# AAE and Variation in Teachers' Attitudes: A Question of School Philosophy?☆

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Linguists and other social scientists have identified school curriculum, teacher education, language policy and testing as pedagogical domains in which to address issues and develop tools that foster greater academic achievement of African American English-speaking students, and nonstandard English speakers more generally. This article focuses on the intersection between teachers' attitudes toward African American English and language policy, or lack thereof, at the secondary school level. The analyses are based on questionnaires completed by teachers from several public schools located in the New York metropolitan area. This study includes teachers with large populations of students for whom English is a second language or whose primary language is a dialect of English other than that spoken by the mainstream. Thus, we inquire to what extent teachers are sensitized to the educational needs of these students. The results point to the importance of school policy in affecting teachers' sensitivity towards AAE.

## INTRODUCTION

The initial goal of this paper was to examine teachers' attitudes toward African American English (AAE) within an educational system located in a large Metropolis with a linguistically diverse population.[1] The results, however, suggest that there may be a correlation between teachers' attitudes and the degree and/or nature of language arts programs and policies at the school-level. To that end, we make inquiries into the institutional practices in place, which may be useful to the goal

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of successfully educating African American students. One school included in this study, for instance, has a highly developed program targeted at bilinguals, also referred to as English Language Learners (ELLs). We acknowledge that in order for categorical change to occur in the education of AAE-speaking students, dialect-related policy must be created and implemented. However, we concomitantly question whether teachers exposed to particular ELL and related programs, either directly or indirectly, are more sensitized to and therein, better trained to work with AAE-speaking students for whom Standard English is not native [SENN]. We would also like to point out that our survey is an initial attempt to understand the relationship between school environment and teacher attitudes and that a larger survey encompassing more teachers and schools in different cities is needed.

Negative attitudes towards AAE are quite widespread as evidenced by the public hue and cry following the 1996 Oakland School Board Resolution on Ebonics. But this was not the first time that teachers' attitudes and school policy had come under public scrutiny. In 1979, there was a court case in Michigan on Black English, commonly known as the Black English Trial. The United States District Court of Michigan ruled that under the Equal Opportunities Act of the United States Code, the Michigan Board of Education had not taken the "appropriate action" to educate eleven African American children at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in Ann Arbor. The negative attitudes of teachers, however inadvertently displayed towards AAE and its speakers, was key to the ruling.

Nearly twenty years later, a new "trial" surrounding Black English emerged with the Oakland School Board Resolution on December 18, 1996 and January 15, 1997; this time the court was that of public opinion. The Oakland School Board resolved to acknowledge AAE as the primary language of its African American students. Furthermore, it stated that AAE would be "taken into account" by teachers when aiding students in the mastery of reading and language arts. Unfortunately, a large public outcry against the Oakland School Board decision ensued. This was primarily the result of public misperceptions about AAE as a veritable dialect of American English, and a lack of familiarity with the strategies developed by scientists and educators to help students improve their reading and language arts skills in mainstream English (cf., Rickford, 1999b, pp. 12–22).[2] Clearly, enormous efforts are required from linguists and other social scientists to increase public access to information, which, in turn, will help to improve public attitudes (cf., Blake, 2000). The focus of this paper, however, is at the level of the school, which is ultimately where change must occur. As Baugh (1999, p. 284) notes, "Unless systematic reforms take adequate account of the dynamics of linguistic diversity among students, we are unlikely to meet our desired goal to combine high academic standards with greater educational equity for all."

To date, there is a substantial body of work linking teachers' attitudes and behavior to their students' academic performance (cf., Bowie & Bond, 1994; Cecil, 1988; DiGiulio, 1973; Foster, 1992; Hoover, McNair-Knox, Lewis, & Politzer,

1996; Irvine, 1990; Tauber, 1997; Taylor, 1973; Trudgill, 1984; Williams, 1976). Included in this research is evidence that negative teacher attitudes and expectations are linked to underachievement in students, especially African Americans.[3] Furthermore, researchers show a correlation between negative teacher attitudes toward the AAE dialect and lowered expectations and evaluations of its speakers.[4] Most notable is Taylor's (1973) exhaustive study of 422 teachers' attitudes toward AAE as a function of several variables like their geographical location, race, sex, age, teaching experience and grade taught.

The results of Taylor's survey reveal that teachers' attitudes vary with respect to which aspects of AAE and other nonstandard English dialects are being discussed (i.e., structure and usefulness of nonstandard dialects, consequences of using and accepting nonstandard dialects, philosophies concerning use and acceptance of nonstandard dialects, cognitive and intellectual abilities of AAE speakers). The majority of teachers in Taylor's study show positive to neutral opinions on topics other than the structure of AAE. However, while 40 percent of the respondents express positive feelings toward the structure and usefulness of AAE and 20 percent express neutral feelings, the remaining 40 percent respond negatively. Taylor's study also finds that overall, teachers with 3–5 years teaching experience and teachers at predominantly black schools appeared slightly more positive in their attitudes.

The linguist John Baugh (1999, p. 284) notes that, "The vast majority of school districts that serve SENN [Standard English is not native] students do not have adequate language policies in place ... [and that] very little effort is devoted to adequate reform of policies for AAE students as linguistic minorities." Furthermore, he charges that, "We need language policies that will ensure that students who are not native speakers of Standard English will not fail due to linguistic neglect." Despite such urgings from academicians, the journalist Felicia Lee (1994, p. D22), reports that "The New York City Board of Education has no plans to set a policy on teaching students who speak black dialect." This is most likely due to the fact that the Board of Education's main focus is on teaching large immigrant populations of students for whom English is a second language.[5] Thus, what students who come to school with AAE as their primary language face is either a hodgepodge of methods used by individual teachers or worse yet, no programs geared towards their specific needs at all. This paper addresses how such circumstances may be mitigated.

## THE STUDY

### The Instrument

The survey for this study was created in May 1997, on the heels of the Oakland School Board Decision. At this time, discussions on Black English and the education of school-age children were ubiquitous in the media. The general public was, at the very least, being exposed to some of the scientific research on the structure,

usage, and history of the development of Black English, albeit, not without contention. This in mind, we felt that it was an opportune time to perform a school survey, as many teachers were focused on the issues surrounding language learning and education more generally. However, we acknowledge the possibility that this may have affected the results we obtained. The questions for the survey were culled from the questionnaire developed by Hoover et al. (1996, pp. 391–393). In developing the questions, we were also influenced by Taylor's (1973) study, which, like Hoover et al., assesses teachers' attitudes toward the AAE dialect.

Whereas bilingualism refers to individuals controlling two languages, bidialectalism describes the ability of individuals to control two distinct dialects of the same language. Many educated individuals whose first dialect is stigmatized, e.g., Appalachian English, Cockney, African American English, etc., make an effort to learn and use a version of the standard dialect in certain situations to avoid discrimination. While we are interested in teachers' attitudes toward AAE specifically, we cannot disregard the fact that this issue is linked to larger linguistic concerns for other students needing to master English. Thus, in the survey we also inquire about teachers' attitudes toward bilingual as compared to bidialectal education. Note that the majority of teachers appear to have a sense of the distinction between bilingualism and bidialectalism, which we discuss further.

The respondents, who spend a majority of their day at their respective schools, were asked to fill out surveys during their "downtime" away from their classrooms, i.e., during break. Mindful of this fact, we reached consensus that the questionnaire needed to be thorough, but succinct. In the end, we devised a survey on language attitudes in the public school made up of the following 19 statements (see Appendix for full survey):

1. People speak differently in different situations.
2. In every language, there are always variations in the way people from different age, class and ethnic backgrounds speak.
3. *Bilingual* education is the right of every child who does not speak the dominant language.
4. Federal funds should be used to support bilingual education.
5. Some children do poorly in school because they do not speak Standard English.
6. *Bidialectal* education is the right of every child who does not speak the dominant language or dialect.
7. Federal funds should be used to support bidialectal education.
8. African American English (Ebonics) is a form of English.
9. African American English is lazy English.
10. African American English is subject to its own set of rules.
11. African American kids would advance further in school without African American English.

12. Using AAE as a tool to teach subjects to African American students would hurt their chances to learn Standard English.
13. There are settings outside the classroom where African American English is appropriate.
14. It is educationally sound to use a student's first language as a way of teaching that student the standard language of a community.
15. AAE would be inadequate for teaching subjects such as social studies or math.
16. African American students have language problems similar to those of students learning English as a second language.
17. African American students should be taught in classrooms alongside English as a Second Language (ESL) students.
18. Standard English is dominant in schools and business because it is the best form of English.
19. One purpose of school is to make certain that all students graduate proficient in Standard English.

Like Hoover et al., we used a Lickert-type scale in which teachers evaluate statements along a range of gradations from "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly." The survey asks the respondents about their background in linguistics and gives them an opportunity to comment at will.

The first part of the survey asks teachers to provide demographic information about themselves, including their age, sex, ethnicity, educational achievement and teaching experience. The second part of the survey consists of 19 statements designed to gauge teachers' attitudes on a range of topics. The first set of statements assesses whether respondents recognize variation in people's speech, whether this can affect school performance, and on their feelings about bilingual and bidialectal education. The second series of statements measure attitudes toward AAE in general; whether it is a form of English, whether it is lazy English, whether it is subject to its own set of rules, and whether African American children would advance further in school without it. Respondents are then asked to evaluate the appropriateness of AAE in and outside the classroom. They are asked to consider if it is adequate for teaching subjects such as social studies or math, if there are settings outside the classroom where AAE is appropriate, and whether using it as a tool for instruction would hurt a student's chances to learn mainstream, Standard English. Finally, respondents are asked to evaluate whether mainstream, Standard English is dominant because it is the best form of English, and whether it is the role of the school to make certain that all students graduate proficient in English.

Respondents are given the following choices in ranking their feelings toward statements: (a) agree strongly, (b) agree mildly, (c) no opinion, (d) disagree mildly, (e) disagree strongly. In our tabulations, the responses are tallied more simply

as: positive, neutral, or negative. In coding for computer analysis,[6] the ratings are further collapsed into two categories. While we understand the limitations of collapsing categories in this way, there were two important reasons for doing so. The first was that very few of the respondents chose "agree mildly" or "disagree mildly." Most responses tended to be concentrated at the extremes (either "agree strongly" or "disagree strongly"). The second was that having only two categories allowed us to carry out a binary statistical analysis, allowing us to make more robust claims about the results. It is evident that our survey is not a perfect tool, but it has been used in prior studies and can function as an effective heuristic.

Many of the respondents took the liberty to provide us with comments. Several remarked that question 18 is poorly worded, and should instead refer to Standard English as the "correct" form of English rather than the "best" form of English. Teachers also felt that we, the researchers, operate on what they refer to as a "biased," essentialist assumption that links African Americans to African American English. However, this comment is often accompanied with the uninformed belief that it is "easy" for AAE-speaking students to master "formal," or Standard English. The ensuing comments on bidialectalism pertain to methodology. The salient concern is how a bidialectal program would be structured. Few propose a "language-rich" environment[7] where dialect speakers have an opportunity to "practice Standard English in a non-threatening environment." Others propose that dialect speakers be placed in classes alongside ELL students. Yet others saw this solution as creating resentment among English-dominant students who speak a nonstandard dialect of English.

## The Sample

We were affiliated with several secondary schools in New York City, either through employment or close contact with the faculty. The questionnaires were distributed to teachers at the five selected schools, which varied in the ethnic makeup of their student populations, achievement levels and school philosophies. Teachers generally received questionnaires during faculty meetings and were asked to return them anonymously on a voluntary basis. The only information provided to the teachers was the fact that we formulated the questionnaire with the intention of "finding out what public school teachers think about issues surrounding language." Respondents were also encouraged to add any extemporaneous commentary. Surveys returned uncompleted were discarded. In the end, the sample for this study consisted of 88 self-selected informants, representing at least 10 percent of the faculty from each school (see tables).[8] The respondents varied in age, gender, number of years teaching, ethnicity, classes taught, as well as ethnicity of the students they taught. Interestingly, all of the teachers taught subjects in the social sciences but many had taught or were currently teaching other subjects including

English, physical education, drama, and economics. This is quite typical in large urban public high schools, particularly among teachers who have been in the system for many years (a full 45% of our sample). We feel that the skewing effect of a uniform sample (as it pertains to subject taught) is mitigated to some degree by this fact.

| *Schools involved in survey* | *Number of respondents* |
|---|---|
| Bilingualism High (BH) | 23 |
| Inner-City High (ICH) | 17 |
| Self-Choice High (SCH) | 11 |
| Upperside High (UH) | 23 |
| West Indian High (WIH) | 14 |
| Total | 88 |

| *Ethnic makeup of respondents* | *Percentage* | *N* |
|---|---|---|
| European American | 67 | 59 |
| African American | 13 | 11 |
| Latino | 8 | 7 |
| Asian American | 2 | 2 |
| Other | 10 | 9 |

| *Sex of respondents* | *Percentage* | *N* |
|---|---|---|
| Female | 42 | 37 |
| Male | 55 | 48 |
| No response | 3 | 3 |

| *Years of teaching experience* | *Percentage* | *N* |
|---|---|---|
| 0–1 years | 10 | 9 |
| 1–2 years | 17 | 15 |
| 3–5 years | 23 | 20 |
| 6–10 years | 5 | 4 |
| 10 years or more | 45 | 40 |

In response to the question about which two groups make up the majority of the students in their classrooms, 66 percent of the teachers identify African Americans as one of the two largest groups. This is compared to 27 percent who do not list African Americans as one of the two largest groups. Approximately 7 percent list West Indians (as opposed to African Americans) as one of the two largest groups.[9]

| *Largest reported ethnic group of students taught* | *Percentage* | *N* |
|---|---|---|
| African Americans | 66 | 58 |
| Other | 27 | 24 |
| West Indians | 7 | 6 |

## The Schools

Below is a synopsis of the five schools involved in this study. All demographic and test score data come from the 1999 to 2000 school year. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the schools. We were able to collect mission statements from all the schools, except Self-Choice High (SCH). In some cases, however schools have only general statements attesting to the academic achievements of their students and the percentage that go on to college rather than a statement of goals and philosophy with regard to teaching.

Bilingual High (BH)[10] is a charter school (Table 1) devoted to the education of a population comprised mainly of immigrant children. During the 1996–1997 school year, there were students from over 50 countries who spoke over 35 different languages. The dominant languages include Spanish, and Chinese, but Polish, Bengali and Russian are also common. Entering students score in the lowest quarter on tests of English language proficiency, yet more than 90 percent graduate within four years and the majority of these go on to further education. The majority of the teaching staff at the school either hold a degree in English as a second language (ESL) plus an academic specialty, or have a bilingual/ESL extension to their first degrees. Teachers are also expected to be proficient in a language other than English. BH's philosophy emphasizes working with students' strengths, interests and rate of progress as well as encouraging their "active participation in the learning process." Students work in depth, both collaboratively and independently. All classes are heterogeneous (mixed) by language, achievement, grade level, and age and are structured around the development of thematic projects in cooperative learning groups. Students are encouraged to maintain and further develop their native language skills by engaging in peer-mediated instructional activities, using

**Table 1.** Bilingual High (BH) 1999–2000 School Year

| *Ethnic makeup of school* | | *SAT average scores* |
|---|---|---|
| Black | 0.2% | Verbal: n/a |
| Hispanic | 45.0% | Math: n/a |
| Asian/Other[a] | 30.0% | |
| White | 0.2% | Eligible for free lunch: 82% |

Population: 435. English Language Learners: 315.
[a] Includes Pacific Islanders, Alaskan Natives, and Native Americans.

**Table 2.** Inner-City High (ICH) 1999–2000 School Year

| *Ethnic makeup of school* | | *SAT average scores* |
|---|---|---|
| Black | 23.7% | Verbal: 564 |
| Hispanic | 13.2% | Math: 607 |
| Asian/Other | 39.3% | |
| White | 23.8% | Eligible for free lunch: 25.7% |

Population: 4,168. English Language Learners: 15.

materials and textbooks in English as well as their native languages. In addition to French and Spanish foreign language classes, students at BH may also select from a range of foreign languages offered at an affiliated community college on the same campus as the high school itself.

Inner-City High (ICH) (Table 2) was chosen for this survey because its student population is divided between several different ethnic groups. ICH is a specialized school with an entrance exam and is considered to be among the top public high schools in the area. There is an emphasis on the natural sciences. The student body is comprised of students from all over the metropolitan area. Over the years (due to a recent influx of Eastern European immigrants, according to several staff members) the population of African Americans has dropped from an average of 39 percent from 1989 to 1994 to 23.8 percent in 2000. The White population has increased from an average of 16 percent from 1989 to 1994 to nearly 24 percent in 2000. ICH states that its mission is to promote the academic achievement of "students with superior scholastic aptitudes" and to prepare these students for "leadership and professional roles at the university level and in our society, with an awareness of social responsibility to the community." Seventy-five percent of graduating seniors at ICH went on to 4-year colleges in 2000. ICH had only 52 ELL students in 2000 and makes no mention of language or helping students with language problems in its mission statement. Given the commitment at ICH to educate primarily gifted students, the assumption is the young people there have already mastered English. ICH offers Chinese, Spanish, French, and Italian as foreign languages.

Self-Choice High has a (Table 3) student body that is largely African American and Latino or Hispanic. This is somewhat of a specialized public school in that

**Table 3.** Self-Choice High (SCH) 1999–2000 School Year

| *Ethnic makeup of school* | | *SAT average scores* |
|---|---|---|
| Black | 47.0% | Verbal: 442 |
| Hispanic | 49.6% | Math: 499 |
| Asian/Other | 2.3% | |
| White | 0.8% | Eligible for free lunch: 46.7% |

Population: 1,547. English Language Learners: 52.

**Table 4.** Upperside High (UH) 1999–2000 School Year

| *Ethnic makeup of school* | | *SAT average scores* |
|---|---|---|
| Black | 33.9% | Verbal: 366 |
| Hispanic | 63.0% | Math: 396 |
| Asian/Other | 1.3% | |
| White | 1.3% | Eligible for free lunch: 82.2% |

Population: 2,751. English Language Learners: 848.

the students are self-selected and the school in known for its strong academic standards and programs. Self-Choice High has one of the highest percentages of students excelling in and graduating from high school on time, and 68 percent of the graduating class of 2000 went on to 4-year colleges. Unlike the other schools in this study where the majority of teachers are European American, the ethnic composition of the teaching body varies. SCH has a very small number of ELL students, most of whom come from the Dominican Republic and Haiti. There is no mention made in the school's mission statement of special policies regarding ELL students, however, the school does offer ESL classes. SCH offers foreign language classes in Latin, French, and Spanish.

Upperside High (UH) is one of (Table 4) the largest comprehensive academic high schools. The majority of the students are African American or Latino American. Most of the students qualify for free lunch under the federal guidelines for poverty level families. There are no special academic programs and less than one-third of the student body graduates on time. In its mission statement, UH says it seeks to provide "programs that meet the diverse interests and needs of our student population" and focuses on "overall high expectations, equity and access." Fifty percent of UH graduates go on to attend a 4-year college. UH offers ESL courses and Bilingual Education classes in Spanish for its ELL students. It also offers Spanish as a second language.

West Indian High (WIH) is what (Table 5) can be referred to as a "local neighborhood school," attended mostly by West Indian students (80% of whom come from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana). In 2000, it also had approximately 125 students from Haiti. Approximately one-third of the student body graduates on time

**Table 5.** West Indian High (WIH) 1999–2000 School Year

| *Ethnic makeup of school* | | *SAT average scores* |
|---|---|---|
| Black | 91.8% | Verbal: 357 |
| Hispanic | 6.1% | Math: 352 |
| Asian/Other | 1.3% | |
| White | 0.8% | Eligible for free lunch: 78.5% |

Population: 1,881. English Language Learners: 258.

and 39 percent go on to a 4-year college. WIH sees its mission seeking to "provide an environment in school and at home, which emphasizes individual achievement of high standards, academic excellence, and creative, social and civic growth." Students can opt for one of three academic tracks: law in the community, language, and food services. The school offers help for ELLs via ESL classes and Bilingual Education for Haitian Creole speakers. While there are no general academic support programs in place, there is a small transitional program (with a cultural and linguistic focus) designed to aid English Creole speaking students with severely deficient reading and writing skills.[11] Students are selected for the program on the basis of several reading tests. The program has room for several students who are tracked together. The teachers attached to this program are assessed as having the necessary motivation and affinity for the students. After one year, the students are "mainstreamed" into regular classrooms. WIH also offers foreign language courses in Haitian Creole as well as Spanish and French.

## THE RESULTS

While the data set for this study is not large, the results do suggest noteworthy and significant trends. Following are the results for the attitudinal part of the survey. They are discussed for the aforementioned social categories in terms of percentages and favorability toward statements.[12]

### By School

In all five schools, the respondents almost categorically acknowledge (95%) variation in language and agree (90%) that children who do not speak Standard English may suffer academically (Survey questions 1, 2, and 5). However, the results for statements addressing issues around language and dialect differences are more nuanced (Survey questions 3, 4, 6, and 7). Figure 1 shows that the teachers in the two schools with developed language programs (and with large number of recent immigrants)—BH and WIH—indicate the strongest feelings about bilingual education being the right of children who do not speak the dominant language, English. As shown in Figure 2, these results closely match the percentages for those teachers who support the allocation of federal funds for bilingual programs. There is, however, an increase for teachers at ICH, suggesting strong support for bilingual education in the abstract or through funding, though perhaps not in reality (i.e., the implementation of actual programs). Regarding bidialectal education, most teachers in our study do not support it or the allocation of federal funds for related programs (see Figures 3 and 4). However, note that the highest overall support still comes from teachers in the schools with language programs for non-English and nonstandard English-speaking students—BH and WIH.

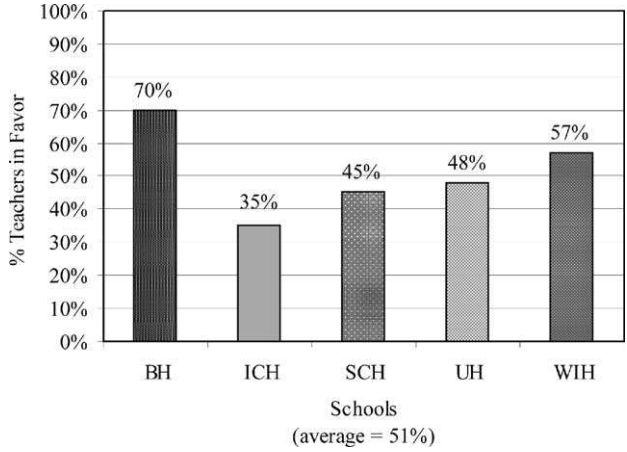



**Figure 1.** Bilingual Education is the right of every child who does not speak the dominant language.

In terms of structure, Figure 5 shows that the teachers in schools with language programs such as Bilingual High School (BH) and WIH, along with those teachers at ICH are inclined to agree that African American English (AAE) or Ebonics is a form of English (Survey question 8). This result is found to be statistically significant ($p < .05$) in a multivariate analysis wherein results less than .50 disfavor the statement and results greater than .50 favor the statement. Teachers at BH greatly favor the statement at .73, followed by the teachers at WIH favoring it at .59. The statistical analysis also shows that the teachers at ICH are relatively neutral

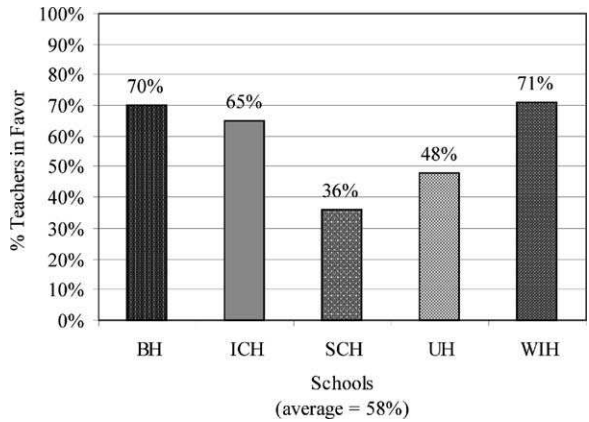



**Figure 2.** Federal funds should be used to support bilingual education.

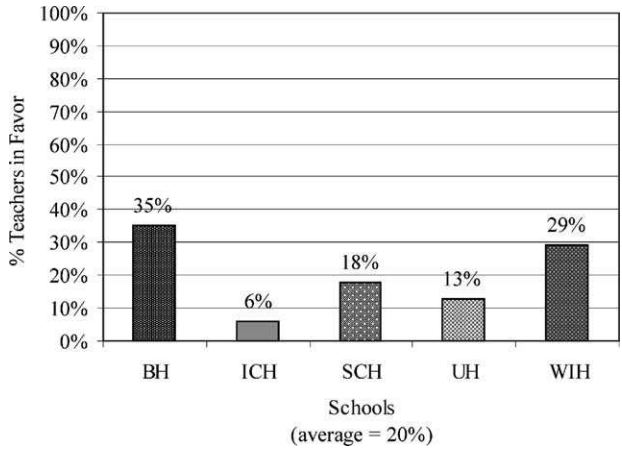



**Figure 3.** Bidialectal education is the right of every child who does not speak the dominant language or dialect.

(.49) to the statement, and the teachers at UH and SCH are inclined to disfavor the statement at .34 and .19, respectively. While not statistically significant, we observe a general correlation between opposition to bilingual and bidialectal programs, and opposition to the idea that AAE is a form of English. In other words, the schools with teachers least likely to support bilingual programs, and even more so bidialectal programs, are those with teachers less inclined to accept AAE as a form of English.

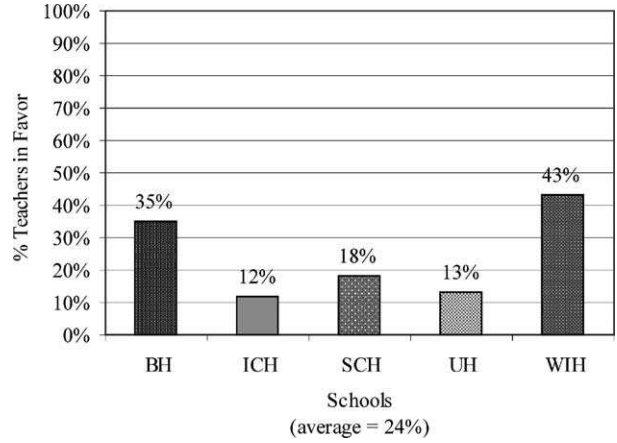



**Figure 4.** Federal funds should be used to support bidialectal education.

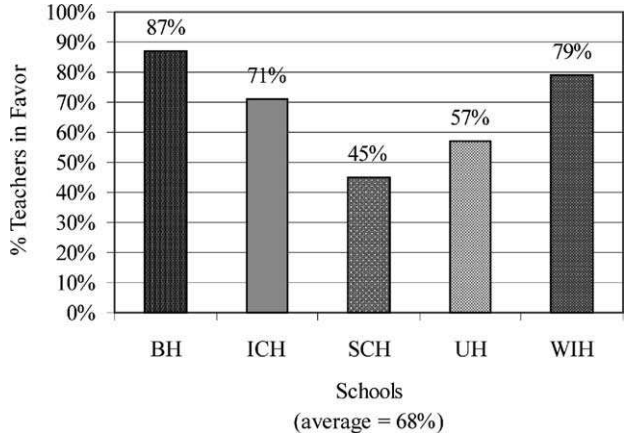



**Figure 5.** African American English (Ebonics) is a form of English.

Regardless of teachers' views on whether AAE is a form of English, few (14%) feel that it is a lazy form of English (Survey question 9). And not surprisingly, the results for the statement that AAE is a form of English parallel those for AAE being subject to a set of rules (see Figure 6 and Survey question 10), albeit at lower frequencies. Again, the most support for this statement is found among teachers at BH, followed by WIH, and ICH. The overall results for this question (44% positive, 23% neutral, 23% negative) suggest that many of the respondents may simply not know enough about AAE to make such as assessment. Following,

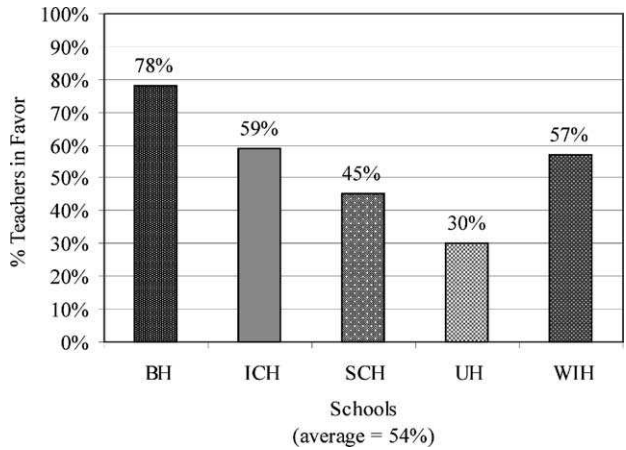



**Figure 6.** African American English (Ebonics) is subject to its own set of rules.

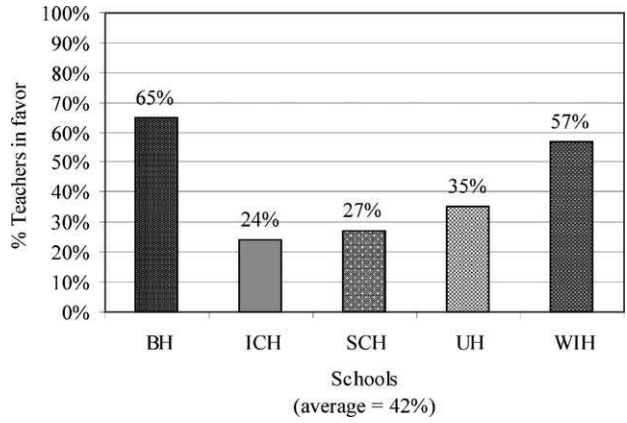



**Figure 7.** It is educationally sound to use a student's first language as a way of teaching that student the standard language of a community.

we see that teachers appear more equivocal when responding to questions about whether AAE has a role to play in the education of students.

There is a significant result when we run a multivariate analysis for the statement that it is educationally sound to use a student's first language as a way of teaching that student the standard language of a community (Survey question 14). The frequencies shown in Figure 7 indicate that, parallel to the multivariate analysis, teachers at BH and WIH greatly favor the statement at .72 and .64, respectively. This is in contrast with the teachers at UH, SCH and ICH, who slightly disfavor it at .42, .34, and .30, respectively. (These results were found to be statistically significant at $p < .01$.) Furthermore, there is general agreement among the respondents that using AAE as a tool to teach African American student would hurt their chances to learn Standard English (see Survey question 12), though least so from the teachers at BH and SCH, the school with the most African American students (see Figure 8). With more specific inquiry into whether AAE is inadequate for teaching subjects such as social studies or math (Survey question 15), there is less agreement than for question 12, as seen in Figure 9. However, it may not be that teachers necessarily feel AAE to be an inadequate learning tool in the classroom. Rather, we suggest that they are uninformed about how it could be used, as evidenced by roughly equal overall frequencies of neutral (22%) and negative (24%) responses to the statement.

In Figure 10, while nearly half (48%) of all the teachers agree that African American students would advance further in school without AAE (Survey question 11), it is the teachers at SCH and BH who agree least. Here, we should remember that it is the Self-Choice High students who are already excelling relative to other

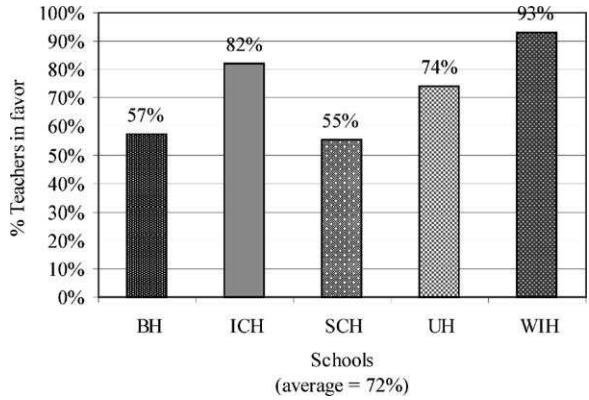



**Figure 8.** Using AAE as a tool to teach subjects to African American studies would hurt their chances to learn standard English.

schools with such large African American populations. While almost all (93%) of the teachers agree that one of the purposes of school is to make sure that students are proficient in Standard English (Survey question 19), a relatively small number (28%) claim that Standard English is the best form of English (Survey question 18).[13] This may be viewed as an acknowledgement that English has many acceptable forms, or dialects. While our results suggest that there is lack of clarity regarding the role of AAE in the classroom, teachers do view it as a viable dialect, and most (85%) agree that there are settings outside the classroom where AAE is

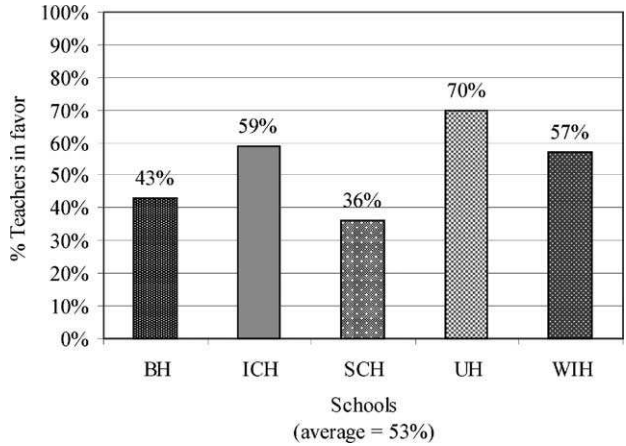



**Figure 9.** AAE is inadequate for teaching subjects such as social studies or math.

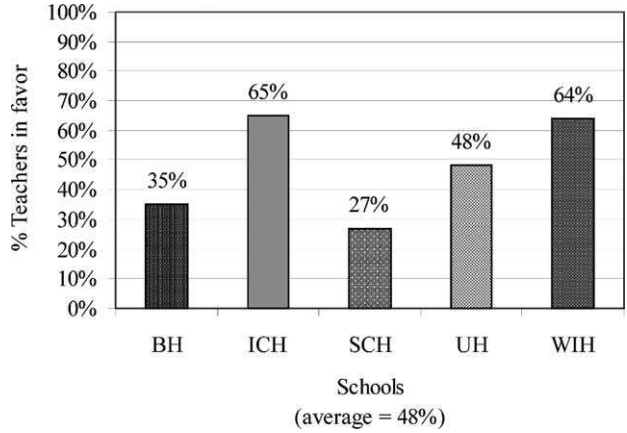



**Figure 10.** African American kids would advance further in school without AAE.

appropriate (Survey question 13). In terms of practice, teachers have mixed feelings about whether AAE-speaking students face language problems similar to those of English as a second language (ESL) students (see Figure 11 and Survey question 16). Overall, approximately 40 percent agree and 40 percent disagree with the statement. As we might predict, teachers from BH and WIH agree with this idea more than teachers at the other three schools. However, overall, very few (14%) teachers believe that African American students should be taught in classrooms alongside ESL students (Survey question 17).

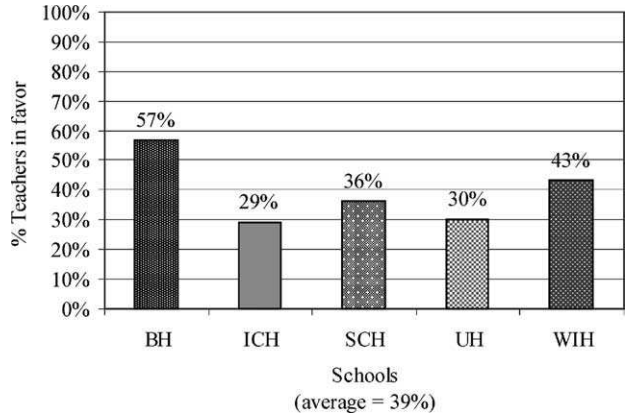



**Figure 11.** AAE-speaking students have language problems similar to those of students learning English as a second language.

### By Sex of the Respondents

In this study, the results for the men and women are strikingly comparable for all statements. In fact, there is an average of only 3–7 percentage points difference for any statement.

### By Years Taught in the School System

The five delineations in this category are in accordance with Taylor (1973). As in Taylor's study, the majority of the teachers in our sample have been teaching for 10 or more years. Because this group comprises such a large percentage of our sample (45%), we hesitate to draw inferences from the results, as the remaining 55 percent of the informants are divided among the four remaining factor groups. Nonetheless, we find little variation in the frequencies for responses between the various groups at this time.

### By Teachers' Ethnicity

Basically, teachers show little variation or trends in their responses when we separated them according to ethnicity, although there were some notable exceptions. For example, while only half of the respondents in the combined group of African American, European American, and Asian American and Other teachers agree that Bilingual education is the right of every child not speaking the dominant language, all respondents ($N = 7$) in the Latino group supported the statement. This is also the case when it comes to federal funding for bilingual programming. Here the Latino teachers are joined by the all ($N = 9$) of the African American teachers as well. There was, however, no variation by teachers' ethnicity in the results for the statements concerning bidialectal education and funding.

### By Students' Ethnic Composition

Though not found to be statistically significant, it is interesting to note that, in Figures 12–15, teachers who did not list Black students (including African Americans and West Indians) as one of the two largest groups making up their students are generally more likely to support bilingual education and funding, and to a lesser degree, bidialectal education. Furthermore, while the teachers in this study generally agree that AAE is a form of English, teachers with substantial numbers of African American students are less likely to agree (64%; $N = 58$) with this statement than those with substantial numbers of non-African American students (83%; $N = 24$). While few teachers agree that AAE is a lazy form of English (Figure 16), it is those with large numbers of African American students who are proportionately most likely to agree with this statement. We should note

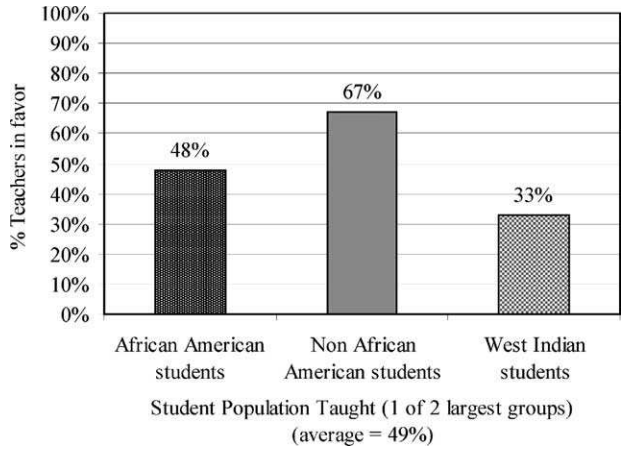



**Figure 12.** Bilingual Education is the right of every child who does not speak the dominant language.

here, however that a third of these respondents have a neutral response to this statement. Furthermore, it is teachers with large numbers of African American students (once again) who are least likely to agree with the statement that AAE is subject to its own set of rules (see Figure 17).

Figures 18–20 show that in terms of classroom practice, teachers with large numbers of African American students are less inclined to agree that such students have language problems similar to ESL students. Furthermore, they are

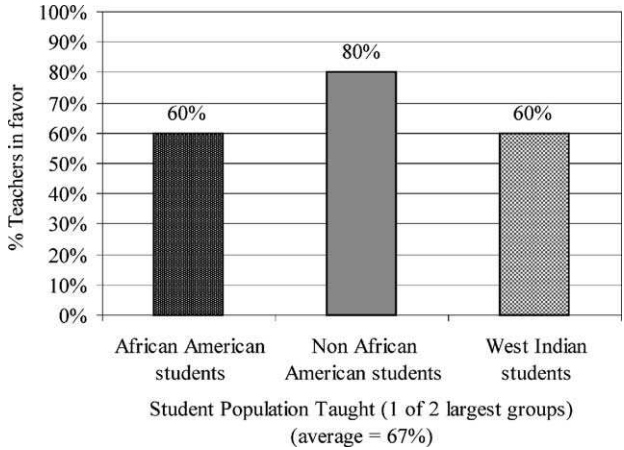



**Figure 13.** Federal funds should be used to support bilingual education.

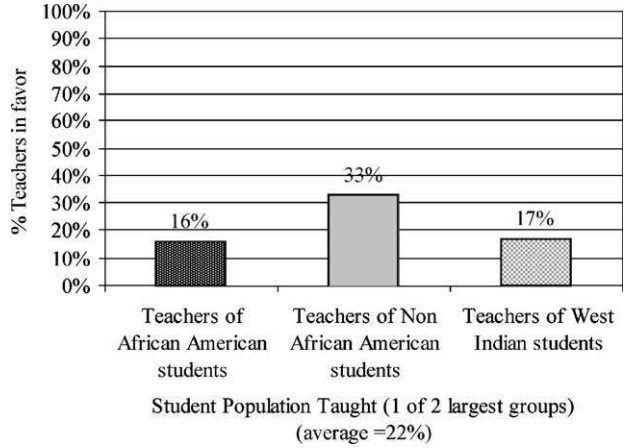



**Figure 14.** Bidialectal education is the right of every child who does not speak the dominant language or dialect.

less inclined to feel that AAE is adequate for teaching social studies and math, and are more inclined to feel that African American students would advance further without AAE. Figure 21 shows that these same teachers feel that Standard English is dominant in school and business because it is the best form of English.[14] This finding is statistically significant ($p < .05$), with teachers teaching large African American student populations slightly favoring this statement by a factor of .59, and teachers of largely non-African American students strongly

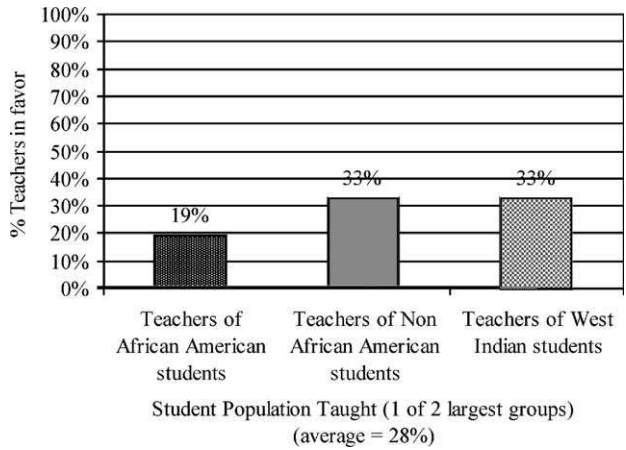



**Figure 15.** Federal funds should be used to support bidialectal education.

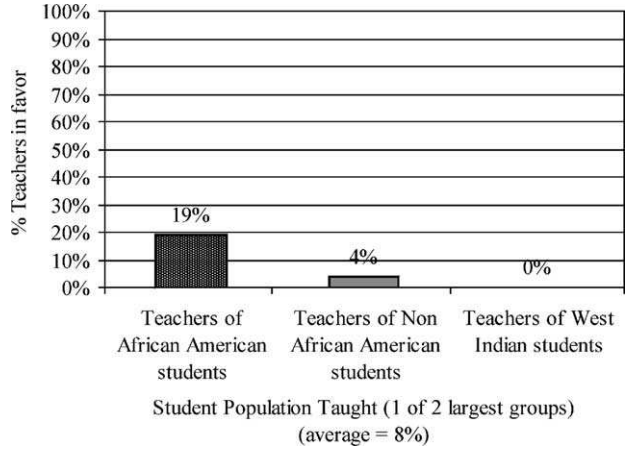



**Figure 16.** African American English (Ebonics) is a lazy form of English.

disfavoring the statement by a factor of .27. Our statistical analysis also shows that teachers with a majority of non-African American students are likely to agree that it is educationally sound to use students' first language as a tool to teach the standard language (.69), whereas teachers of African American students are more likely to disagree (.42). (These results were also found to be statistically significant at $p < .05$.) This corresponds to the frequency results in Figure 22.

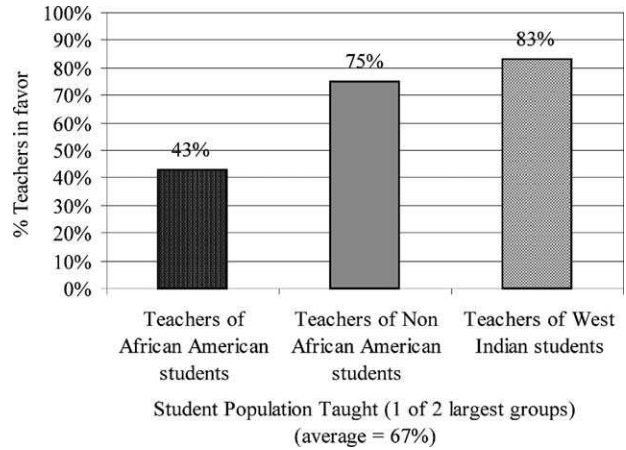



**Figure 17.** African American English is subject to its own set of rules.

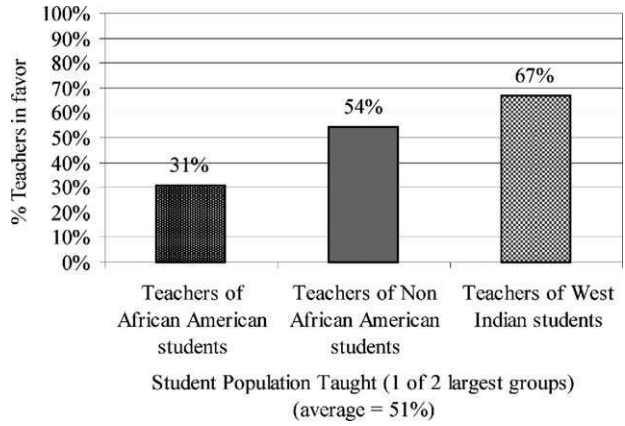



**Figure 18.** African American students have language problems similar to those of students learning English as a second language.

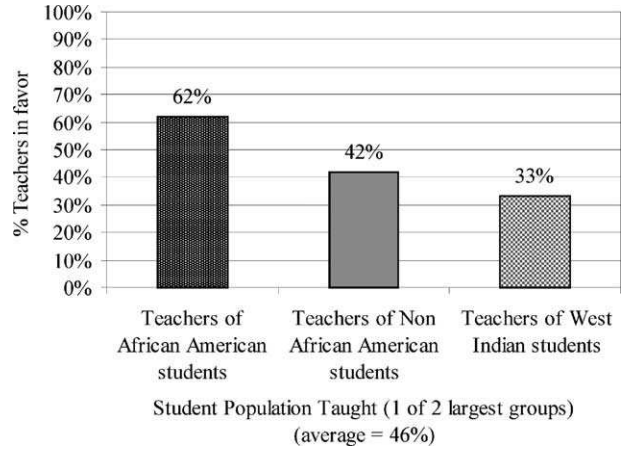



**Figure 19.** AAE would be inadequate for teaching subjects such as social studies or math.

## DISCUSSION

Using the instrument created, we observe that New York City teachers in the five public high schools we visited appear to have a basic understanding of language variation and dialects. A substantial (69%) percentage view AAE as a form of English, and in a relatively positive light, with only 14 percent viewing it as a lazy form of English. In addition, more than half (55%) of the teachers respond positively to AAE having its own set of grammatical rules. And only 28 percent agree that Standard English is necessarily the best form of English. Although we

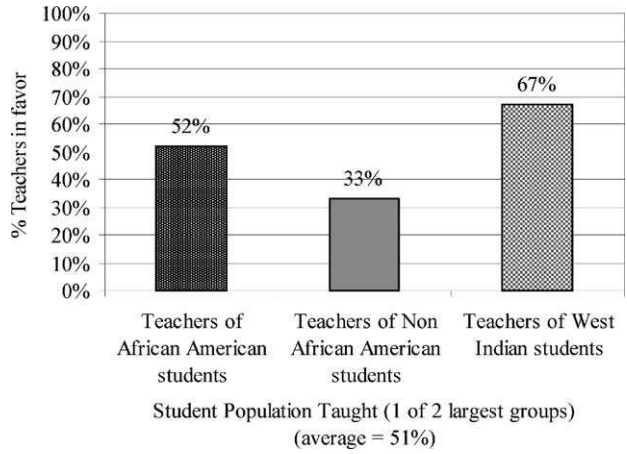



**Figure 20.** African American kids would advance further in school without African American English.

have fewer statements on the structure of AAE than Taylor (1973), if our results are correct and are some indication of a larger national trend, then it seems that over the past quarter century teachers have become more positive in their opinions about the structure of AAE. While this is encouraging in terms of the potential to enhance school practices around language and dialects, there is obvious room for improving negative and uninformed attitudes.

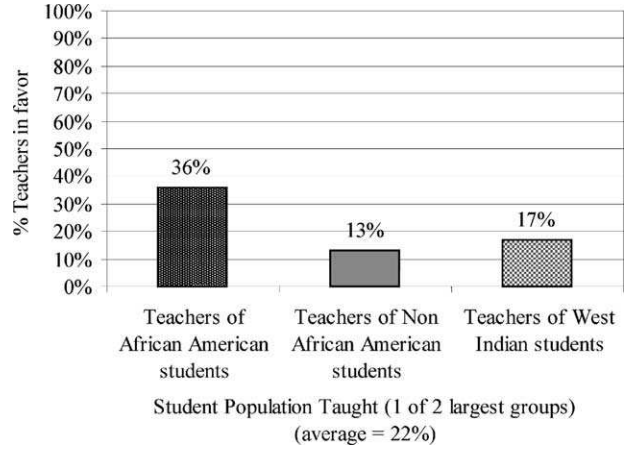



**Figure 21.** Standard English is dominant in schools and business because it is the best form of English.

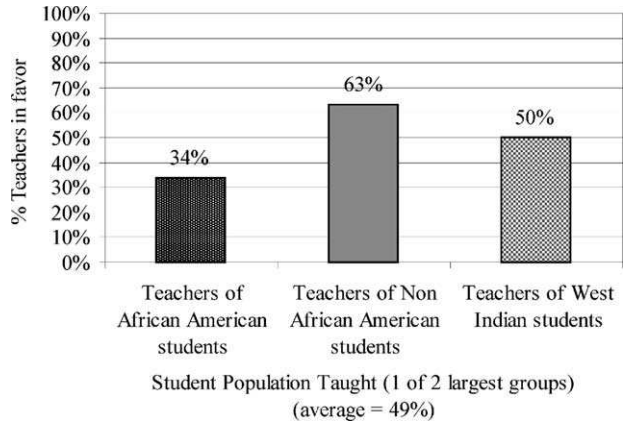



**Figure 22.** It is educationally sound to use a student's first language as a way of teaching that student the standard language of the community.

The most compelling trend in this study is that teachers' language attitudes appear to be influenced by the philosophies, or lack thereof, of the schools in which they teach. For instance, of the five schools surveyed, the responses from the teachers at BH categorically indicate that their assessments of AAE as a viable dialect of English appear most positive and sensitive. We believe that this finding is meaningful when the unique teaching mission and practices of this school are revealed. For instance, Bilingual High has established an approach to the education of students that encourages respect for language diversity such that heterogeneous groupings of students and staff work together throughout the year. In addition, language is viewed as the key to learning, and career exploration is considered a motivating factor in language learning. We suggest that it is the culture of the school that offers enticing suggestions as to why its teachers may be more attuned to linguistic difference as a resource rather than a liability.

Specific to the curriculum of Bilingual High is a clearly stated manifesto that highlights the importance of language diversity in an increasingly interdependent world, and the need for positive attitudes around issues of linguistic difference. Teachers write curriculum within the broad mandates of the city and state educational requirements, and the school's governing philosophy. Their daily and weekly interactions and considerations are concentrated on language difference and its effect on the mastery of school language and curriculum. The fact that students are encouraged to maintain and further develop their native language skills attests to an environment that acknowledges and welcomes linguistic diversity. BH's school administration also takes a proactive role in assuring that its teachers are abreast of issues relevant to language minority students (cf., DeFazio, 1997).

The teachers at West Indian High also show a tendency toward more positive language attitudes towards AAE. As stated earlier, this public school has a program that addresses the dialect needs of a select group of Caribbean English Creole speakers who have recently emigrated from the Anglophone Caribbean. Although the program is small, and therein directly effects approximately 1 percent of the student body, WIH, like Bilingual High, builds a school culture around this program, evidenced by educational workshops for its Caribbean English Creole-speaking students and their parents at large.

While we resist making correlations due to the size of this study, we are struck by the observation that the two schools with proactive language and dialect programs are the ones with the most positive language attitudes among its teachers. It is important to reiterate that more in-depth attitudinal studies in the schools are needed to fully appreciate generalizations and idiosyncracies. For instance, the teachers at WIH felt most strongly that using AAE as a tool to facilitate Standard English learning would be detrimental to African American students, and furthermore these students would advance further without it. Considering the fact that the language program at WIH is "transitional" in nature, this finding is perhaps not surprising.[15]

The degree to which teachers are exposed to basic linguistics courses would also seem to be an important factor in shaping attitudes towards AAE and other language varieties. Half (51%) of the teachers in the survey attest to having taken at least one linguistics course. Not surprisingly, the majority (74%) of teachers at Bilingual High[16] fit in this category, followed by the teachers at Self-Choice High (55%) and West Indian High (50%). Only 26 and 18 percent of the teachers at Upperside High and Inner-City High, respectively, report having taken a linguistics course. However, this did not prove to be a factor that affected teachers' attitudes towards AAE.

Our results also suggest attitudinal variation in terms of the ethnic makeup of the student body, with more positive results logged for the teachers who do not list African Americans as one of the two largest groups they work with. A higher proportion of these teachers support bilingual education and funding, and to a lesser degree, bidialectal education (as opposed to teachers with few African American students). Furthermore, a higher percentage feel that AAE is a form of English subject to its own set of rules and disagree that AAE is a lazy form of English. In terms of pedagogy, a higher proportion of these teachers believe that African American students have language problems similar to ESL students. Similarly, more of them feel that it is educationally sound to use a student's first language as a tool to teach the standard language and more are positively inclined towards using AAE to teach subjects such as social studies and math. Finally, a smaller proportion of these teachers feel that Standard English is dominant in school and business because it is the best form of English. These findings are opposite to those of Taylor (1973) for schools with predominantly Black [African American] students compared to those that are predominantly White. One must use caution, however, in interpreting our results as the public schools in the New York Metropolitan

area are generally mixed,[17] and the Black–White dichotomy employed by Taylor does not apply. While there may be other biographical variables that differentiate teachers' language attitudes, the small *N* across factors limits our evaluations.

Returning now to the overall results, in terms of bilingual and bidialectal education, approximately half (52%) of the teachers in the survey support bilingual education, with a slightly larger number (65%) supporting the funding for such programming. The results are reversed for bidialectal education, with only 20 percent of the respondents supporting bidialectal education as a child's right and 24 percent supporting funding for such programs. A majority (72%) of the respondents feel that AAE would not be useful as a tool for mastering Standard English, and fewer (55%) feel that it is adequate for teaching subjects like social studies or math. For the total set of respondents, roughly equal percentages hold negative and positive views (42 and 43%, respectively) toward the statement that it is educationally sound to use students' first language as a way of mastering the standard. The remaining 15 percent respond neutrally.

Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez (1972, p. 105) note that teachers, "although [they] may express linguistically enlightened attitudes . . . are still quite likely to be influenced by what they perceive as deviant speech." Such circumspection appears to be borne out in our findings. In spite of the fact that a substantial number of respondents view AAE as a legitimate dialect of English, all indications point to the fact that it is generally considered inappropriate for the classroom, and moreover, unprofitable for its speakers. Forty percent of the teachers in the survey agree that AAE speakers have to contend with language problems associated with ESL students, with as many agreeing that it is sound to use a students first language or dialect to teach them the standard language of the community. However, few support programs for dialect speakers or learning strategies employing AAE as a tool.

## CONCLUSION

This survey was developed to complement the work being done by linguists and other social scientists on language policies and classroom practices that address the educational exigencies of African American English speakers, as well as speakers of nonstandard varieties of English more generally. Smitherman (1999, p. 117) states that,

> There are two major lessons to be learned from the past three decades of massive work on U.S. Ebonics. One is that we need a national policy, written into the law, with full resources devoted to its implementation throughout the nation. The other lesson is that as far as language diversity and language attitudes are concerned, the school remains a critical agent of social change.

Smitherman highlights The National Language Policy created by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC, 1991), which promotes

multilingual and multidialectal appreciation and participation nationwide. She also offers several programs that embrace a philosophy of multilingualism as examples of effective classroom practice.[18] Along the same lines, Rickford (1999a, pp. 329–347) and Wolfram (1999) discuss linguistically-focused methods, geared toward mastery of Standard English by AAE and other nonstandard dialect speakers of English. These techniques, which take the students' linguistic background into account, use the native dialects of speakers to varying degrees as a device for successfully acquiring Standard English.

The results of our survey seem to have a bearing on the lessons Smitherman outlines. Again, studies show that teachers' attitudes play a significant role in the experiences of students, and furthermore, predictions of students' scholastic achievement are related to evaluations of their speech. Our survey suggests that teachers at schools with developed, or comprehensive language programs communicate more sensitive attitudes to the educational issues of AAE-speaking students, and language diversity in general. What is new in this research is the notion that the language philosophies and programs, or lack thereof at particular schools may correlate with attitudes conveyed by teachers in concrete ways. If this is the case, it provides more evidence that change happens at the level of the school and this change can be measured not only in terms of students' academic performance.

For Baugh (1999, p. 289), "Policies for AAVE (African American Vernacular English) students have been driven by two forces: relevant law and corresponding funding." Baugh argues that, by and large, the language policies implemented for AAVE students are uninformed due to the "dearth of linguistic understanding of language minority students" (ibid., p. 290). Furthermore, there is traditionally no state or federal funding allocated for language as a barrier for native speakers of nonstandard English as there is for ELL students.[19] Baugh (ibid., p. 286) clarifies a misconception about the relationship AAVE speakers have to Standard English, which, as mentioned, is evident in the New York attitudinal surveys. He says,

> AAVE natives are likely to understand Standard English, due to persuasive and constant exposure to it through the mass media. It is on the basis of "understanding (Standard) English" that AAVE students dramatically differ from their LEP (limited-English-proficient) peers. But it is also clear that comprehension of Standard English, in the face of other language barriers, does not imply that AAVE students have the same academic advantage as do students who speak Standard English natively.

Based on the results of our survey, we agree with Baugh that it is imperative to have educational laws which, in this case, are targeted at categorically training teachers about language diversity. The individuals creating such training programs should be cognizant of the needs of non-native English speakers, while also addressing the needs of students who are nonstandard English speakers, this including

AAE-speaking students. In diverse metropolitan centers like New York City, one cannot address bilingualism without addressing bidialectalism, and vise versa, and yet this continues to be the case. Our survey suggests that teachers' attitudes toward these two language issues are differentiated, which naturally has consequences for students. Thus, it is evident by funding, policy, programming, and now teachers' attitudes that there is greater concern for issues surrounding bilingualism than for bidalectalism.

**Acknowledgments:** We want to thank Anthony DeFazio, who was a co-contributor to the original research. The saliency of school philosophies in the education of teachers, and consequently the education of students is evidenced in his early contribution. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 26th Annual Conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English (NWAV XXVI) at the University of Laval, Quebec. We thank the participants at this conference from whom we received helpful feedback. We also extend our gratitude to John Singler, John Rickford, and David Sankoff for their support and assistance, and to the anonymous reviewers for their comments. We, however, are responsible for any remaining flaws.

## APPENDIX A

(African American English and AAE are used interchangeably with Ebonics)

20. People speak differently in different situations.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

21. In every language there are always variations in the way people from different age, class and ethnic backgrounds speak.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

22. *Bilingual* education is the right of every child who does not speak the dominant language.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

23. Federal funds should be used to support bilingual education.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

24. Some children do poorly in school because they do not speak Standard English.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

25. *Bidialectal* education is the right of every child who does not speak the dominant language or dialect.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

26. Federal funds should be used to support bidialectal education.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

27. African American English (Ebonics) is a form of English.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

28. African American English is lazy English.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

29. African American English is subject to its own set of rules.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

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

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

31. Using AAE as a tool to teach subjects to African American students would hurt their chances to learn Standard English.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

32. There are settings outside the classroom where African American English is appropriate.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

33. It is educationally sound to use a student's first language as a way of teaching that student the standard language of a community.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

34. AAE would be inadequate for teaching subjects such as social studies or math.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

35. African American students have language problems similar to those of students learning English as a second language.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

36. African American students should be taught in classrooms alongside English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

37. Standard English is dominant in schools and business because it is the best form of English.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

38. One purpose of school is to make certain that all students graduate proficient in Standard English.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree Strongly | Agree Mildly | No Opinion | Disagree Mildly | Disagree Strongly |

## NOTES

1. Following Spears (1998) and Morgan (1998), we use AAE as a cover term for a collection of standard and nonstandard or so-called "vernacular" varieties used by people of African American descent in the US, but we would like to specify not all African Americans speak AAE, nor are all AAE speakers African American.

2. There was also a general misperception that the Oakland School Board was proposing that AAE, or Ebonics was to be taught to students as curriculum, which was not the case.

3. Hispanics and other minority groups also appear to be negatively affected by low teacher expectations (cf., Trudgill, 1984).

4. See Bowie and Bond (1994, p. 113) for review of disparate views on the effect of teacher attitudes and expectations on student performance.

5. There is growing support for English Creole programs for recent immigrants from the Anglophone Caribbean.

6. The multivariate program, GOLDVARB2, was employed.

7. A commonly held belief is that AAE speakers are language-deficient, which Labov (1972) has shown not to be the case.

8. Most of these schools are large with approximately 1,000–4,000 pupils and approximately 18:1 full and part-time teachers.

9. The reader should be aware that these responses are based on the judgements of teachers, and therefore the African American population may well include West Indians.

10. BH was one of the first charter schools in New York City which partly or entirely accounts for the small size of its student body. We feel that its small size and charter status may have predisposed teachers at BH towards more positive responses to the questions in our survey.

11. This program has recently run out of funds.

12. The authors can be contacted for the raw percentages for each category.

13. This percentage may be higher, since as we note later, teachers remark that we should refer to Standard English as the "correct" form of English as opposed to the "best" form of English.

14. Eliminating the six tokens for teachers with substantial numbers of West Indian students gives us statistically significant results. Note that similar to the teachers with large numbers of African Americans in their class, 67 percent of the teachers in this category indicated agreement with the statement.

15. See Ruiz (1988) for a discussion of the orientations to language planning (i.e., "language-as-problem," "language-as-right," "language-as-resource").

16. It would seem that all of the teachers at BH would indicate that they had taken a linguistics course. This, however, might not be evident in this question, which could be interpreted as having had a formal linguistics course, as opposed to being exposed to linguistics in their advanced degree education courses, for example.

17. According to the 1998–1999 Annual School Report, the New York Metropole schools are comprised of approximately 16 percent White students, 37 percent Black students, 35 percent Hispanic students and 12 percent Asian and Other students.

18. There are a number of "successful" programs that embrace the philosophy of multilingualism, which includes multidialectalism (cf., Harris-Wright, 1999). There remains, however, a need for tools and research that evaluate the efficacy of such programming.

19. The Dekalb County School System in Georgia is one of those exceptions in which Title I funding is made available for a bidialectal program (cf., Harris-Wright, 1999).

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