

*African American Language Styles in Afrocentric Schools*  
By Keisha M. Josephs

## **Chapter 1: A review of the literature**

### **Introduction**

One of the most ongoing discussions in education has been centered on the low academic achievement for minority students within America. Many theories have been put forth, the most common theory being that minority students experience a cultural dissonance between their home culture and their school culture (Erickson 1987; Irvine 1990; Ladson-Billings 2001, Heath 1999). This theory of cultural compatibility, that is, students tend to succeed when their home culture is congruent with that of their school culture, has been proven for a number of minority groups within America (Ladson-Billings 2001). Some sociolinguists however go deeper within this argument, arguing that language as an extension of culture plays a key role in the dissonance between the culture of home and school (Heath 1999). Some go further and posit that the preference or use of particular languages itself becomes politicized within the classroom (Erickson 1987).

One solution to cultural incompatibility for Black students has been to create African-centered schools, which are schools that seek to teach students using values and methods from African culture. These schools recognize that African-American culture stems from cultural patterns that Africans brought with them along to America and have survived (Murrell 1994). This idea of the need to see Black culture within the context of its original culture is at the heart of Afrocentrism (Asante 1980, 1988, Pollard & Ajiroto 2000) , but while Afrocentrism discusses African and African-American history, religion and cultural survival, as far as the linguistic argument is concerned, there

has been little research on the roles that Black language patterns play within the African centered classroom.

In this paper, I investigated the way Afrocentric schools treat Black language styles within the classroom. I accomplished this through a qualitative study consisting of interviews and classroom observations, and an analysis of verbal interactions within the classroom.

### **Cultural Compatibility**

The 1954 Brown vs. Board of Ed decision officially signaled the end of segregated schools. Before then, blacks were educated in separate schools that were supposed to be “separate” but “equal”. But “separate” was not “equal”, and Black students frequently arrived in newly integrated schools less prepared than their white counterparts. It was during this time that the discrepancy between black and white achievements became more apparent. During the 1960s, the most popular belief that educators used to explain Black underachievement was that Black students, largely originating from poor, working-class, urban areas were holders of a culture that was inherently inferior. They believed that Black children were deprived of “good” culture and that this cultural deprivation caused Black children to be socially, cognitively, and developmentally delayed. (Biber 1967, Crow et. al 1966). Under the cultural deprivation theory (sometimes called cultural deficit) schools that served Black children were encouraged to find ways to remedy cultural deprivation (or cultural deficit) by providing opportunities for Black students to experience “good” culture such as trips to art museums, as well as to adjust instructional practices under the beliefs that Black students

needed time to “catch up” (Biber 1967). This theory however, did not last long as anthropologists quickly disproved it citing the theorists’ poor research methods and overgeneralizations (Zigler & Valentine 1979). Thus, the cultural deprivation theory was refuted, however the fact that Black children continued to do poorly remained.

A new theory emerged, that of cultural compatibility, which discounted the cultural deprivation theory. The theory of cultural compatibility denies the implication of an inherent inferiority in Black culture but states that the *difference* in home culture versus school culture is one of the reasons Black students do poorly (Irvine 1990, Ladson-Billings 1994). Furthermore, unlike cultural deprivation theory, it places no value judgment on either school culture or home culture thus one is not superior to the other.

This theory of cultural compatibility states that when teachers and students do not share the same culture, the different cultural behaviors performed by the other are open to misinterpretation because neither party realizes that they may be operating on different cultural codes. Irvine gives an example of this stating, “Black students may not maintain constant eye contact with teachers as do white students. Often black children are accused of not paying attention when they are” (Irvine 1990, 30). Many Black parents teach their children that to look an authority figure in the eye is disrespectful, that it shows that you are equal with that person. In this example, the White teachers believe that Black students are not paying attention when they are not maintaining constant eye contact, while the Black students believe they are deferring to an authority figure by not maintaining eye contact (Johnson 1971).

To exacerbate matters, at the end of desegregation, the number of black teachers sharply declined. Between 1954 and 1972, almost 40,000 black teachers in seventeen

states in the south lost their jobs (Irvine 1990). With the decrease in black teachers after desegregation came the increased possibility for Black students to be educated by teachers that did not share the same culture, that is, the “shared knowledge, customs, emotions, rituals, traditions, values, and norms that are embodied in a set of behaviors designed for survival in a particular environment” (Irvine 1990, 22).

Language is tied to culture, and some sociolinguists dug deeper within the cultural incompatibility theory and posited that Black language patterns can be a key source of cultural misunderstanding that can affect Black students’ academic performance. These educators subscribe to what Erickson (1987) terms the communication process explanation. The communication process explanation holds that minority students come from different speech communities or networks than white teachers that have their own set ways of communicating, such as showing attention, sincerity or disapproval. Thus language can be a factor in cultural incompatibility as well.

One of the main proponents of this theory is Shirley Brice Heath (1999) who studied the way the verbal interactions of a Black community affected them in the school. Heath’s Black community was a town she called Trackton, where the residents were largely poor and working class. Residents of Trackton engaged with language far differently from the residents of Roadville, who were white and working class, and the townspeople who were both white and black middle class families. From a young age, Trackton residents valued and performed complex language activities, such as weaving long imaginative stories or being able to participate in verbal sparring but participated very little in “literacy events” or taking meaning from books or other texts that are written. On the contrast, the townspeople from a young age taught their children that

books are something from which you take meaning. Moreover, during their bedtime stories, the questions that townspeople asked their children closely followed the Initiation-Reply-Evaluate (IRE) model of verbal interaction that is prevalent in schools. In this model a teacher regulates classroom interactions by first initiating a question (usually with a predetermined answer in mind), waiting for a student to reply and then evaluating the response as right or wrong. Trackton residents, however, do not normally use this model of questioning, so consequently children have little familiarity with this type of questioning at home and when faced with it at school, do not respond in the way the teacher desires. Thus, we can conclude from Heath's study that language does indeed have an important effect on Black students.

Blaming language itself as a reason for the underachievement of black students is potentially dangerous in that it has the potential to shift back to the cultural deficit theory of the 1960s where poor, Black, urban youth were characterized as being linguistically immature, and not having an adequate language to express complex thoughts. It was even thought that this "inadequate" language prevented students from even *thinking* complex thoughts (Biber 1967). For example, Eleanor Wilson Orr conducted another study of the way Black language patterns affects Black students in the classroom. Her book, Twice as Less studied the effect that Black language had on Black students' math performance at an elite private school in the District of Colombia. From her study, she concluded that Black English also known as Ebonics or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) was in fact a barrier for low income Black students learning math. (Orr 1997) For example, from her research she believed that speakers of Black English did not have what she terms, *as...as* comparative structure in their language, that is they could not

understand a mathematical phrase such as “twice as small as” or “half as small as”. Because of this, she believed that Black students who spoke Black English could not adequately understand mathematical phrases because their language lacked the same constructions as those used in mathematics (Orr 1997). Orr’s argument however is dangerously close to the cultural deprivation model, in that she argues that Black students’ language is inadequate or deficient and cannot express mathematical concepts.

Lisa Delpit (1995), criticizes Orr’s argument, however. The first criticism is that Orr was comparing the mathematics skills of low income Black students to the upper class white students. The Black students in Hawthorne’s high school came to Hawthorne through a cooperative program in the District of Columbia that allowed several, low income Black students to attend. The low math scores, Delpit argues, stem from them being underprepared not their language. Additionally, Orr fails to account for other speakers of other languages like German or Chinese, which do not have the same constructions as English mathematical phrases. (Delpit 1995)

But the simple difference between languages might not be all that is affecting students in the classroom. Some studies go beyond the communication process explanation and suggest that AAVE becomes a political tool in the assertion of identity and in the resistance of the dominant culture’s hegemony (Erickson 1987, Labov 1972, Fordham 2001). It is important to remember that using AAVE, is an important part of Black students’ identity for it is the language they tell stories in, the language they tell jokes in, the language they use to speak of their triumphs and the language they use to tell of their tragedies. It is inextricably linked to their culture and they recognize that. Often times, students who are either unable or unwilling to speak AAVE experience ridicule on

behalf of their Black peers. One of Labov's (1972) earlier studies documented this among Black male youths in the inner city among "clubs" groups of youths who hung out together on the street. For the members of these clubs it was important not to be considered a "lame", a Black person who is perceived to be out of touch with Black culture. One primary marker of a "lamer" is his or her inability to speak AAVE. In a more recent paper, Fordham (1991) reports a similar situation among Black highschoolers in Washington, D.C. at Capitol Highschool, a racially mixed school that sought to "peer-proof" academically successful Black students by separating them and encouraging them to disassociate from other Black students. On the contrast, Black students were expected by their peers to identify with other Black students. One marker of showing shared identity and solidarity for Black students was using AAVE. For the Black students, talking "white" or talking in modes more commonly found among white people, often led to peer ridicule. Eschewing activities that are perceived to be common to white people is one way Black students seek to retain their identity and resist assimilation into the school culture which is often a replica of the dominant culture (Fordham 1991). Although the school sought to peer-proof academically successful Black students by separating them from their peers in different classes, it only resulted in causing Black students to face a tough choice of choosing academics over community (Fordham 1991).

Erickson (1987) takes a slightly different direction when he points to Piestrup's (1973) study of different classrooms in which some treated AAVE negatively and some paid little attention to it. In the first classroom during a reading lesson, the teacher continually corrected Black students if they made a nonstandard pronunciation of a word.

What Piestrup discovered was that in classrooms in which a teacher of any race negatively sanctioned the use of AAVE, the students' English became even more divergent from the norm. The opposite happened in classrooms in which the teachers did not stigmatize AAVE. Over the course of the year, the students' English became closer to the standard. What is happening here is what Erickson (1987) would term as a cultural boundary becoming a cultural border. A cultural boundary is simply "behavioral evidence of culturally differing standards of appropriateness" (p. 345) or a culturally different way of doing a specific action. When this simple cultural difference becomes politically charged, that is endowing it with specific negative implications, it becomes a border, a political area in which resistance and dominance is asserted. In Piestrup's study the continual criticism led black students to believe that their very identities are being attacked causing them to resist and assert their identity more because they see their actions as siding with their culture. This continual resistance leads to a strained relationship and area of conflict between teachers and students and decreases the probability of achievement (Erickson 1987). In these interactions, language becomes a political tool for the teacher and students in asserting dominance and culture.

Recognizing AAVE as an important part of Black culture is something that is more recent. Previously cultural deficit theorists believed that AAVE was a sign that the culture of poor Blacks prevented them from learning to speak properly. Additionally, these theorists believed that AAVE was inadequate for expressing higher thoughts and in fact, prevented them from being able to express higher thinking (Biber 1967). During the 1970s there were studies on AAVE, but it was in 1996 that AAVE was brought to the field of Education.



## **The Ebonics Resolution**

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Education officially recognizes the existence, and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and each language as the predominantly primary language of African-American students; and...

The Superintendent ...shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills, while respecting and embracing the legitimacy and the richness of the language patterns. (Excerpt from the text of the Oakland Ebonics Resolution, Perry & Delpit 1998, p.143-147)

One decision that theoretically had the opportunity to depoliticize AAVE in the classroom was the Ebonics decision put forth by the Oakland School Board. I have used the excerpt above to show the actual text used in the decision, because much misinformation about it has been spread through the media. (Perry & Delpit 1998) In the resolution the Board recognized that AAVE or what they call Ebonics is indeed a legitimate language derived from the Niger-Congo languages of slaves brought to the United States and not simply incorrect or “lazy” English. It acknowledges over two decades of linguistic work that proved continually that although Ebonics uses an English lexicon it operates on its own system. When teachers do not recognize this, cultural

misunderstandings are most likely to occur. Heath gives an example of this in her book Ways with Words, with the interaction of a black student and a white teacher.

A teacher asked one day: “Where is Susan? Isn’t she here today?” Lem answered, “She ain’t ride de bus.” The teacher responded: “She doesn’t ride the bus, Lem.” Lem answered: “She *do* be ridin’ de bus.” The teacher frowned at Lem and turned away. Within the system of Black English Lem used, *ain’t* was used as equivalent to *didn’t*, the negative of the past tense of auxiliary *do*; thus his answer had to be interpreted as “She didn’t ride the bus.” The teacher heard the *ain’t* as equivalent to *doesn’t* and corrected Lem accordingly; he rejected this shift of meaning and asserted through his use of *do be ridin’* that Susan did indeed regularly ride the bus. (Heath 1983, 277-278)

Beyond discovering cultural misunderstandings, the Ebonics resolution hoped to teach students Standard English through Ebonics, that is, seeking to help students become aware of the language that they were speaking and to use it to highlight errors that they may make. Unfortunately, many people misinterpreted it as teaching Black students Ebonics instead of English, including major black figures such as Bill Cosby, Jesse Jackson and Maya Angelou (Perry 1998). It experienced extraordinary criticism from the public as well. Words such as “bastardized English”, “poor grammar” and “slang” often accompanied the descriptions that proliferated on messageboards and emails about Ebonics even though linguists supported and legitimized it (Rickford 1999). What people failed to see, was that Ebonics was a program in which Black students’ modes of

speaking were for once not going to be stigmatized. Furthermore, what was significant about the program was that it recognized that Black students' were not culturally or linguistically deficit, and that it was possible to use the language that they already had as a starting point for further education (Adger, Christian, & Taylor 1999).

The concept of a program such as Ebonics however, is not new. Many schools and classrooms use what Wolfram would term a dialect awareness program in which students can study various American dialects that would consequently heighten their sensitivity to Standard English (Wolfram 1999, Harris Wright 1999). Delpit calls this "linguistic pluralism" and gives examples of similar programs such as a program for Native Alaskan children which allowed the students to actually study their Athabaskan language as well as explore the difference between their way of speaking and English (Delpit 1995, 54). A "dialect awareness program" provides not only a space where students can undertake serious linguistic inquiry but also a space where students can learn about their own language as well as English without criticism, conflict or stigma.

### **Afrocentricity and Afrocentric schools**

So what else can be done to be sensitive to the culture of Black students? One major movement that has arisen is to create Afrocentric schools based on the principles of Afrocentricity, but before the conversation on Afrocentric schools can proceed it is necessary to first define what Afrocentrism. Looking back, we can see that there have been various Afrocentric movements before the word Afrocentrism was ever coined, such as the Negritude movement and Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement. But it was

Molefi Kete Asante who first coined the word “Afrocentricity” which he defines as “the belief in the centrality of Africans in post modern history” (Asante, 1980, p.6). In other words, Afrocentrists acknowledge themselves as Africans and that their culture is African and seek to use African culture as a viewpoint to understand the world.

In regards to my topic, what is significant is that Asante recognizes language as important in Afrocentrism. This importance he terms *nommo*, which is “the generative and productive power of the spoken word” (Asante 1988, p.122). This *nommo* Asante believes, is part of the original culture of Black people and was further enhanced by anti-literacy laws for Blacks during slavery. Banned from reading and writing, oral tradition and oral communication became the prime and fundamental source of communication. Thus, things such as Ebonics, sermons and spirituals became essential mediums to transmit information (Asante 1980).

How does Afrocentricity relate to schooling? For Asante establishing Afrocentric schools is necessary for the creation of new black leaders who are “re-educated, re-oriented, and restored to their center” (Asante 1988, p.47) Afrocentric schools have often been the victims of undue criticism, with critics citing fears that Afrocentric schools would promote either hatred towards whites or incorrect accounts of history (Lefkowitz 1997, Webster 1997, Howe 1998). Some also criticize the prevalent misconception that Afrocentric schools solely exist to build Black students’ self esteem. This latter reason is the main source of criticism towards Afrocentric schools although while self-esteem is a part of Afrocentric schooling it is by no means the main component (Pollard & Ajirotutu 2000). Instead, Afrocentric schools strive to give students a holistic education using the principles of Afrocentricity that is as Asante (1988) says, a “cultural project is a wholistic

plan to reconstruct and develop every dimension of the African world from the standpoint of Africa as subject, rather than object” (105). Thus Afrocentricity is not simply learning about African and African American culture but it is using an African worldview as a starting point in which to see the world. For example, the founder of a Milwaukee Afrocentric school, dressed in traditional African clothes and used traditional storytelling to recount the experiences of slaves in American to American history students. Instead of learning it through simply reading about it from a textbook, students had the opportunity to experience the story through the eyes of slaves in a traditional storytelling manner (Murrell 1993). Though Asante (1988) lists over 275 principles, teachings and sayings as part of the way he came to Afrocentrism, it is by no means a rulebook to Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity is not a religion, but a philosophy, though Asante would probably claim that it is more than that, a way of life rather. People who define themselves as Afrocentric can express it in a variety of ways. They can simply be devoted to African American culture, or both African and African-American culture. Some Afrocentrists adopt traditional West African or Kemetic (Ancient Egyptian) religions, while some remain Christian or Muslim. The range of Afrocentrism can vary but if Afrocentric schools are using Asante’s definition of Afrocentricity then Black language(s) and oral traditions, or *nommo*, should have a presence within the school.

I have found little information however, devoted to the study of Black language styles within Afrocentric schools. One ethnographical study, by Kate Mencken of the University of Pennsylvania, however presents insight within this area. In her paper, *Ethnic pride and the classroom: An ethnographic study of classroom behavior*, Mencken observed a public school in, located in a predominantly lower to middle-class African-

American neighborhood in South Philadelphia. She observed two seventh grade classes in which one African-American teacher taught both classes in Science and English.

Although the school itself is not Afrocentric, the teacher believed that she constructed the class as an Afrocentric one, which focused on African-American authors, as well as literature and poems dealing with African-American themes and history. When it came to language however, the teacher showed a preference for Standard English. When students responded used AAVE in formal academic situations, the student was corrected as shown in the example below:

S: Ain't the ocean blue?

T: Ain't

S: Uh, isn't the ocean blue? (Mencken 1994:97)

However, in informal dialogue such as talking to the teacher about non-academic matters, or talking amongst themselves, the teacher permitted students to use AAVE, stating "It's okay to use that language with their friends, but you need to know how to use correct English when going in for a job application or interview" (97). Within the quote we can see that the teacher places a value judgment on AAVE, calling Standard English "correct English", which makes AAVE incorrect by default.

In this study, I seek to explore how a true Afrocentric school treat Black language patterns such as AAVE within its walls. Through a qualitative study in an Afrocentric school consisting of interviews and classroom observations, I try to discover if the attention paid to it is explicit or implicit or if it is accepted or contested. In the interviews

I try to have teachers explain their views on AAVE and it's role in the classroom, and in the classroom observations I look to see how these teachers put their theories into practice.

## Chapter 2: Methods

My interest in how Afrocentric schools treat Black language styles began in my senior year after taking a course that dealt with race and ethnicity in education. My original topic was going to explore how Black language styles disadvantaged Black students in schools, but it was a topic that had been done before and I struggled to garner enthusiasm for it. Fortunately, I was introduced to the subject of culturally relevant pedagogy and began to wonder if an Afrocentric school, a school that seeks to be culturally relevant to its students, would treat a highly important aspect of Black culture such as AAVE differently than a mainstream school.

I had no previous knowledge of Afrocentric schools in Philadelphia, so I chose a school named Rose Academy<sup>1</sup> at the suggestion of a classmate who had previously had contact with the school for an interview project. I was not aware of the Afrocentric schools that existed in Philadelphia so I welcomed her suggestion. I expected that contact with the school would be fairly easy, however initial contacts with Rose Academy were not successful. Unfortunately, I was not able to secure a definite position from Rose Academy on whether I would be able to conduct observations there. Fortunately, the assistant director of Rose Academy, Beth Johnson pointed me in the direction of three other Afrocentric schools in the area. One of the schools she listed, Sankofa Charter School, was a couple of blocks away. After a few meetings with Kwaku Roberts, the Vice Principal of Sankofa Charter School I was able to secure observations within the school.

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<sup>1</sup> All names including the names of the school, town and individuals have been changed.



## Site Description

Sankofa Charter School is a small African centered<sup>2</sup> charter school serving kindergarten to eighth grade a section of Philadelphia I will call Deutschtown a predominantly black, working class, urban area. Sankofa Charter school is located in a medium sized three story building. It was founded in 2000 and has roughly 400 students enrolled. The student body is 100% African American and the entire faculty except two were African-American.

On my first visit to the school Mr. Roberts took me on a tour of the school. Sankofa Charter is a lovingly decorated school. Children's artworks are proudly displayed in the halls and on classroom walls, and the classroom door entrances are draped with African cloths. Traditional African sculptures, carvings and baskets are located all throughout the school as well pictures of notable African Americans such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and historical events such as Civil Rights marches. Additionally each class is named after a nation, for example the fourth grade is the Zulu Nation.

The atmosphere of Sankofa Charter is very friendly, loving and community oriented. Hugs are freely given between students and faculty. On my first visit there I was hugged by four kindergarteners, and at the end of my first day actually observing, I received a hug from a fourth grader. Similarly I saw students openly give quick hugs to teachers and staff before scampering quickly to class. At the front of the school there is a

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<sup>2</sup> The term African-centered is increasingly being used in favor of the term Afrocentric when referring to schools. In this paper the term Afrocentric is used primarily.

garden which students and teachers tend together and students are always reminded that they are part of a community.

African and African-American history enters at all levels in the curriculum. For example in Literature students might read a traditional Yoruba folktale or in Math learn geometry by studying traditional African American quilt designs. Even at the social level, African culture is ingrained. Adults at Sankofa Charter are addressed as Mallam and Mallama, for males and females respectively, with either a first or last name following the title. Mallam or Mallama is the Swahili word for teacher, and it literally means “learned one”. If the teacher wants to catch the classes attention he or she will say “Ago!” which in Swahili means “Are you ready to listen?”. Students will then respond in unison with “Amay” which means “I am ready to listen.” For discipline students adhere to the principles of Ma’at, an ancient Egyptian code of ethics of which truth, reciprocity, justice, harmony, righteousness, order and balance are the main focus. These principles are hung on the wall in every classroom and in the hallways, which are dedicated as PHOB zones, areas of peace, harmony, order and balance and in which students must remain quiet. Additionally students also are taught to live by the principles of Kwanzaa.

Both the uniforms and dress of some faculty and staff is either African or African-influenced. For female students the uniform is a black skirt or pants, white shirt and a black vest that is made out of kente cloth in the front. Male students wear black pants, white shirts and the same vest. It is not uncommon to see the faculty and staff dressed in African clothes either. Many teachers come to school with elegant African dresses, headwraps and shirts; others wear subtle African jewelry and other African accessories.

## **Study Methods**

The main focus of my study was to discover how an Afrocentric school would treat AAVE and other Black language patterns since it is a significant part of Black culture. To explore this I used two methods, classroom observations and interviews. The reason why I chose both classroom observations and interviews is so that I would be able to compare what teachers actually say about the use of AAVE in the classroom to what they actually do. I conducted observations before the interviews because I did not want my questions to influence their practice. With the interviews I also wanted to get more opinions of Afrocentricity from people that actually practice it, rather than relying on only what was said by researchers. I hoped that hearing their own views on Afrocentricity would help illuminate their classroom practice.

For my observations I randomly chose two classrooms to get an unbiased view of classroom life, and observed in them over the course of six days. I recorded on audiotape classroom conversations as well as written notes of verbal interactions. The hours I spent during classroom observations ranged from roughly three to four hours. During my observations I was not so focused on what teachers and students were saying as much as how they were saying it. I paid close attention for incidents of AAVE usage from either students or teacher, and made note of the situation it was said in. I also recorded instances of Standard English to serve as a comparison. In my observations, I also tried to look for attitudes a teacher or students might have towards AAVE. The classrooms I conducted observations in were the fourth grade classroom of Mallama Haines, and the classroom Mallama Maryam who taught sixth and seventh grade literature.

After I was done with the observations in their classroom, I had two interviews with each teacher about their views on AAVE and also Afrocentric education. I was also fortunate enough to get an interview with Dr. Darlene Dalton, the founder of Sankofa Charter School, whom I interviewed about the founding of the school and Afrocentric education. Because of time constraints, I was not able to ask all of the questions included in my interview protocol included in the appendix. Because of this, what I tried to do was follow the general themes of the interview questions, probing for more answers as needed and as time permitted.

To analyze my data I separated general themes that I saw arise in the interviews. I pulled out direct quotes that were common to at least two, if not all of the interviewees. In analyzing classroom data, I excerpted a few verbal interactions that I felt were the best examples of students and teachers using both Standard English and AAVE. I then related the way each teacher treated AAVE to what they mentioned in the interviews. The following chapter is product of these analyses.

### Chapter 3: Analysis

I had originally planned to do simple classroom observations in order to observe Sankofa Charter's treatment of language, however I added interviews in order to get a first hand attitude on the subject. From the interviews, particular themes about Afrocentrism and AAVE (referred to as Ebonics) arose.

One major theme is that, at least for the interviewees, Afrocentrism is a way of life and thinking. An African-centered education has to go beyond curriculum. Another theme is that students should be able to use AAVE depending on the context. All three agreed that students should learn Standard English, but still recognize AAVE as part of Black culture.

For Sankofa, Afrocentrism is not simply curriculum but rather a holistic approach to education. It is for this reason that Sankofa not only includes an African centered curriculum, but African social and spiritual customs as well. The principles of Ma'at and the Nguzo Saba on the walls are not simply for display, but something that I saw teachers continually refer to in order to remind children the way they should act. For example the idea of community and working together, which falls under the principle of *ujima*, collective work and responsibility, and the notion of respect, one of the Principles of Ma'at, is used by Mallama Haines. She states,

Here at Sankofa we try to teach the children to respect one another, respect your family, respect your community. When we go out in the community, I do not

expect to see anybody throw trash down. I teach them that on their block it's your responsibility as a family, as a village, to make sure that you keep it clean.

When a student in Mallama Maryam's class got into an altercation with a teacher, she asked the students to write an apology on the student's behalf with drew protests from the other students. Mallama Maraym responded to the class,

See that's what's wrong with Black people today, we don't work as a community. That's why we have so many problems today, because we don't want to work together. When something like this happens we as a community should come together and take responsibility for the actions of one of our community members.

In opposition to the individualistic notion that the dominant society promotes, the students were made to write an apology on behalf of the offending student, underscoring the principle of *ujima*. In both of these cases, an African-centered education goes beyond simply reading books by African American authors, or leaning about African history. An African centered education is a holistic one, including cultural practices and spirituality in the lives of its students.

Another theme that arose from the interviews was that an African centered education is a response the "miseducation" of their culture that Black people have endured for hundreds of years. The term miseducation is a term first employed by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the second African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard, (the first being W.E.B. DuBois) when referring to the education of Black people in America.

Woodson's book "The Mis-education of the Negro", written in 1933 puts forth his own view of how Black Americans have been wrongly taught about their African culture. For many years Black people in America were told that they have no history or culture, that African culture was primitive, savage, and uncivilized. Moreover, Black culture was rarely placed within the context of its history. This historical miseducation has caused many Black people to see themselves and their culture as being apart from Africa. As Mallama Maryam says,

And from the beginning you really need to instill in African children that they are African and you need to have that be a part of their life so that they internalize that... I think they need something that affirms their Africanness because so many of us are disconnected from it, so I think that that's more important.

Mallama Haines concurs similarly,

We also believe here at Sankofa that students need to know their history and culture to be centered, and find centeredness and groundedness, in one's own historical and cultural experience... and I was always aware of the fact that when you talk about multicultural education, most of the different cultures that we're speaking of, they're aware of who they are and where they come from. Our culture is the one where there's still question marks. They're still children to day who will say, African American children who will say, "I'm not from Africa". I always felt growing up that we needed to connect.

Dr. Dalton also agrees succinctly when talking about what African centered education can give Black students: “They can get to learn some correct history and learn some cultural things that nobody else is going to bother to teach them.”

In all three responses is the acknowledgement that the American educational system has not done its best when it comes to educating Black students, historically by denigrating Africa while simultaneously not acknowledging the African origins of Black culture. An African centered education, then, has the opportunity to correct this by acknowledging the African origins of Black people and their culture.

The issue of self-esteem also came up during the interviews not surprisingly. Unfortunately, it is on this issue that critics (Webster 1997, Brown 2001, Binder 2002), have often downplayed Afrocentrism for. Believing that Afrocentrism exists solely to help “improve Black students self esteem”, these critics have found reason to dismiss Afrocentrism. For example, Yehudi Webster (1997) states,

Afrocentrists argue their critics, construct a myth of a dominant, white, male, Eurocentric education, and demonize Western civilization in order to slip in an Afrocentric worldview that *has no credibility except the dubious promise to improve black students' self-esteem* (46). (emphasis mine)

However as said before, self esteem was an important factor for Haines and Dalton. Mallama Haines said,



To teach self-esteem alone I don't think it's a bad thing. If you have self-esteem about yourself if you know who you are...and where you come from then that alone is strength within.

Dr. Dalton however is quick to point out that, when talking about self-esteem in relation to an African centered education, the focus should be on *cultural* esteem rather than personal esteem:

...most of our children have a pretty decent self esteem but they have almost no culture esteem. Which means that we are kind of outside the dominant culture so we're not a part of what's considered to be good. So what does that make you, bad?

Whereas critics criticize the notion of African centered education for the sole reason of improving *personal* self-esteem, what seems to be more important is improving a student's cultural esteem by accepting and giving them knowledge of their culture once again responding to the historical neglect and misunderstanding of Black culture. In an African centered education, African culture raised to the standard that European culture has enjoyed for centuries. Part of the focus of an Afrocentric education is not to malign European culture, but to give Black students a chance to finally understand their own culture and take pride in it. .

In regards to AAVE, I found it interesting that even though they were accepting AAVE to some extent, all three were quick to acknowledge that the students must learn

Standard English, or the “King’s English” as Dr. Dalton referred to it. Regarding this Mallama Maryam said, “They need to learn Standard English to survive because everything is based on Standard English” and Mallama Haines said similarly, “I think [AAVE] should be accepted as a bridge to get them where they need to be in Standard English.” In both responses there is the idea that speaking Standard English is a necessity. Dr. Dalton also agrees however saying:

So if we talk slang and we talk whatever these young people talk alright, I’ll deal with that...but at the same time you better know how to speak the King’s English if you want a job and get a good education and be seen as an intelligent person, and be at least bidialectal if not tri-dialectal.

It is important to note that in her response, Dalton concurs around the necessity of learning Standard English however not at the expense of losing the ability to speak AAVE. What Dr. Dalton is referring to when she speaks of students being bidialectal is language switching but what many people call code-switching. People often refer to code-switching when describing when a person is switching between languages however what code-switching really refers to is the “codes” or language systems a person must have stored in his or her brain to understand and process the different languages that he or she speaks (Auer 1998). This is most apparent in an AAVE speaker who must hold two codes for a language that consists of the same lexicon. Speakers of AAVE need to recognize that a word uttered in AAVE can have a different meaning in a Standard English sentence, thus they have to recognize two different “codes” stored. Recently,

however, the term code-switching has now become synonymous with “language switching (Auer 1998).

Mallama Maryam also implicitly mentions language-switching in her interview:

You know I often tell the children no one is saying you can't speak in Ebonics but there is a difference between the way you write and the way you talk, I continuously tell them that. I speak to my mother and my girlfriends one way and I speak a completely different way when I go into a professional setting. I'm not trying to downplay Ebonics, but I definitely feel like there's a time and place for everything.

Situational language-switching is something that is often mentioned by Blacks, most commonly referred to as formal versus informal language. In her response Mallama Maryam is fine with students speaking AAVE in an informal setting however, in situations she deems formal, such as writing, she does not accept it.

Mallama Maryam's preference for situational language-switching is something that is also advocated by Mallama Maryam:

I explain to them, because they come right in with it, and you have to jump on it from the beginning, you have to let them know “Ok, you can feel comfortable in here when you speak to me and you're speaking to me in Ebonics, I just want you to know that before the year is over, you're going to know how to turn it on and turn it off. You're going to know how to change your Ebonics

statement into a Standard English statement... So they understand that there's a time to listen to it, there's a time to write it, and there's a time to use Standard English.

The way in which to use Ebonics in a lesson is where the practice of Mallama Maryam and Mallama Haines diverge. Mallama Maryam does not formally make her students aware of Ebonics: "If I get an assignment from them and they've made a mistake like, grammatical or what have you, I do go over with them how it needs to be written. That's the most I do just correct it." Mallama Haines favors a more explicit instruction, and conducts a formal lesson on the difference between Ebonics and Standard English in class:

Well we do it in the beginning of the school year, I always give them information, I give them background on Ebonics...I teach them that there are parts of language and language that's written by famous writers, poets, and short stories writers, a lot of our people, African American writers, that use Ebonics. We understand it when we listen to their writing because it's in Ebonics, because of the time in which they wrote the piece, it wouldn't sound the same if we changed it into Standard English at that time, and we enjoy it, we understand it better, because we listen to it in the dialect that they wrote it in.

One interesting thing that I found during the interview with Mallama Haines is that even though she was accepting of Ebonics and taught it explicitly in her classroom,

(using the actual word “Ebonics”) she expressed a bit of distrust towards the Oakland Ebonics Resolution:

In Oakland, I remember reading that they invested something like 3 million dollars or something to train teachers to learn Ebonics and I just thought about how that money could be used elsewhere. I think that their reasoning for doing that was to get funding. Because once you declare something a second language and it’s being taught, there’s funding that comes, the school would get money as a result of teaching this. Teaching teachers to understand Ebonics-- where would they go about doing that? I mean who do you bring in, an Ebonics specialist?

It is not surprising however, as there is a deep distrust of the educational system among American Blacks. Many Blacks bristle at the thought that their children are receiving what they perceive to be a lesser education than others are. Many prominent Blacks such as Jesse Jackson, Maya Angelou, and Bill Cosby denounced the Oakland Ebonics decision feeling that it was another way to give Black students a sub-standard education. (To be fair however, Jesse Jackson later retracted his earlier denouncements.)

As the aforementioned Dr. Woodson (1933) wrote,

Highly educated Negroes denounce persons who advocate for the Negro a sort of education different in some respects from that now given the white man. Negroes who have been so long inconvenienced and denied opportunities for development are naturally afraid of anything that sounds like discrimination. (Woodson xvii)

Regardless of the research behind it, the fact that a white dominated school board was proposing using Ebonics among Black children must have seemed extremely suspicious to a people who have historically been denied an adequate education by the dominant culture.

In the interviews, I asked Mallama Haines and Maryam more indepth questions about Ebonics as they call it, because I wanted to compare their response to the observations that I did in their classrooms. I thought the interviews with Mallama Haines and Mallam Maryam were interesting because they seemed to imply that they actively correct the students when speaking AAVE, when in reality I only saw Mallama Maryam correct a student once, during my observations and Mallama Haines not at all.

Mallama Maryam was very familiar with the students often discussing with them the current music artists, boyfriends and happenings within the school. She most often spoke Ebonics during these times; however, she did use Ebonics during instruction, though less frequently in conversation. One instance was when she was conducting a writing assignment with her morning reading students. (Here, and in subsequent examples the letters “MM” stand for Mallama Maryam, “MH” Mallama Haines, S(S) student[s] ):

MM: All ya’ll been sayin’ ya’ll don’t know when ya’ll are plagiarizing, (1.0)=

S: but what if--

MM: =if you say something about the Marxists or Communists I'm'a  
know you ain't write that

In the first utterance she omits the auxiliary verb HAVE

The one time that I did see her correct a student was during a reading lesson, in which the sixth grade alternative students were preparing to read a play. The class was a buzz because not all the roles had been filled, causing some students to switch the parts that they wanted to play. Too many people started to switch, causing the level of noise in the classroom to drown out a girl who had already begun to read the narration. The student tries to regain the attention of the class:

S: Is ya'll ready? Is ya'll ready?

MH: Say it again, are ya'll ready?

S: are ya'll ready?

Here Mallama Maryam corrects the students AAVE phrase, most likely because she categorizes a classroom lesson as a formal situation. One incident that I did notice in Maryam's class was a situation in which a student corrected a teacher. In the beginning of the lesson when the students were first receiving their parts, another teacher, Mallam Anderson entered the classroom to pick up another student. A couple of students who had finished writing their apologies (mentioned in the beginning of this chapter) began to hand it to him.

MA: What is these?

S1: our apologies

S2: (*simultaneously*) What **are** these, that's the proper English, what **are** these.

He however was not paying attention so there was no response from him.

One area that Mallama Maryam's interview and her classroom practice seem to coincide was the area of writing. During my time observing, the students had just completed learning about the Black Panther Party, and their assignment was to create a community service group of their own. I took a written excerpt from one group's project to demonstrate how drastically different the students' speech was from their writing.

H.T.C: Help The Community

Help us help the community, so we can make the world we live in a much better place than it is. My name is [A.B.] and my friend [I.B.] would like to ask people around the Philadelphia county to help by donating money to help us get the materials that we need to clean up the trash that people litter. We need the help of Philadelphia citizens so that we know that we aren't the only ones who feel a certain way about the community.

This group was not the only one with no incidence of AAVE in their writing. In all the group projects, except for minor grammatical or spelling errors, the writing was in perfect Standard English.



While observing in Mallama Haines's room I was able to see more verbal interaction than in Mallama Maryam's class, since hers was focused on reading. I was surprised when during my interview Mallama Haines said that she corrected the students language:

If a child comes to me and says something in Ebonics... I know automatically what they are saying, so in turn I will say I understand what you are saying, but I would like for you to just give it to me again in Standard English.

This contrasted what I saw, so without leading her on, later on in the interview I asked if she minded if students used Ebonics in verbal interactions and she said:

Well again, I make them feel comfortable about it, but I do correct them. I do correct it but I do it in love. I think as a whole it's gone over very well, I haven't had a child cry because 'Mallama Haines said I shouldn't say this.' They know automatically and all I have to say is you've given it to me in Ebonics give it to me in Standard English.

However, I never witnessed her correct a student even though there were many instances in which a child used Ebonics when interacting with her. For example when completing some math problems that were written on the board, a boy inquired about how to complete a problem:

S: Do you s'posed to pick a number?

MH: Uhh, Jonathan don't talk out of turn.

She does not tell the student to say "Are you supposed to pick a number" instead focusing on the fact that he did not raise his hand.

In another episode during the a test a student blamed her lack of a pencil on the student next to her:

MH: Where's your pencil Kiara?

S: (*somewhat impatiently*) I asked her can she hold it.

MH: Well it's too late now.

Here the student exhibits a common AAVE construction of reporting a yes-no question. This was first recorded by Labov (1972) in his study of Black inner-city youths. Instead of using the Standard English construction, "I asked her if she can hold it" an AAVE speaker preserves the original structure of the question. In this case the original question was "Can you hold it" asked of another female student. Instead of reporting it back to the teacher as "I asked her if she could hold it," the original structure is embedded within the sentence transforming it to "I asked her can she hold it." But Mallama Haines does not correct the student at all. In another incident during the same test, a boy is out of his seat walking around the class:

MH: What's wrong Michael? Why aren't you sitting at your desk?

S: (*angrily*) Man, she steal my pencil from under my desk!

MH: You NEED to SIT down.<sup>3</sup>

Here, the student was not corrected to use the past tense “stole” but instead she focused on his tone of voice and the fact that he was out of his seat during a test. In fact, I found Mallama Haines to be more concerned with students not raising their hands, talking out of turn or their tones of voice rather than whether they were speaking AAVE or not. Even though I only witnessed her using Ebonics once with the students during a fire drill-- “Ya’ll gotta hurry up”--she turns out to be more accepting of AAVE than she purports to be. What is interesting is that even though she does not use AAVE with the children, she implicitly places no political value during her classroom interactions on the usage of AAVE. In her classroom, also, the students writing show little incidence of AAVE. For example when a first arrived she had some students read aloud their essays about pianos they had written in response to a journal question given the day before. Except for one girl who wrote “There is more white keys...” rather than “there are more white keys..” there was no appearance of AAVE in their writing. (The girl was also not corrected for that grammatical error but Mallama Haines stated in her interview that she does not correct grammatical errors in students’ journals.)

But what about Mallama Maryam’s classroom in which she says she corrects students’ grammar? Unlike Piestrup’s study there seems to be no resistance through language displayed on the parts of the students. My speculation is that in an Afrocentric school, students’ culture is constantly reinforced and praised so that there is little need for

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<sup>3</sup> Although it may seem that Mallama Haines responses to the students are harsh, it is not the case. Not having a pencil or having a broken pencil (sometimes intentionally breaking it) was a common strategy employed by students to delay doing their work or to walk around the classroom of which Haines was keenly aware.

students to emphasize their identity solely through language. Instead, they are in an environment where their teachers, staff, curriculum, and school culture reflect their identity as well as their language so they do not see language as the most pressing symbol of their identity as opposed to if they were in a predominantly white school or had a white teacher or staff member correcting them.

### **Conclusion**

Instead of serving as a means of fostering hatred of whites, if Sankofa is any indication, an African centered education is focused instead on giving Black students a holistic education that treats the mind as well as the spirit. It seeks to validate Black culture after centuries of much invalidation, and to extol Black history after years of much denigration. Concerned more about the education of Black children than the control of Black children, Afrocentric educators, are equipped with the keen understanding of Black culture that allows them to go beyond the cultural deprivation model.

I began this study in the hopes of exploring the way that Afrocentric schools treat Black language patterns particularly AAVE through a case study of a single school, Sankofa Charter. The implications that I received from the study seemed interesting. Although AAVE was accepted to a certain extent, the interviewees all expressed and recognized that children needed to learn Standard English. The way this goal was carried out diverged among the teachers, with Mallama Maryam not openly teaching a lesson on Ebonics instead choosing to correct students in contrast with Mallama Haines who does a lesson at the beginning of the year, and says she corrects students but does not. In either case the students do seem to understand when to use AAVE and when not to, as

evidenced by their writing. Additionally, language does not seem to be a contested area of identity for students at Sankofa. What this implies for further study is that Afrocentric schools need to be studied less from a curriculum standpoint and more for how they help shape Black identity among their students. Since language is connected to identity it would be more interesting to explore if AAVE loses its politicization in other Afrocentric schools. What would be more interesting is to see if non-AAVE students in Afrocentric schools are accused of “acting white” as they are in traditional schools. Additionally, it would be interesting to interview students themselves and see how aware they are of their language-switching and if they know when to use it.

In terms of achievement for Black students what this implies is that some Black students are keenly aware of the difference between AAVE and Standard English and learn the appropriate times and situations in which to use it. Thus, their writing seems relatively unaffected by its usage. My study is limited however as it does not have any implication for the effects, if any, that allowing AAVE to be used has on reading comprehension.

### **Symbols used in conversations:**

= = : continuation of an utterance

(1.0): one second pause

**bold:** word spoken was emphasized

*italics:* information on how a phrase was spoken

CAPS: word spoken was emphasized and louder

(S1), (S2): first student, second student in conversation

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

### Interview Questions

Tell me a bit about your background and how you came to teach at Sankofa.

How did Sankofa Charter School get founded?

What are the goals of Sankofa?

Do you feel these goals are being accomplished?

Why did you choose to teach at Sankofa?

What do you feel Sankofa (or Afrocentric schools) can give African American children that traditional schools can't?

What is your definition of Afrocentricity?

What would you say to the critics of Afrocentrism? (teaching myth as reality)

Are you familiar with the Oakland Ebonics decision? (if not explain)

What do you think about the decision? Do you agree with it?

Do you think Ebonics has a place within a school or a classroom?

Do you allow the children to use Ebonics in the classroom?

Do you make the children aware that there is a difference between Ebonics and Standard English?

## **Appendix B: Interviews**

Dr. Darlene Dalton Interview

### **How did Sankofa Charter School get founded?**

It was an idea that was born back in 1986. I have 5 sisters and a brother and one of my sisters the year my mother died which was in 1985 had an idea that we should as a family give back to the community. So when my mother passed in '85, in 86 we started a community day camp program, and at the day camp program we spent a lot of time teaching the children who they were and whose they were, we spent a lot of time teaching them Ma'at, we talked about values and principles, children were not allowed to call each other names, we talked about manners respect social graces, African-centeredness like I said who they are and then we had to teach them ways of acting that I thought would be more appropriate other than what they often brought to the table. So we started out like that teaching children those things and then a larger part of the goal was to make sure they didn't get cobwebs on their brain over the summer in reference to the academics because school's over in June they don't come back until September and they forget stuff



because they spend a lot of time doing playing and things that are not, at least leaning towards things that are academics, cognitive types of things. So I had been doing that from 1986 really until in 1998 I helped Christine Wiggins who was the founder of Imhotep. I'm considering to be a founding scholar, I helped write proposal but it was a high school level. And I found out after serving at the vice principal that year that highschool students, while I love them, are not my niche, it was very difficult for me to deal with the issues that children have at that age level. So it occurred to me that I could take all of those things I had been doing for all of those years in daycamp with the notions that I had about how we could educate our own children in an African centered environment, providing needs for them that reference their own learning style the way that we have our cultures different from other people's culture, how can we meet there needs to take them to the next level in academics so that they can be the best that they can be, and that year after I helped write that proposal for Imhotep, I took a lot of those same concepts, I added some of my own, but I had been doing all of those years at summer program and created Sankofa. So here we are, this is our fifth year, we've gotten renewed for another 5 years, so we're doing good. The children are getting better, I think more used to us, because I think a lot of the children thought initially that there was really something wrong with me and the teachers and the rest as to what it is we want or do not want from them, so that I may give you a detention for sucking your teeth and rolling your eyes because that means disrespect, and respect for us is way high on the totem pole of things to be and do. You need to respect, you need to be respectful and people need to respect you back. It's reciprocal and reciprocity is one of their principles of Ma'at which we teach, Nguzo Saba and the Ma'at principles. We teach those we try to incorporate it into the curriculum. So all of those things that are really important for me to feel like our children who are going to grow up and be the adults and they're going to do things whether it's correct, incorrect or whatever. We have to teach them correctly for them to act correctly.

### **Could you tell me a little more about the Principles of Ma'at?**

Ok there are, well some people call them the 42 affirmations, and some people depending on how [unintelligible] they are in the African way of doing meditations in the mornings before you get out among people the way you spend your time, your spiritual quiet time, they recite those 42 affirmations and I call it the ten commandments plus, it's all of the ten commandments plus other things like I will not pollute water, I will not take food from children, I will not do a lot of things that in addition to committing adultery, lying, stealing, killing, all of those things that are obviously in there. Those 42 affirmations were created by ancient Egyptians and it had to do with how one lives in a community. How do you treat each other, how do you act how do you have peace harmony order and balance, which are part of those Ma'at principles. There are 42, we've kind of condensed it to about seven that we actually teach, like reciprocity, balance order, righteousness... So it's a way of living is what it amounts too, it's a way of living a way of thinking about living with other people so you have a level of peace. Our motto is "Strive for Peace", because our ancestors felt like peace was a place you wanted to attain.

Happiness is fleeting, happiness depends on something but peace is a state of being that you can have and it has nothing to do with happiness. You can have trouble in your life but you can still have peace. So we strive for peace and we talk a lot about how we can handle conflict without violence, how can we handle conflict without hitting, how can we handle conflict without yelling at each other, there are other ways to handle that so we spend time teaching those kinds of values and principles to the children.

**What do you think African centered schools can do for Black children that traditional schools cannot?**

Well, one they can get to learn some correct history and learn some cultural things that nobody else is going to bother to teach them. We can teach them what beauty is as opposed to what somebody else's beauty is. In America we have been inculcated to think that beauty is white, blond haired and blue eyed and skinny to boot. But African-Americans typically aren't skinny. We aren't made that way, generally speaking, and so we have begun to feel like if our lips are too big or our skin is too dark or our hair is too nappy when all the time, beauty began with African people, so we have to teach the children that so that they begin to develop a better self-concept and a better self esteem of who they are, what they look like, however God allowed you to be is good. And so we teach those things. The dominant culture will obviously never teach that to our children because, one, they don't believe it. They have reported out there what they have considered what beauty is and it's important for our children to learn that they are beautiful however God allowed you to be is good, and you have beauty within what you do, beauty is how you act not necessarily how your face looks, because you can have a car accident and lose that but that does not mean you are not beautiful, based on the kind of person that you are and how you treat others. So it's real important to teach children those kinds of things and then in our school what we try to do is appeal to children's learning styles which obviously is not something that the dominant culture does because they don't understand our culture they aren't trying to understand our culture, and they operate out of a deficit model to look at us in our culture and in our communities so if you start with a deficit model obviously you can't come out good, because you're starting with a de-fi-cit, so we start with a more positive model that you are good, that you are pretty, that you are smart and we start there and we move them up to the next level. If you can lead your child and help them understand who they are then they can feel pretty good about that and also. But you have to teach culture along with that because most of our children have a pretty decent self esteem but they have almost no culture esteem. Which means that we are kind of outside the dominant culture so we're not a part of what's considered to be good so what does that make you, bad? So we have to teach that our culture is good, this is what we do in our culture. So if we talk slang and we talk whatever these young people talk alright, I'll deal with that because we have to have something that's ours, we have to learn how to create our own thing in this country, but at the same time you better know how to speak the King's English if you want a job and get a good education and be seen as an intelligent person, and be at least bidialectal if not tri-dialectal. So these are the kinds of things the have to take time and teach our children here, so they can leave here and be able to survive and be productive in a society that doesn't care a lot about them, a society that's building bigger and better prisons for them

as we go along, particularly our males and one of our goals would be obviously to keep as many of them out of that system as we can.

Mallama Haines Interview

**Tell me a bit about yourself and how you came to teach at Sankofa**

I've always wanted to be teacher and pretty much always wanted to teach in a school with mainly our [African-American] children. I always felt a calling to teach African American children, I just felt that African American children are always given a bad deal from birth. And I say that mainly because a lot of our children come into schools not reading, not being accustomed to having books and magazines in their homes so their coming in with a deficit so I felt that I could do some good by coming in and motivating them and teaching them that reading was very important because I believe that if you read well you'll write well. And if you write well you'll get through life in an easier way.

I attended Chestnut Hill college which was an all women's college at the time now it's co-ed and at the time I was there everybody was motivated to teach in the suburban area, in the county as they call it. Montgomery County which separates itself from Philadelphia county and it's mostly African American children who are taught in Philadelphia county as opposed to Montgomery county. And even though I live in Montgomery County my goal was to teach in Philadelphia so during my Senior year at Chestnut Hill college we were given options to do our student teaching in the county, Montgomery county but I chose to do my teaching in Philadelphia and I think I may have been one of the only students who chose to teach in Philadelphia. And when I taught I taught at the Henry School and Mount Airy, and I remember once being there my eyes were opened because there were children in the class who were autistic, there were many IEP's there and at one point when I would do my teaching I would have to wear headphones and I would have to speak in a way that a child who had a small percentage of sight, hearing was impaired, and I would have to speak directly to that student. So I saw during my student teaching that my work was cut out for me. But when I looked around the classroom and could see that they were basically all our children, all African American, I felt like ok I'm on the right track. So after graduating it was now time to work and all the theory all the book learning was fine, I did exceptionally well with my studies, I carried a 3.9 to a 4.0 the entire time I was there, so now I'm ready for a job. A lot of my friends teach in the Philadelphia Public Schools but charter schools have always been an interest to me, even in school when we studied them. I said 'You know, that sounds pretty good' because it means that the charter school has the opportunity to focus on one theme, and I said 'That's me.' I'd like to do that. I found a list of charter schools in Philadelphia and I when I saw Sankofa, right away the name alone got my attention and when I read further I saw they were African centered.

Being African-centered means to me at that point at time, not being here at Sankofa, and knowing and hearing all that I've learned but at that point when I saw African centered education I knew that it meant that they would take the children back where they come from and then bring them up to where they should be, which means, and I believe in it the Sankofa symbol which means you must know where you come from in order to go into your future. A lot of people are stuck because they don't know where they came from. They don't know their history, and I had a real hunger for that. So coming here at Sankofa I was interviewed by Dr. Dalton and before I had two interviews but after sitting down with Dr. Dalton I never made it to the second interview. I brought

all the things that I had learned, I brought my portfolio, art projects that I had done in student teachings and she was quite impressed but when she started sharing with me different things that they were doing here at Sankofa and that African-centeredness meant that children were robbed of their history through the years and that it would be our job here to do research about where we come from our ancestors, how we should be proud of who we are and to give the children that back in the academics, and my first thought was, ‘How do you do that?’ She shared that you have to do your research you have to read books about our ancestors and learn more about how we put emphasis on Africa and African culture and blend it in with the Civil Rights movement. The Civil Rights movement was the part of me that was in place but I didn’t know the African part. I didn’t feel that I needed to go back that far, but that after being here at Sankofa I realize I do, because it connects and it makes us one.

### **What do you feel Sankofa can give Black children that traditional schools cannot?**

Well I honestly believe that Sankofa and I cannot speak for other African centered schools, but I would hope that...well I first have to tell you that I believe that an African centered Education is a multicultural education with an emphasis on Africa and African American culture. I believe that the holistic approach integrates with academic growth cultural enrichment and the development of personal responsibility, respect for the community which is a part of our mission, family, teachers and fellow students. So by doing that and creating this holistic approach and integrating it with the academics I find that when we teach about almost any subject we are taught here as teachers to go back and find something that is related to the African continent and bring it in. Sometimes if it only means using Nguzo Saba which teaches us Unity or purpose what’s your purpose in it why should we have faith in it, we go back and we use it and we connect it in some way. When talking about a scientist for example talking about a particular scientist and the scientist happens to be non-African American it’s our job as educators to go and do our research and find an African American scientist that we can go and give the children a comparison to. So we do that in our curriculum. I believe that in America today and years past it’s a country made up of many contributing cultural groups yet to date African history and culture is distorted, it’s oppressed, it’s eliminated and it’s marginalized within the educational process. I remember for myself for example, it wasn’t until tenth grade that I truly understood why there was a civil war, why the fight took place, why the war was so vicious, why so many died and gave their lives, it was tenth grade. And I couldn’t understand why that was kept from me for so long. Even in tenth grade I remember discovering then that there were Black cowboys. I never knew that, never because these books were kept from us. Growing up, I grew up in South Carolina, my family is there and I came up to attend college, the civil war hidden in a way from us African American students at that time. Because I guess they felt it would cause unrest. My family never talked about because I guess they thought ‘We have to live here, we have to live with the White Americans, Southern Americans and we don’t want any trouble’. So it wasn’t until like tenth grade and then again in college that I truly understood that that war took place because there were people in this country who felt that they could own another human being. And they considered us less than human, so they felt that to buy another human being was no big deal. IN this school we teach these children, self worth, self esteem. We

sing a pledge that is all about us, we sing the Black National Anthem every morning. I have children in my classroom who come from other public schools and they sometimes ask ‘When are we going to say the Pledge of Allegiance’?, and I tell my students that you’re very fortunate to be able sing a song that’s about us, our ancestors, and you should feel proud about that. So we do a lot of that here at the school.

At Sankofa we also believe that all children need to know the relationship between African civilization and their lives today. So a lot of times in a lot of cases we’ll always reach back to Africa. I taught one time in the county in a private school, and there were only two Black teachers in the entire school, and there were about only 2% African American in the school and I’ll never forget one day I was teaching about families, I did a unit on families, I also extended it to teach about housing and about how in the inner city you’ll find single homes, you’ll find twin houses and you’ll find row houses, with many houses connected. And in this classroom the children wanted to know what was a row house, because most of these children came from single family dwellings. They thought at one point that the rowhouses were the boathouses on Lincoln Drive. Boathouse Row was what they thought I was referring to, being the houses are connected. So I felt that I brought a lot to them about our culture, African American culture but it was something that they took and didn’t really need. There if I wore my hair a certain way it would be a questioned, they wanted to touch it, they wanted to see how I got it done. The teachers all would ask me questions. Here at Sankofa, I fit. There are other people who look just like me there are other people who wear their hair like I do, they’re children in the classroom who wear their hair like me, there are children in the classroom who aspire to wear their hair like me. Locks is something that is frowned upon, it’s not something that they think “Well if I wear my hair in locs, I won’t be able to get a job.” There’s a different environment here at Sankofa and I knew right away in the interview with Dr. Dalton that I fit, that I needed to be here.

We also believe here at Sankofa that students need to know their history and culture to be centered, and find centeredness and groundness, in one’s own historical and cultural experience. And I believe, because I’ve done studies and I’ve done workshops on multicultural education, and I was always aware of the fact that when you talk about multicultural education most of the different cultures that we’re speaking of they’re aware of who they are and where they come from. Our culture is the one where there’s still question marks. They’re still children to day who will say, African American children who will say, “I’m not from Africa”. I always felt growing up that we needed to connect. If you speak to a European American they will say, I’m from Europe, someone from Scotland will say I’m from Scotland. Everybody had a connection but us. And being here at Sankofa helps me to connect. I automatically know that the motherland, my motherland is Africa. So there’s a connection, and there’s a groundedness and a oneness. As an educator here at Sankofa, especially to me the goal at Sankofa is to contribute to filling in the missing content of the curriculum so that it is more centered around us as a people, African history past and present. That’s important to me because, again I could read about things in Social Studies and Science and all these textbooks, but we need to be able to have the children identify that we don’t always have to be either the object or the subject, we should be the subject. And there are books that will depict us as the subject and not always the object of the subject. So that’s important to me, to make sure the curriculum reflects that. And past and present is important. As you walk around our

school you'll see African history, you'll see information about Dr. King, about Rosa Parks about all the African Americans who contributed to building this country. And there are times when I'll use a teachable moment where if a child is mistreating another child or feels that they can not hold hands with another child I will use that as a teachable moment and point out somebody from the timeline, especially Rosa Parks. And I will say that the degrading thing about Rosa Parks is us as a people in Alabama at the time during the bus boycott, was the fact that we spent the same money to ride the bus as everybody else but we were degraded because we had to get up on the bus in front, drop our money in, step down walk around to the back of the bus and enter through the back. It was like there was no stopping to these people in degrading us. Here at Sankofa we try to teach the children to respect one another, respect your family, respect your community. When we go out in the community I do not expect to see anybody throw trash down. I teach them that on their block it's your responsibility as a family as a village to make sure that you keep it clean. Our classroom, I try to do the same thing, at the end of the day, even though we have two custodians that come in and clean I teach my children that we are to pick up everything at the end of the day. Make their job easier because this is where we live most of the day. This is our home away from home. Therefore giving our students a more balanced view of self and self identity.

**How you would you respond to the critics of African-centered education who say things like it's only to build self esteem or it's an excuse to teach myth as fact?**

First I would have to say who are these critics that are saying this, do they look like me? The children that they are teaching, do they look like them or do they look like me. To teach self esteem alone I don't think it's a bad thing. If you have self esteem about yourself if you know who you are—I often tell the children in here when someone teases you about the way you look, how you speak, if you know who you are and where you come from then that alone is strength within. I believe that it's not a myth. That African centered education is very much needed and there are a lot of school today where there are white teachers who are teaching a classroom of African American students—African American students need a role model. They need to see that there's an African American teacher who may have been where I am, who may have lived where I lived but she or he got out, and by got out I mean they got the education, they're now teaching us that it's possible that we can get the degree or many degrees. That' it's not impossible. I hesitate to see, and I know there are cases where there are teachers who are of non African American descent and they do teach positiveness to the students. This past summer in my graduate class, I met a couple of teachers who teach in the county and as a result of presenting a whole lesson on multiculturalism including African history, they were quite impressed and they wanted to know if I would be able to come in and share with their class, because they felt that there was a part of the African centered history that they could not bring to the class. They could do the book learning but there's a part of it that's missing because they don't relate in that way. So I think that it's very much needed, I think our children need to know that we played a very important part in history, we helped to build this country. And that we're needed, and we are there and we make excellent contributions to this country. On my wall I try to include the African American inventors and a lot of times my children will look at the wall and say, "We invented

that”? And that’s because that information has been kept from us for so long, that now when we present it it’s almost like it is a myth. They say, “Are you making that up?”, and I say “No, I am not making that up”. We have books now that will prove that we invented things, that we wrote things, that we led people to different things. It’s just a lot of information and it’s time for the reverse and I think that in an African centered school we have the opportunity to do it. We can show our children a different side of the coin.

**Are you familiar with Ebonics and--?**

*(She interrupts)* Yes, I am and I remember doing studies, some study on Ebonics and I remember when it came out I was in a graduate class then and it was a big discussion in the class about it, should it be taught should it be accepted as a second language. And I remember my answer then, and it’s funny because there weren’t that many African American teachers in that class so of course the questions that are related to us as a people, African American people would fall on the person in the classroom who’s African American, that would be me. But I’m saying now and I said it then that I believe that Ebonics, it is a language, it is a learned language, it was spoken by a lot of our ancestors, it’s a language that’s used in the homes of many of our people. But when I was in class and it was presented to me, “Should it be used, should it be recognized as a language?” I think it should be recognized as a language to this point, using it as a bridge to get to Standard English. If a child comes to me and says something in Ebonics, I know, because, I know automatically what they are saying, so in turn I will say I understand what you are saying, but I would like for you to just give it to me again in Standard English. That teaches the child that ‘Ok this is a language that I know, that I use, when I go home I use it, I use it with Grandma, I use it with my aunts and my uncles and my cousins, but when I’m in the classroom I have to be able to turn it off and on. I have to know when to use it and when not to use it. So I think that we’ve reached that point. In Oakland I remember reading that they invested something like 3 million dollars or something to train teachers to learn Ebonics and I just thought about how that money could be used elsewhere. I think that they’re reasoning for doing that was to get funding. Because once you declare something a second language and it’s being taught, there’s funding that comes, the school would get money as a result of teaching this. Teaching teachers to understand Ebonics, where would they go about doing that? I mean who do you bring in Ebonics specialist? I don’t understand, I didn’t understand then at the time, but it would be interesting to go back and find out who did they bring in to teach it, and I’m sure it was done, I think from my study, it was done. But then when you think about it, I do want our children to be understood. If our children are, if they’re at a small percentage in a school where it’s predominantly white or non English speakers then when they use Ebonics I do want our children to be understood. I don’t want them to be embarrassed, I don’t want them to develop low self esteem because they feel like, “Well I cannot respond to that question because I don’t know how to do it.” I think that it should be patience on the teacher’s side where the teacher would at least bring the child to the point where ok I understand where you saying you know, share it again, let’s try to work out, let’s try to put it in words, proper English, what you’re trying to say. I think it should be handled that way with the teacher, I don’t think that a child’s self esteem should ever be torn down because of Ebonics. I think it should be accepted as a bridge to get them where they need to be in Standard English.



**I see that you're talking about this idea of a bridge, so do you make your students aware explicitly of the difference between Standard English and Ebonics and if so how do you do that?**

Well we do it in the beginning of the school year, I always give them information, I give them background on Ebonics. I explain to them, because they come right in with it, and you have to jump on it from the beginning, you have to let them know "Ok, you can feel comfortable in here when you speak to me and you're speaking to me in Ebonics, I just want you to know that before the year is over, you're going to know how to turn it on and turn it off. You're going to know how to change your Ebonics statement into a Standard English statement. So I make them feel at ease about it, that's the number one thing I do. Sometimes we even joke about it a little bit and it's ok because they understand. But the biggest thing about it I teach them that there are parts of language and language that's written by famous writers, poets, and short stories writers, a lot of our people, African American writers, that use Ebonics. We understand it when we listen to their writing because it's in Ebonics, because of the time in which they wrote the piece, it wouldn't sound the same if we changed it into Standard English at that time, and we enjoy it, we understand it better, because we listen to it in the dialect that they wrote it in. So they understand that there's a time to listen to it, there's a time to write it, and there's a time to use Standard English. I think they know the separation.

**So do you have any set times for when they can use it and when they can't?**

Well if they're bringing in poetry, if they're bringing in—there's a certain time of the year around thanksgiving when I'll have them bring in something from a family member. If they brought in a poem that was written by Grandma, Great-Grandma and it's written in an Ebonics format, I'm going to allow them to read it, because it was written by someone [else], it was written by them and even if it was, I would still have them read it and then we'd try to interpret it as a class, we'd use it as a teachable moment. And I have to add, that journal writing in my classroom, I don't get involved in the journals, I feel the journals are a personal thing. There are times that I might suggest a topic and I might ask them to give me some feed back but on a whole their journal is their personal diary, so they write in it in the format that they choose to write in it and if they share it and it is Ebonics I'm not going to touch it because it's their original piece. So those are about the only times.

**What about verbal interactions, do you mind?**

Well again, I make them feel comfortable about it, but I do correct them. I do correct it but I do it in love. I think as a whole it's gone over very well, I haven't had a child cry because 'Mallama Haines said I shouldn't say this.' They know automatically and all I have to say is you've given it to me in Ebonics give it to me in Standard English. And because I'm patient with them they give it to me and straighten it out. They clean it up.

**Are there any other things that you wanted to add?**

Not really, I'm just happy to see that you're investigating and exploring Ebonics because I think that some people are afraid of it. Some people have looked at it as "Ok, that's Black English." But that's labeling a whole group of people, and it's not fair to do that, and they are times when we use slang. Children in here they might use a slang word, but I know what they mean, it's a neighborhood thing, it's a community thing, I know what they mean, but if it came to the point, I just want them to get to the point where if they had to substitute that slang word for another word in Standard English, they could do it, and I'm fine with it. If you're with your friends and your family, do it. Spanish speaking children I'm sure once they reach home the Spanish starts to go and any other culture they do it, because you can feel at home you can let your hair down, but this country expects us to teach the children Standard English since it's expected in the job market, it's expected in higher learning, it's our responsibility to teach them and give them a balance of the two and know when to use it and when not to use it

Mallama Maryam Interview

**Could you tell me a little about your background and how you got started?**

I went to Temple University, I wasn't an Education major I was a Communications major, and also I didn't minor in African American studies but I took so many courses that I really should have, I just didn't. And I ended up here because I wanted to teach, and my background really helped me teaching the children bringing an African centered perspective to the class. We've already done assignments such as the one that you see around the room where they create a self help organization for the community, we read about Angela Davis, the Black Panther Party and another gentleman Matthew something... I forget his last name, but he's a South African writer. I've had them read a lot of excerpts and my main approach is to have them do responses, I have them do those responses in class, I try to find stories from the literature book that are African centered, it's a challenge but I try to. So I really do try to bring that to the class.

**What does African-centered mean to you? Is it a way of life? Is it just curriculum?**

I think it's a combination of both, I definitely think it's not something that you can be at school and then go home. In order to I guess to be adequate in your field you really have to have those beliefs, outside of just the school setting, academic setting that's what you have to do. So I think it's definitely a way of life.

**What do you feel Sankofa or Afrocentric schools can give African-American children that traditional schools cannot?**

I think create knowledge of self, love for self. I always tell my children that when I was younger I had to the Pledge of Allegiance but they get to do Harambe in the morning. And from the beginning you really need to instill in African children that they are African and you need to have that be a part of their life so that they internalize that instead of internalizing the constitution not that they don't need to know that but on a daily basis I don't think they need to be saying the pledge, I think they need something that affirms their Africanness because so many of us are disconnected from it, so I think that that's more important.

**What would you say to the critics of Afrocentrism? I've read a lot about how the critics say that it's an excuse to teach myth as fact or just to create self esteem. What do you think about that?**

I think critics of an African centered curriculum or an African centered lifestyle have been brainwashed by Western ideologies. I really don't agree with, and I've heard the criticisms of 'Oh you're doing the same thing when you teach African American or African children only African centered subject matter and not multicultural subject matter, you're doing the same thing that a Western education has done and I disagree with that especially in this world, African children need to be reminded on a daily basis that they are African children and even if we are Africans in America or Africans in

South America, anywhere in the world, we need to be continuously reminded of it and I just think that any people need to have a strong understanding of themselves and they're history and it's insulting that people would decide that a lot of the African centered teaching are myths because a lot of Western civilization and Western teaching are in fact built on African quote-unquote myths and other things that people would say. I completely disagree. I think it's just people criticizing us for being who we are and who are not all for us just reaffirming our African-ness on a regular basis.

**Are you familiar with Ebonics?**

Mm-hmm.

**Ok. Do you think that Ebonics has a place within a school or a classroom and why or why not.**

I'm familiar with Ebonics and I'm no expert, and I don't think, I think that it's important that the teacher understands Ebonics which would mean a black teacher understanding Black English because she is a Black person but I'm not going to allow to my children to turn in a paper to me that's written in Ebonics. They need to learn Standard English to survive because everything is based on Standard English. You know I often tell the children no one is saying you can't speak in Ebonics but there is a difference between the way you write and the way you talk, I continuously tell them that. I speak to my mother and my girlfriends one way and I speak a completely different way when I go into a professional setting. I'm not trying to downplay Ebonics, but I definitely feel like there's a time and place for everything.

**Have you ever done a class on it? How do you make the students aware of it?**

No I haven't done a class on [the difference between] Standard English but I have done, especially for the girls in my morning reading and even for my literature students, like if I get a test from them or if I get an assignment from them and they've made a mistake like grammatical or what have you, I do go over with them how it needs to be written. That's the most I do just correct it. You know I don't say, what's Ebonics and what's not. It's not a wrong or a right, but I do emphasize that there is a right time for everything. If someone speaks Ebonics I would correct them but I wouldn't, I wouldn't scold them. I would just say this is not the setting where you would say, "I ain't going to the store." When you're home with your friends you can say that but now you have to say "I am not going to the store".