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“It bees dat way sometime”:  
BLACK ENGLISH AND EDUCATION DISPARITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

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## **Abstract**

In 1954, *Brown vs. Board of Education, Topeka Kansa* ended the segregation of public schools. This decision stated that “separate educational facilities [were] inherently unequal” and was supposed to allow African American students to attend facilities that were equal to those of Whites. While great strides have been made since the court case in 1954, African American students still face a number of struggles in the U.S. educational system. In many communities around the nation, African Americans speak a language different than that of the hegemonic culture: Black English. It has also been called Black Dialect, Black Idiom, and includes variations such as, Ebonics, “language of soul,” “language of hip,” and just plain Black Talk. Over the past several decades, the discussion has centered on whether or not this is a legitimate language and if its speakers are deficient and unable to speak Standard English. This thesis was written with the goal of providing the reader with a comprehensive overview of the literature, as well as a discussion and conclusion surrounding the discourse on Black English and educational disparities in American language education.

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*"It takes a village..."*

## Introduction

The 1954 Topeka case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* was meant to end the segregation of public schools, allowing Blacks to attend schools with White students. This decision stated that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal and allowed African American students to attend schools that were equal to those of Whites. While great strides have been made since the court case in 1954, African American students still face a number of struggles in the U.S. educational system. In fact, over the past several decades there has been little else that has received as much attention as the disparities that are present between Black and White students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), in 2007, 64.4 percent of all Whites were enrolled in college while only 13.1 percent of all Blacks were enrolled. In 2009, CNN reported that 18.2 percent of Blacks in America had obtained less than a high school degree and only 31.5 percent of Blacks were high school graduates or obtained an equivalency degree.

As a student who grew up in a very racially mixed school system, I began to realize such disparities at a fairly young age. I noticed that of all the Black kids in my school (about 1/3 of 2,500 students), there were only a handful of us on the AP/Honors track. Perhaps what bothered me most about this is that I had personal relationships with many of the kids who were not in my classes and knew that they were capable of doing the same work I was being given in my upper level classes. I started to wonder what it was that placed me on a different academic track than them. Eventually, I began to recall my first day in second grade at a new school. My classmate, another Black girl, told me

that I “talked like a White girl.” Subsequently, in the third grade, I had a teacher who praised both my writing and speaking abilities. It was then that I realized that part of what set me apart at such a young age was my speech and the way I wrote. By Standard English standards, I spoke extremely well, particularly for someone of my race, but to my peers, I spoke like a White person. This phenomenon interested me greatly. Why was it that in order to be considered “smart” I had to speak a certain way in front of those who would be assessing my speech, but to be accepted by my peers I had to speak another? Why was it that kids who had the same reasoning abilities as I did were being told they could not read and write as well even though they were completely literate? It wasn’t until college that I realized what my peers spoke was a language identified as Black English.

In many Black communities around the nation, the dominant language is Black English. It has been called Black Dialect, Black Idiom, Ebonics, “language of soul,” “language of hip,” and just plain Black Talk (Smitherman, 1977). Over the past several decades, the discussion has centered on whether or not this is a legitimate language and if its speakers are deficient and unable to speak Standard English. As such, the past several decades have brought much debate about the topic of Black English.

Prior to the 1970s, many educators believed that it was a deficient form of speech spoken by African Americans. Recent scholarship, however, has concluded that Black English is indeed a language in its own right. It is the child of West African and Gullah languages, and has grown and changed significantly since its birth in the early 1800s. While some scholars argue that native African languages disappeared so immediately

there were hardly any words of African origin left in Black culture, basic linguistic structures of African languages did, in fact, survive the slave trade (Holloway, 2005). Additionally, Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit (1998) suggest that traces of many African languages can be seen in African American English. As Molefi Kete (cited in Holloway, 2005) points out, many words used in Black English, African American English or Ebonics are of African origin. That is, many of the structures seen in West African language have been retained in Black English over the years. One imperative point he makes in his argument is that of time inflection (or lack thereof) in African American English. For example, William M. Stewart (cited in Holloway, 2005) observed that rather than verbs Ebonics uses verbal inflection to differentiate between simple present and past. For example, Asante (2005) points out that “I see it” in Black English may mean “I see it” or “I saw it,” depending on the circumstance of the speaker (cited in Holloway, 2005). In the Niger-Congo languages of Twi, Igbo, Ewe, and Efik as well as in Jamaican Creole and Gullah a similar lack of inflection with regards to time was observed (Holloway, 2005).

The current debate deals with the ways such linguistic differences play out in students’ work. While it is clear that language is not the only issue that causes educational disparities in the United States, it is a largely overlooked aspect in the discussion of the achievement gap. Personally, it has become a major part of my own narrative, as it has driven my current interest in education generally and language education specifically. In fact, the subject has interested me so much that I have chosen it as the topic for this thesis. I begin by exploring past literature written on the subject of

Black English in a comprehensive literature review, including the works of such scholars as J. L. Dillard (1972), Geneva Smitherman (1977, 2000, 2003), Keith Gilyard (1991), John McWhorter (2000), and numerous others. I continue with a discussion of the literature, including suggestions as to how to improve upon teaching practices and policies as they pertain to teaching students who are speakers of Black English.

## **Literature Review**

The discourse on Black English, as it pertains to education, hit the scholastic scene in a significant way in 1972 when J. L. Dillard's book, *Black English*, was published. The first major text on Black English in the post 1960s era (only Lorenzo Turner's book had preceded Dillard's), the book acknowledges the modern study of Black English. In it, Dillard argues that prior to the 1960s, there was a lack of historical information about Black English, which produced a handicap to educational programs. Around the late 1960s, however, linguists began to understand that Black English was different in grammar and syntax from Standard English. Dillard's book attempts to encompass the linguistic viewpoint in which Black English is to be placed (Dillard, 1972).

Dillard began writing the book when he noticed that research regarding African American language patterns characteristically labeled Black English as "deficient" language. Interestingly, Dillard noted that reliable information regarding the vast majority of Black Americans was not generally available, neither to educators nor the public, often causing those writing to be ignorant about the topic.



Dillard's book highlights the obvious differences between American and British European culture and language and the fact that America has always been a melting pot of sorts. While Americans are not only descendants of Englishmen, there are still those who choose to believe that only British-derived parts of grammar are important in language history. There are limitations to this theory, however:

[T]o proclaim that the English of Blacks is identical to that of whites is to allow one's theories to deny the evidence of one's senses. Unfortunately, such denials of what is universally perceived have sometimes passed for science. (Dillard, p. 5)

Dillard acknowledges that to some degree, all forms of English have roots in England; however he also points out that people often come to the United States without having ever set foot in England. Therefore, he explains, the existence of non-British language patterns within American society is undeniable.

Dillard highlights the similarities between many African languages and Black English of the 1960s/70s. For instance, he argues Black English contains features common to both Caribbean and West African varieties of English, particularly varieties in Gullah, which are spoken on the Sea Islands off Georgia and South Carolina. This pidgin/creole theory, he argues, directly challenges the theory of exclusively British origins of English, as it proves the particular versions of English spoken by many Black Americans were not native to Great Britain.

Finally, Dillard argues that once the differences between Black and Standard English are acknowledged, problems pertaining to language education and disparities will

become less daunting. He notes how easy it has been to overlook the relevance of dialect differences in the past because such differences not created a problem for the White majority who speaks Standard English.

In 1977, Geneva Smitherman published the second classic book on Black English, *Talkin and Testifyin'*. Smitherman (1977) highlights the two major forces generating the concern about the speech of Blacks and education: social change movements (particularly the Civil Rights Movement) and White America's implementation of poverty programs in lieu of this new Black energy. She argues that while Blacks were busy establishing Black consciousness and pride, the goal of Whites for Blacks was always assimilation into the mainstream. The most obvious way for Whites to accomplish this goal was the creation of programs that would introduce Blacks to White culture and allow them (at least that was the hope for those deemed capable) to leave their own culture behind and assimilate into mainstream, White, American culture. Therefore, the 1960s were full of "solutions" to the linguistic "deficiency" in Black students, including educational programs such as Head Start, Upward Bound, Higher Horizons, High Potential, and Project 300. Moreover, Smitherman cites British sociologist Basil Bernstein, who reprimands educational programs who have misinterpreted the concept of "working-class restricted code" (as opposed to a "middle-class elaborated code) and used such a misinterpretation as a means of "streaming arrangements which neatly lower the expectations and motivations of teachers and [the] taught" (p. 202-203). In other words, some Black students were not seen to be capable of such full assimilation. In any case, it was clear that language education focused on sociolinguistic etiquette and what the

hegemonic White, middle class deemed as the norm.

Smitherman provides her personal definition of Black English. She says that, in a nutshell, Black Dialect is:

[a]n Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America. Black Language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture. The Black Idiom is used by 80 to 90 percent of American blacks, at least some of the time. It has allowed blacks to create a culture of survival in an alien land, and as a by-product has served to enrich the language of all Americans. (p. 2-3)

Like Dillard (1972), Smitherman acknowledges that Black Dialect is a product of the fusion of West African languages and English that evolved over time. Smitherman, however, added something to the discussion that Dillard had missed: the importance of Black English in the culture of Black people. While Dillard was able to acknowledge the historical significance of Black English and where it originated, his background as a Caucasian, middle-class American left him unable to comment on such factors as the meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture of the language personally.

Smitherman notes that the two most important dimensions in Black speech are language and style. In Black English, language, she argues, can be used in a fluid way distinctive from Standard English. For instance, in a song by Nina Simone, the artists

sings, “It bees dat way sometime,” indicting the language aspect by manipulating the use of the verb *be* to indicate a recurring event rather than a single occurrence. Smitherman also highlights the speech of Reverend Jesse Jackson, who says:

Africa would if Africa could.

America could if America would.

But Africa cain’t and America ain’t. (p. 3)

While she notes that Reverend Jackson does play with the language aspect of Black Dialect in his ditty, Smitherman is also concerned with the style of his speech. His use of rhythm and ability to identify with a Black cultural belief set, in addition to the familiarity with the not language variety, are important, in allowing him to establish credibility among his audience.

Smitherman goes on to create a timeline of the changes Black Dialect has gone through as it pertains to education. She continues to highlight language programs that were created in an effort to aid “disadvantaged black students,” and subsequent supposed “enlightened” approaches, which, on the surface, recognize that “nonstandard” English is just as good as any “standard” form of English (that is, so long as “nonstandard” English stays in its place and does not get ahead of the “standard”). Importantly, Smitherman points out (and to some extent supports – ) some of the attacks placed on the American educational system, as it is the educational system that largely shapes the beliefs and values of tomorrow’s adults. If the educational system publically knocks Black English, what will there ever be for those who speak it, right?

While Dillard (1972) and Smitherman (1977) may have laid the foundation for the

discussion on Black English and education, talk of the topic did not stop with them. Since their publications, scholars of many different backgrounds have commented and continued to add more to the discourse. In order to give the reader a comprehensive understanding on the topic, this literature review will highlight how the discussion has evolved since its genesis in 1972.

Notably, Smitherman's work cast a giant shadow on scholarship for almost twenty years. Although there continued to be numerous articles published about Black English, it wasn't until the 1990s that another book-length study represented a significant turn in the scholarship. In 1991, Keith Gilyard published *Voices of the Self*, a semi-autobiographical work, which presents an account that further illuminates the discussion of Black English for those scholars involved with the education of African American students. His book was a specific response to the work that had already been done regarding Black English. What Gilyard was able to contribute to the discussion was a look at the lives of students themselves. His book is a first-hand account of the problems of Black English from the perspective of a student. His work uses personal narratives in an effort to deal with the linguistic and educational progress of African Americans. He establishes that over the prior twenty-five years, few problems in education had received as much media and parental attention as the fact that many young, urban, Black students had not achieved Standard English competence in public schools. He recognizes scholars like Dillard (1972) and Smitherman (1977), who have condemned public schools for neither recognizing nor accepting the separate and legitimate language variety known as Black English. One of the many problems, he explains, is the perpetuation of the self-

fulfilling prophecy. Little is expected of certain Black students; therefore, certain Black students produce little.

Importantly, Gilyard highlights his personal experience as a college professor of English, noting that he has worked with Black students who have been ill prepared by public schools to write in Standard English. His childhood narrative along with his personal experience dealing with Black college students adds a student's perspective to the discussion, allowing for the topic to be viewed and discussed from angles that had never been explored.

Adding even more to the discussion in their book entitled *The Real Ebonics Debate*, Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit (1998) set the record straight regarding several myths about Ebonics. For several decades many scholars had suggested that Black English was a derivative of African language systems. Perry and Delpit (1998), however, take the argument a step further, noting that African American children are not raised in homes in which Standard English is the dominant language, but rather an environment where a West and Niger-Congo African structure has been retained. As such, they argue, the basic language structure of these students should not be unfairly expected to be the same as those students who come from inherently English-driven homes.

John McWhorter's *Spreading the Word* (2000) further contributes to the conversation by addressing the fallacy that there is one single "best" English and compares such a narrow-minded ideology to believing that the earth is flat. The problem with this belief, he argues, is that it is detrimental to students and teachers alike. Knowing the truth about English and its different forms is particularly important, especially for

those teachers who plan to change our outlook on how to teach Standard English to Black students who speak Black English. Without such knowledge, teachers will overlook important language differences and help to continue the cycle.

McWhorter notes that English is fluid and ever changing. He does so by outlining the phrase “she’s all that,” acknowledging that while this may be the most common phrase to describe an attractive woman in the year 2000, the same woman would have been said to have it “goin’ on” in the 90s, “fresh” in the 80s, a “freak” in the 70s, and a “hot tomato” in the 50s. He points out that every form of English has evolved over time. In this regard, his argument advances that of scholars before him who point out the extent to which Black English has connections to West African languages.

Eventually, the focus of the discussion begins to shift from the actual language itself to the way it is dealt with by educators and policy makers. While it had been mentioned by other scholars prior to John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford (2000), their book, *Spoken Soul*, deals with the 1996 Oakland School Board Resolution at length, paying particular attention to the task force’s initial recommendations and the subsequent failures of said recommendations.

The Oakland debate began when both educators and parents began to notice that Blacks were doing poorly in school. Teachers said the problem was Black English, while scholars argued the issue was negative attitudes toward Black English. The resolution was to acknowledge and respect the language and to train teachers in Black English. The resolution was not controversial in practice, but it was in the way in the way it was phrased.

After the resolution in 1996, the Task Force came up with nine recommendations, which included identifying, assessing, and admitting students to Special Education and Gifted and Talented Education classes, improving parental and community involvement, increasing funding, and hiring African American teachers at a greater rate. What is important to note, however, is the willingness of the Task Force to write off students who do not speak Standard English as “Special Education” students. Additionally, it is important to note the unrealistic goals the Task Force put in place, such as “increased funding” and “improved parental and community involvement.” While Rickford and Rickford’s argument points out the unrealistic nature of these goals, it also condemns the Task Force for putting such goals in place and thus setting students up for failure. Their argument sheds light on the way the institution of American education prepares many Black students to fail in school immediately, and in life overall. Their argument is that it is not Black students who have been failing nationwide, but rather that schools nationwide have been failing Black students.

In 2000, the mother of the Ebonics debate, Geneva Smitherman enters the conversation again with her book *Talkin That Talk*. A follow-up to her earlier work *Talkin and Testifyin*, *Talkin That Talk* clears up any remaining misconceptions about Ebonics and points out that much of the problem of education as it pertains to African American English is that teachers are unfamiliar with the grammatical system of African American language. The lack of knowledge on the part of teachers causes not to accept the language and the students who speak it. In understanding the failures of the 1996 Oakland School Board and Ebonics Resolution, Smitherman lays out a five-point



program for teaching English to Black students: I. Examination of alternative lifestyles, II. Emphasis on reading, III. Emphasis on oral work, IV. Intensive study of language and culture and both social and regional dialects, and V. Emphasis on content message, logical development, use of supporting details and examples, analysis and arrangement, style, specificity, variation of word choice, sentence structure, originality, etc.

Importantly, Smitherman's book offers detailed and specific suggestion to teachers teaching Black English speakers, an approach never taken by previous scholars.

Once more, in 2003, Smitherman inserts herself into the discussion on Black English, this time with fellow scholar, Victor Villanueva in the book *Language Diversity in the Classroom: From Intention to Practice*. Together, the two focus heavily on the attitudes of teachers in the classroom. They found that, by and large in American society, it is not racism that is taboo, but rather appearing racist. As a result, the scholars found that teachers may say things like "I am not a racist, but if these kids want to get ahead, they need to learn proper English," problematically assuming that there *is* a proper English (3). They conclude that due to such attitudes, teachers at all levels should undergo a course on language awareness. Such a course, they suggest, will serve as diversity training, making educators more accepting of different language varieties. Their work is unique in that it looks at the specific needs of teachers dealing with speakers of Black English and offers a suggestion as to how to go about solving the problem on a broad scale.

Theresa M. Redd and Karen Schuster Webb's book, *A Teacher's Introduction to African American English* (2005) deals specifically with teachers. What is perhaps most

important about the book, however, is that it answers the question as to whether or not African American English affects students' ability to write in Standard English: the answer is an overwhelming "no." The two scholars defend students who are speakers of African American English, explaining that the language neither limits students' thinking, nor stunts their potential to learn to speak Standard English. Additionally, the book offers helpful tips on how speakers of African American English can become more effective writers of Standard English. The book addresses the question of whether or not speakers of Black English are unable to learn to speak in Standard English, referring to the deficiency theory of the past. The book clearly states that speaking Black English does not limit a student's ability and offers ways for these students to become more effective writers of Standard English without negating their first language.

Overall, the literature has covered a multitude of topics and has evolved a great deal since 1972. While it began as a discussion of what Black English was and from where it originated, it has developed into a vast discourse including arguments against the deficiency theory, the evolution of the language, and its use and (lack of) acceptance in school settings. One important gap in the literature, however, is a discussion of how Black English affects education disparities directly.

## **Discussion**

While at a first glance it may seem that both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Second Dialect (ESD) programs are simple solutions to the problem, they both have their flaws. Simply moving all students to an ESL program raises the issue of geography and nationality. An African American student who speaks Black

English and is from Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York does not necessarily have the same language needs as a white student from Germany who speaks no English at all. Though neither of the two may speak Standard English, their concepts of English are completely different, as one may be familiar with the language, having at least heard it on TV or in movies. Thus, the two students have different foundational needs. Additionally, some of the basic structures of Black English are closely related to English, notably more so than those of most other languages. Likewise, the problem of teaching ESD is that at a deep structural level, Standard and Black English are different *languages*, not dialects. Though they may have mutual intelligibility and share common vocabulary, their basic structure is different. The suggestion of schools to offer ESD neglects to acknowledge Black English as a language in and of itself.

For now, we must continue to educate educators and policy makers about Black English. Not only do teachers need to learn that it is a valid language, but also acknowledge the fact that many students (particularly inner-city students) may and do speak it. Thus, those students will need additional help when learning Standard English concepts. It is not being suggested that teachers must speak Black English (to their students or otherwise) or have a deep academic understanding about how it functions, but they should be prepared to understand it and the discourse that surrounds it, at least at a surface level. For instance, teachers need not know the specific use of the “habitual ‘b,’” but they should be able to at least identify the sound when they hear it and understand how to address it when teaching Standard English.

Additionally, they should be familiar with the highly stigmatized features

associated with Black English; such familiarization is the only way to fight damaging stereotypes. As well, educators must begin to differentiate between negating a student's speech and provoking thought. While it is okay to challenge a student to speak Standard English in the classroom, it is not okay to tell a student he or she is wrong in his or her speech and discourage his or her growth. Such negative reinforcement perpetuates the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Importantly, we must not forget the effect that the disapproval of Black English has on college admissions for Black students. In 2011, the total population of Black, undergraduate students was 14 percent, while the total population of all White, undergraduate students was 62 percent (nces.ed.gov). Unfortunately, as Gilyard states, because teachers and other educators often frown upon Black English, the self-fulfilling prophecy continues to be perpetuated. Fortunately, however, some college admissions boards are making significant changes to the college admissions process. They realize there is a need to address the achievement gap between Blacks and Whites, and some have begun doing so by taking place in the discussion on Black English. Regarding Black English in colleges, Elizabeth McPhearson, a professor of English at Forest Park Community College in St. Louis, Missouri states, "If we are a college, and not just defenders of the status quo, we've more important business than worrying about dialect changes" (17). She realizes what many scholars have for decades: language should not be a barrier to access. While it is necessary for all schools to maintain that their students are literate, they must not be so focused on language differences that they are so quick to label their students as deficient and thus fail in their responsibility to admit and educate

bright students. Unfortunately, not enough members of the discussion on language have the mentality of McPhearson. In order to change the stigma surrounding Black English, educators must come to the same realization she has. Rather than holding prejudices against certain languages and the individuals that speak them, educators must work to be sure the curriculum is geared towards students of all language varieties.

In addition, it must be acknowledged that Black students deal with unfair disadvantages in terms of access to higher education because of such standardized tests as the SAT. In his book *The Chosen* (2005), Jerome Karabel argues that standardized tests, the SAT in particular, were created to keep access to Ivy League (and eventually all) universities limited to the White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant population. Thus, questions that appeared on the test put upper-class White students at an advantage, asking such questions as, “Polo is to horse as croquet is to what?” Not only are the games “croquet” and “polo” unfamiliar to many working-class individuals, the words are particularly unfamiliar, if at all existent, to speakers of Black English. As such, minorities from urban and working-class populations, particularly Blacks, were and still are marginalized from obtaining a post-secondary education.

Additionally, Tom Fox’s book *Defending Access* highlights the discriminatory admissions processes of many colleges in still recognizing standardized test scores. In it, he discusses the experiment done at City University of New York (CUNY) in 1969, in which standardized test scores were eliminated from the admissions process, a process known as Open Admissions. This practice tremendously increased the admissions of African Americans attending CUNY from 12.3 to 35 percent that year alone. Importantly,

Fox states that one of the central arguments for Open Admissions was that standardized tests are racist, neglecting to consider those students who have grown up in inner cities and therefore may not speak or write in Standard English fluently. The data prove his argument to be valid, as the numbers of African Americans attending the school more than doubled when standardized test scores were taken out of the equation. When paired together, he notes, standards and access create an “institutional ambiguity” that allows schools to become gatekeepers rather than provide access to students. As such, schools can limit who has access to higher education, and who does not. Unfortunately, in the past (and still in the present) those gates have typically been utilized to keep minority students out.

In order for Blacks to obtain admission to institutions of higher education at greater rates, the use and validity of standardized test scores need to be reexamined in the college admissions process as a whole. Perhaps the option of Open Admissions should be revisited. To what extent is it fair to use standardized test scores to judge a student’s ability to perform in college when much recent data reveal that students are not being brought up to the same standard? In terms of Black English, such standardized tests leave these students at a particular disadvantage, as they test students not only on the foundations of a language with which they are unfamiliar, but also on cultural references with which they are often not acquainted. As well, the literature proves that many of these students are being failed by school systems nationwide in the area of language education. Students should not be penalized for the injustices and negligence of the school system, but rather colleges and universities should take it upon themselves to

bring these otherwise brilliant students up to speed in the subject of Standard English.

One applicable solution to the problem of elementary and secondary language disparities is to identify those students who struggle with Standard English early on in the school year through an assessment test. Subsequently, educators should work with these students in small groups throughout the year to ensure that they are brought up to speed regarding the grammatical and social functions of Standard English. In terms of higher education, we must, as Tom Fox (1999) suggests, urge institutions of higher education to resist the urge to depend so heavily upon standardized test scores when making admissions decisions. While their ultimate goal is to determine a student's ability to reason, they often waver from that in that they judge, instead, a student's cultural and thus linguistic upbringing. Additionally, we must educate educators about Black English at all levels either by including a class on language diversity in all English education curriculums or through mandatory diversity training.

## **Conclusion**

It must be noted that English, like any language, is fluid in nature. It is ever-changing and ever shifting in order to accommodate its speakers. As McWhorter (2000) notes, the English language has developed over time. The British translated the original text of the Bible from Hebrew to English in order to accommodate their language needs. Additionally, the Bible has since been translated from Old English to more modern versions of English. Similarly, Black English has evolved over time to accommodate its speakers. It has grown and developed, encompassing new words, terms, and phrases along the way.

In order for Black English to ever be legitimized by the public, all scholars, teachers, and other school-type officials must come to the realization that Black English is the result of an evolutionary process of language. It is an amalgamation of different West African languages and many different dialects of English. It is the result of a specific cultural upbringing and a means of expression. It is, like African Americans, a hybrid of sorts.

Considering all of these factors, we must ask ourselves the question of whether or not the title “Standard English” is even a valid term. If English is always changing and does in fact have many different dialects and forms, who is to say that one form of English is more or less correct than another (i.e., by whose standard are we judging the English language?)? *The Ebonics Phenomenon, Language Planning, and the Hegemony of Standard English* by Charles E. DuBose (2007) highlights the hegemonic nature of those who demand that Standard English is the only correct form of English. DuBose faults hegemony for the problem of the current state of Black English and suggests that if Black English is to ever be seen as a legitimate language, the dominant social group must be open to accepting language types that are different than its own. One possible way of accomplishing such a task is to become more welcoming of Black English in major social and academic institutions like colleges and universities. The more this language is accepted in schools, the more members of society will begin to recognize and accept the language for what it is, hopefully allowing all students the opportunity to begin their language education on an equal playing ground.

While the discussion of Black English has evolved greatly, it still has a long way



to go. There are still educators who need educating on the topic and students who need to be taught that it is acceptable to be fluent in both Black and Standard English. As a future teacher of English in an urban community, I am always grappling with the desire to want to teach students Standard English to prepare them for life beyond their own communities and the wish to respect and value students' home language. I understand that I should never make them feel as though their native tongue is wrong. Rather, I understand that they should be nurtured and eased into the structure and speech patterns of a new language to avoid the possibility of becoming a proponent of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Furthermore, scholars must continue to conduct and publish research regarding the topic of Black English, *especially* from the perspective of the student. The more these narratives are heard, the more familiar people will become with them. As well, a student-driven narrative adds an element of pathos that a scholar who may be removed from the classroom (as a student) would lack in his or her narrative. Finally, we must never forget that students are the driving force behind the entire discourse of Black English. If not for them, all of the work done is in vain. They must always remain at the center of the narrative of Black English and education disparities. There is still much work to be done; however, if educators take the aforementioned studies and ideas into serious consideration, there is no doubt that change will occur.

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## Academic Vitae

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### Education

Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA May 2012  
English, B.A. Candidate  
African and African American Studies, B.A. Candidate  
Ronald E. McNair Scholar  
Paterno Fellow

### Research Experience

McNair Scholars Program

Summer 2010

- Conducted an independent research project
- Used ATLAS.ti to code interviews
- Analyzed gathered data
- Wrote a comprehensive report on the results of the research project

Exploring the Educational Experiences of Black Immigrants (EEEEBI) Project

Fall 2010

- Organized and scheduled interviews for several students and interviewers
- Created a system of pseudonyms for participants
- Read literature and compiled a comprehensive literature review

### Publications

Griffin, A., Griffin, K. (2010). *“For me, it was just routine”*: Exploring Factors Related to Post Secondary Aspirations for African Immigrants. 2010 McNair Scholar Journal, The Pennsylvania State University.

Griffin, K., Del Pilar, W., McIntosh, K., Griffin, A. (2011). *“Oh, of course I’m going to go to college”*: Understanding the Role and Manifestation of Habitus in the College Choice Process of Black Immigrant College Students. 2011 Journal of Diversity in Higher Education.

### Presentations

July 2010 McNair Scholars Conference (State College, PA)

*“For me, it was just routine”*: Exploring Factors Related to Post Secondary Aspirations for African Immigrants.

October 2010 Research Exhibition at the Capitol (Harrisburg, PA)

*“For me, it was just routine”*: Exploring Factors Related to Post Secondary Aspirations for African Immigrants.

November 2010 Association for the Study of Higher Education (Indianapolis, IN)

*“Oh, of course I’m going to go to college”*: Understanding the Role and Manifestation of Habitus in the College Choice Process of Black Immigrant College Students

February 2011 Achievement Conference (University Park, PA)

*“For me, it was just routine:” Exploring Factors Related to Post Secondary Aspirations for African Immigrants.*

March 2011 Undergraduate Research Exhibition (University Park, PA)

*“For me, it was just routine:” Exploring Factors Related to Post Secondary Aspirations for African Immigrants.*

April 2011 Brown Bag Series (University Park, PA)

*“For me, it was just routine:” Exploring Factors Related to Post Secondary Aspirations for African Immigrants.*

### **Professional Qualifications**

Fluent in and comfortable with ATLAS.ti to code interviews

Able to transcribe interviews and clean transcripts for errors

### **Honors and Awards**

Bunton Waller Merit Award, 2008-present

Cathleen Bole Award, 2010

W.E.B. Du Bois/Fannie Lou Hamer Scholarship, 2009, 2011

### **Work Experience**

#### ***Research Assistant***

August 2010 to July 2011

Center for the Study of Higher Education, University Park, PA

Wrote comprehensive literature reviews

Cleaned and coded transcribed interviews

#### ***Peer Tutor***

January 2010 to July 2011

Penn State University Writing Center, University Park, PA

Helped students to successfully revise and complete academic papers

Competently communicated with professors regarding the progress of students

### **Community Service**

Saint Anthony’s Youth Center, Volunteer, Easton, PA - 2009

Easterly Parkway Elementary School, ESL Teacher’s Aide, State College, PA – 2009

Lemont Elementary School, Kindergarten Teacher’s Aide, Lemont, PA– 2011

CHOSA Teacher and Team Leader, Cape Town, South Africa – 2011

### **Activities**

Co Chair, MLK Day of Service, 2009-2011

President, Ashe Theatre Company, 2008-2011

Secretary, Silent Praise Mime Ministry, 2010-2011

Overnight co-chair, Student Minority Advisory and Recruitment Team (SMART), 2010-2011