), 1-13.

Grade Level Content Expecations. Retrieved June 5, 2005 from "<http://www.mich.gov/mde>"

Grant, C.A. & Secada, W.G. (1990). Preparing teachers for diversity. In W.R. Houston (Ed.) *Handbook for Research on Teacher Education*(pp.403-422).

Guyton, E. and Hidalgo, F. (1995). Characteristics, responsibilities, and qualities of urban school mentors. *Education and Urban Society*, 28(1), 40-47.

Harris-Wright, K. (1999). Enhancing bidialectalism in urban African American students. In Adger, C.T., Christian, D., and Taylor, O. (Eds.). *Making the connection. Language and academic achievement among African-American students*. IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and by Delta Systems, Co.

Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Heron, W.K. (2005). *Unconventional wisdom. Urban historian Thomas Sugrue visits Metro Detroit*. Retrieved December 1, 2005 from [www.metrotimes.com](http://www.metrotimes.com).

- Hill, K.D. (2005). *A grade 7 teacher's enactment of literature-based instruction in an affluent suburb*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Montreal, Quebec.
- Hilliard, A. (1999). Language diversity and assessment: Ideology, professional practice, and the achievement gap. In Adger, C.T., Christian, D., and Taylor, O. (Eds.). *Making the connection. Language and academic achievement among African-American students*. IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and by Delta Systems, Co.
- Hilliard, A., Perry, T., Steele, C. (2004). *Young, gifted, and Black. Promoting high achievement among African American students*. MA: Beacon Press.
- Houston, R. (1988). The education of minority students in non urban schools. Philadelphia, PA: Research for better schools. (Washington, D.C.) U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Educational Resource Information Center.
- Irvine, J.J. (2003). *Educating teachers for diversity. Seeing with a cultural eye*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Irvine, J.J. (1990). *Black parents' perceptions of their children's desegregated school Experiences*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, MA.
- Kantor, H. and Lowe, R. (2004). Reflections on history and quality education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 6-10.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2002). I ain't writin' nuttin': Permission to fail and demands to succeed in urban classrooms. In Delpit, L. and Dowdy, J.K. (Eds.). *The skin that we speak. Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465-491.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers. Successful teaching for African American students*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Lampert, M. (1987). How do teachers manage to teach? Perspectives on problems in practice. *Harvard Educational Review*, 55(2).
- Lareau, A. (1989). *Home advantage: social class and parental intervention in elementary education*. Philadelphia: Falmer.
- LeCompte, M.D. and Schensul, J.J. (1999). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research*. CA: Alta Mira Press.
- McIntire, A. (1997). *Making meaning of Whiteness: Exploring identity with White teachers*. NY: SUNY Press.
- Meier, T. (1999). The case for Ebonics as part of exemplary teacher preparation. In Adger, C.T., Christian, D., and Taylor, O. (Eds.). *Making the connection. Language and academic achievement among African-American students*. IL: Center for Applied and by Delta Systems, Co.
- Mirel, J. (1993). *The rise and fall of an urban school system: Detroit, 1907-1981*. MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Moll, L.C. and Greenberg, J.B. (1990). The zone of proximal development as instruction. In Moll, L.C. (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education: Instructional applications of sociohistorical pedagogy*.
- Morris, J. (2004). Can anything good come from Nazareth? Race, class, and African American schooling and community in the urban South and Midwest. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(1) 69-114.
- Nieto, S. (2000). *Affirming diversity*. New York: Longman.

- Ogbu, J.U. (2003). *Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement*. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates, Inc.
- Orfield, G. and Eaton, S.E.(1996). *Dismantling desegregation. The quiet reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*. New York: The New Press.
- Pardo, L.S. (2005). *We begin writing in the ninety-first minute: Examining stories of how beginning teachers learn to finesse their teaching contexts*. In *The Classroom as Still Point in the Turning World of Literacy Education Reform*, an interactive session at the 26th Annual Penn Ethnography in Education Research Forum. Philadelphia, PA.
- Purcell-Gates, V. (2002). As soon as she opened her mouth. In In Delpit, L, and Dowdy, J.K. (Eds.). *The skin that we speak. Thoughts and language and culture in the classroom*. NY: The New Press.
- Putnam, R.T. and Borko, H. (1997). What do new views of knowledge and thinking have to say about research on teaching and learning? *Educational Researcher*, 29(1),4-15.
- Raphael, T.E., Florio-Ruane, S. and George, M.(2001). Book Club Plus: A conceptual framework to organize literacy instruction: *Language Arts*, 79(1), 159-168.
- Rickford (1999). Language diversity and academic achievement in the education of African American Students. In Adger, C.T., Christian, D., and Taylor, O. (Eds.). *Making the connection. Language and academic achievement among African-American students*. IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and by Delta Systems, Co.
- Rodriguez, R. (1982). *Hunger of memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez*. NY: Bantam.
- Rose, M. (2001). *Possible Lives. The promise of public education in America*.New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Sachs, S.K. (2004). Evaluation of teacher attributes as predictors of success in urban schools. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(2),177-187.
- Sawyer, R.K. (2004). Creative teaching: Collaborative discussion as disciplined improvisation. *Educational Researcher*, 33(2), 12-20.
- Secret, C. (1997). Embracing Ebonics and teaching Standard English. *Rethinking Schools*, 12(1), 32-33.
- Shannon, P. (1995). *Text, lies and videotape: Stories about life, literacy, and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Shulman, L.S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57, 1-22.
- Sleeter, C.E. (2001). Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52, 94-106.
- Sleeter, C.E. (1993). How White teachers construct race. In McCarthy,C. & Crichlow, W. (Eds.). *Race, Identity and Representation in Education*, 157-171.
- Smitherman, G. (1999). Language policy and classroom practices. In Adger, C.T., Christian, D., and Taylor, O. (Eds.). *Making the connection. Language and academic achievement among African-American students*. IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and by Delta Systems, Co.
- Sugrue, T.J. (1996). *Origins of the urban crisis: Race and inequality in postwar Detroit*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Tyack, D.K. (1974). *The one best system. A history of American urban education*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Vaughn-Cooke, A. (1999). Lessons learned from the Ebonics controversy—Implications for language assessment. In (Eds.) *Making the connection. Language and academic achievement among African-American students*. IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and by Delta Systems, Co.

Weinstein, C.S., Tomlinson-Clark, S., and Curran, M. (2004). Toward a conception of culturally responsive classroom management. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(1), 25-38.

Wells, A.S. and Crain, R.L.(1997). *Stepping over the color line. African American students in White suburban schools*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Wilson, S. and Berne, J. (1999). Teacher learning and the acquisition of professional knowledge: An examination of research in contemporary professional development. *Review of Research in Education*, 24,173-209.

Wolfram (1999). Repercussions From the Oakland Ebonics Controversy—The critical role of dialect awareness programs. In Adger, C.T., Christian, D., and Taylor, O, (Eds.). *Making the connection. Language and academic achievement among African-American students*. IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and by Delta Systems, Co.

Wells, G. and Chang-Wells, G. (1992). *Constructing knowledge together: Classrooms as centers of inquiry and literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Zeichner, K.M., Grant, C., Gay, G., Gillette, M., Valli, L., & Villegas, A.M. (1998). A research informed vision of good practice in multicultural teacher education: Design principles. *Theory into Practice*, 37(2), 163-171.

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2024 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

---

**Source**      **URL:**<https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-5-issue-2-spring-2008/providing-access-standard-and-nonstandard-writing-conventions-h>