Linguistic justice: Addressing linguistic variation of black children in teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper underscores how the multidimensionality of racism, such as cultural, systemic, and interpersonal biases, influences the early language development and support of African American English (AAE) speakers, as well as calling attention to the linguistic capital of AAE that is often not given prestige in contrast to General American English (GAE). Using a case study of early educators in a Black-majority preschool program, this paper sheds light on early educators' knowledge, attitudes, professional preparation and needs regarding meeting the educational needs of AAE speakers; caution is warranted due to the small sample size and single source. Nevertheless, the findings from this case study are examined through an anti-racist and anti-linguicism lens, calling for a transformative linguistic approach, translanguaging, that recognizes the injustice of requiring African American children to demonstrate linguistic flexibility by switching codes. This requires their cognitive resources to be allocated to learning the language of the classroom along with other academic and social skills without allowing them access to their full linguistic repertoires. In addition to more research regarding educators' knowledge, attitudes, and professional preparation regarding AAE, this paper calls for transformative training and ideology shifting, coupled with structural changes, to support early educators to accept the use of dialects used by children by recognizing that each language and language variety is utilized in different spaces for specific functions.

1. Linguistic justice: addressing linguistic variation of young black children in teaching and learning

> Stigmatized as it is, Black English is as sophisticated and diversified as any other linguistic variety; it's a testament to the achievements of the Black people. ~ Dr. Walter Edwards

Children enter school using the language of their homes and communities. Many children in the United States speak languages other than English, whereas others may use linguistic variations of American English that reflect regional, cultural, and ethnic influences (Roberts, 2013; Wolfram et al., 1999). African American English (AAE) is a variation of general American English (GAE) spoken by many African American children in the United States (Edwards et al., 2014; Washington & Craig, 2002). Some scholars estimate that nearly 80% of African Americans in the U.S. have spoken AAE at some point in their lives (Joiner, 1981). AAE differs from GAE in every language domain: phonology,

morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics (Diehm & Hendricks, 2021; Washington & Seidenberg, 2021). Among these domains, the morphology, syntax, and phonology of AAE are most well-documented (Green, 2004; Wolfram, 2019).

Similar to bilingual or multilingual children who are heritage language speakers, children who use AAE at home or in their community must learn to switch to GAE in educational settings, as GAE is the language of education and text (Washington & Seidenberg, 2021). Different from bilingualism, which is legally supported and integrated into educational contexts across states and nationally, speakers of language varieties such as AAE do not receive comparable support in education settings. Indeed, educators, who are more proximal to children's language and learning, along with the education system, often are complicit in the lack of support for AAE in educational contexts due to linguicism that devalues Black culture, history, and language, viewing it as deficient rather than recognizing its importance for supporting Black children's learning and development (Newkirk-Turner et al, 2013). This

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paper draws on a case study conducted with early childhood educators and staff in a program serving children, birth to age five, living in poor households about their knowledge, beliefs, practices, and professional preparation and needs related to AAE as part of a professional development series. We use these data to illustrate the synergistic impact of anti-Black racism and linguicism in Black children's ecology while acknowledging the strengths of AAE speakers' bidialectalism (Iruka et al., 2022). Most importantly, advancing linguistic justice for AAE speakers can be achieved in part by eliminating the tendency on the part of teaching professionals to suppress and change the language used by African American children; instead, we argue that they should extend and support dialect use (Lee-James & Washington, 2018).

2. Deficit view of African American English

A vast majority of research focused on Black children's (and their families and communities) language has primarily been deficit-based, despite there being a large body of research showcasing the benefits of multilingualism and multidialectalism (Antoniou & Spanoudis, 2020; Antoniou et al., 2016; Baumgart & Billick, 2017; Kempert et al., 2011; Makalela, 2015; Vender et al., 2021). While several scholars in the U.S. have identified the benefits and richness of bi/multidialectalism for learning (e.g. Curenton & Justice, 2004; Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Paris, 2009), much of this research has been conducted with either older children or outside of the United States in countries such as Cyprus and Greece (Antoniou et al, 2016), Scotland (Ross & Melinger, 2017), Germany (Poarch & Vanhove, 2019) and South Africa (Makelela, 2015), and on languages that do not include American English. Whereas in the United States, literature on the benefits of language variation has mainly focused on the impact of bilingualism and multilingualism on education and executive function. In particular, there is a fairly large and growing body of literature focused on the "bilingual advantage," such as strong thinking skills, using logic, focusing, remembering, and making decisions, and learning other languages (Bialystok, 2003; Kaushanskaya & Marian, 2009).

The dearth of literature in the U.S. focused on the potential benefits of speaking a dialect reflects a general lack of attention to the resilience, resistance, and cultural wealth that Black children have, especially in dealing with their racialized experiences in the U.S. Linguistically, literature focused on AAE in educational contexts has focused on methods to change children's cultural-linguistic variations (Edwards & Rosin, 2016; Johnson et al., 2017; Wheeler, 2006), to the exclusion of approaches addressing the potential benefits of supporting bi/multidialectalism for teaching and learning, even though several paradigms have been provided by linguistic scholars about approaches for the maintenance and development of AAE in the education of African American children (e.g., Lee-James & Washington, 2018; Mordaunt, 2011; Washington et al., 2023).

Dialects are derived from a major language, spoken by specific groups and communities in specific regions, and are present in every country worldwide. AAE is a major dialect of American English. Black children who are speakers of AAE typically are bidialectal speakers of at least two language varieties (e.g., AAE and GAE). In addition, many Black children are multidialectal speakers, as they may also speak Southern English, Gullah, or other regional and cultural varieties of American English in addition to AAE and GAE. Despite early deficit narratives surrounding the language and cognitive abilities of Black children (Bereiter & Englemann, 1966; Deutsch, 1965) that characterized AAE as a simplified and deficient version of GAE, decades of research since then have demonstrated the systematic and rule-governed nature of AAE. AAE has its own linguistic structure, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as well-developed rules that govern its use in varied communicative contexts (Green, 2002; Hyter et al., 2015, 2018; Labov, 1966; Wolfram, 2007). Despite this critical work documenting the richness of AAE, the use of AAE in schools continues to be discouraged. We argue here that there is a need for developmental science and educational research to delve deeper into Black children's cultural wealth to better support their learning by leveraging their strengths and assets: their linguistic capital (i.e., skills to communicate, verbally and non-verbally, in different languages and styles attained through various experiences) is one of those assets (Yosso, 2005). To effectively support the healthy development of Black children, inclusive of their language skills, scholars, educators, and practitioners alike must examine the anti-Black racism that pervades the learning and language-supporting environment of children, starting in the early years, including the urgent need to dismantle systems of oppression to ensure linguistic justice.

3. Theoretical framework: role of racism, linguicism, and cultural wealth in AAE

Advancing Black children's language development and, subsequently, school and life success requires the integration of multiple theories that recognize the interplay between the multidimensionality of racism and other systems of oppression and stratification and child and family cultural assets. As noted by Bailey et al. (2021), "There is no 'official' definition of structural racism — or of the closely related concepts of systemic and institutional racism [but] all definitions make clear that racism is not simply the result of private prejudices held by individuals, but is also produced and reproduced by laws, rules, and practices, sanctioned and even implemented by various levels of government, and embedded in the economic system as well as in cultural and societal norms" (p. 768). Thus, racism is multidimensional, from the ideology of white supremacy and "the water we swim in," which "refers to a global perspective that reflects beliefs in the supremacy of one group over another and is entrenched in people's ideological views (e.g., "belief that the White race has been responsible for most of the good things in human history: the great art, great science, and great thinking, and that Whites are inherently superior" [Schwartz, 2017, p. 293], "everyday behaviors, language, symbols, and media" [Iruka et al., 2022, p. 112]). This ideology becomes the basis for *structural* racism that privileges one group's norms, styles, and culture over another through institutional policies and practices, instantiating a narrative or implicit bias about the superiority and humanity of one group over others that undermines experiences and opportunities, causing the disparities in education, wealth, and health outcomes.

On the one hand, the deficit beliefs surrounding AAE are part of a culture that views Whiteness and white norms, language, and expression as standard and superior to others, effectively establishing these "standards" as normative (Akintunde, 1999; Christian et al., 2019). This cultural ideology biases perceptions of AAE, creating structural and interpersonal processes that devalue and limit the opportunities for those who speak this rich dialectal form, which we call *linguistic racism* or *linguicism*. Linguistic racism refers to "the ideologies and practices that are utilized to conform, normalize, and reformulate an unequal and uneven linguistic power between language users" (De Costa, 2020, p. 2). Thus, linguistic racism creates hierarchy and privilege based on one's form of language, such that those who speak GAE compared to dialectal speakers, such as AAE speakers, are given more advantages and power (Lippi-Green, 2012).

In educational settings, linguistic racism is institutionalized in our classrooms and, most notably, in our assessments. There is a long history of concern about AAE and standardized test performances of African American children (Hendricks & Diehm, 2020; Seymour, 2004). The response to these concerns has been to suppress the use of AAE and attempt to change the linguistic patterns of African American children who speak AAE to match the language of school text and testing (Baker-Bell, 2020), arguably a form of both linguistic and structural racism. Text and assessments are written and delivered in GAE, establishing it as the norm that African American children must acquire to succeed in school. Unlike what is usually done for bilingual speakers, texts and assessments do not include AAE linguistic patterns to support teaching and learning. This effectively increases the extraneous

cognitive load required for AAE speakers to master text-based skills (Washington & Seidenberg, 2021). Importantly, this approach is both White- and adult-centric, removing the expectation that teachers will accommodate the learning and language needs of African American children and requiring instead that children change their language use to accommodate the classroom. This is linguistically unjust, unnecessarily disadvantaging AAE speakers.

Perhaps most importantly, continuing to emphasize poor academic outcomes of African American children ignores the competencies that African American children bring to their academic learning (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023). Studies find that African American children enter formal schooling with well-developed phonemic and phonological knowledge, a vast vocabulary, including a repertoire of consonants and vowel sounds in their oral dialect, and an established understanding of the allowable sound combinations that make up words (Baker-Bell, 2020; Gee, 1996; Washington et al., 2023).

Yosso (2005) defines cultural wealth as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77). In addition to AAE being a form of cultural wealth (i.e., resistance capital) created by enslaved people in response to the oppression of having their native language erased, one must recognize the linguistic capital, hence resilience, represented by African American children's flexible use of language. Once they enter school, however, the emphasis on GAE devalues their existing cultural-linguistic knowledge, highlighting instead the differences between their language use and the "expectations" in the classroom, which are ultimately interpreted as weaknesses or deficits. In an investigation focused on phonemic awareness in African American kindergarten and first graders, Thomas-Tate et al., (2004) found that phonemic awareness assessments that focused on phonemes in the final position of words unnecessarily disadvantaged African American children whose dialect includes variable inclusion of final consonants. Indeed, the authors suggested that the early literacy competence of these children was underestimated because the assessment was not sensitive to the language variations inherent in children's linguistic systems. When phonemic awareness with these same children was assessed in the initial and medial position of words, it was determined that their skills were developmentally appropriate. The phonological features of AAE differ from the language of school instruction, so discrepancies can occur when children draw upon their established linguistic system to make connections between speech and print (Washington et al., 2023). In addition, when students speak with a dialect, they are corrected more than students who do not speak with a dialect (Gardner-Neblett and Soto-Boykin, 2024). Thus, one must ask whether it is simply that the dialect influences reading and writing outcomes or whether the biases related to AAE that discourage linguistic accommodation decrease the likelihood that AAE variations will be utilized to support language and literacy acquisition and learning by a child, or whether they will be allowed by teachers.

4. Case study: early educators' knowledge, beliefs, practices, and professional preparation and needs

We posit here that an important starting point for supporting teaching and promoting African children's learning is improving our understanding of what early educators and practitioners know about the current assets and competencies of their AAE-speaking young children and requiring that they be provided with knowledge of the characteristics of AAE. With attention to racism and implicit bias that may contribute to underperformance, combined with encouragement to view language variation as an asset to both teaching and learning, it may be possible to change both attitudes and outcomes. Addressing the knowledge, beliefs, practices, and professional preparation and needs of early educators who serve AAE-speaking children is of utmost importance, given the sensitive period of language development and love of learning that we hope to foster during these early years. The questions

we sought to answer through this case study were: (1) what are the knowledge and beliefs of early educators of African American preschool-age children regarding AAE, and (2) What are the practices and professional preparation and needs of early educators of African American preschool-age children?

5. Methods

5.1. Context

As part of a professional development series to support educators and staff of AAE speakers in an African American-majority early childhood program in an urban-centered city in the Midwest, exploratory baseline data were collected from 41 early education staff, including coaches, reading specialists, and site directors. This early childhood program offers comprehensive services from home-based prenatal services and K4 Charter School to center-based preschool for infants and toddlers, serving 690 children across two campuses with 155 staff. Children who attended the early childhood program met federal poverty guidelines required for attendance. Only center-based staff (N=50) at one of their campuses was invited to complete the survey, and no incentives were provided. The goal of the research was to understand what educators and staff currently knew and believed about AAE and the children who speak it. Most respondents identified as female (81%); almost 50% identified as Black/African American, 38% White, and 7% Asian. Over 90% spoke mostly or all English and 67% had a bachelor's degree or higher. Over 80% of respondents had not attended any training or workshops, either in person or virtually, on AAE or culturally responsive practices or pedagogy in the 12 months before completing this survey.

5.2. Measures

The baseline survey consisted of four sections (see appendix). The first section focused on demographics, such as gender, race/ethnicity, and language. The second section focused on *knowledge about AAE* based on questions adapted from Hendricks and Diehm (2020), Diehm and Hendricks (2021), and Newkirk-Turner et al. (2013), which included four questions with response options from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (e.g., know the language feature of AAE that make it different from Mainstream American English, can identify when children are speaking AAE) and ten questions requiring respondents to identify sentences containing AAE features (e.g., They sure is crazy, He hit baseball). Features of AAE were selected and identified as most commonly used by young children from both middle and low-income backgrounds (Washington & Craig, 1994; Washington & Seidenberg, 2021). Responses were averaged for the 4-item knowledge questions and the percent of correct items for the 10-item questions about AAE.

The third section focused on *attitudes about AAE* compared to GAE, which was also adapted from Newkirk-Turner et al. (2013) and included 16 items with response options from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (e.g., AAE is a good language system, children who speak AAE will have writing problems, addressing language issues of AAE speakers in the schools will improve children's learning).

The final section focused on *practices, preparation, and support for AAE* was adapted from Diehm and Hendricks (2021) and Newkirk-Turner et al. (2013) with the five items with response options from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (e.g., my early education credential, professional development, and technical assistance trained me to address the language needs of children speaking AAE, I would like to learn some teaching strategies to address the language needs of my students who speak AAE). Responses were averaged. Whereas the survey is not yet validated, it provides important foundational knowledge that can be used to impact practice and lead to a validated survey for future use.

5.3. Analysis

The purpose of this case study is to provide illustrative and descriptive information on the knowledge, attitudes, and professional preparation and needs of a group of early educators regarding AAE, recognizing the limit of this data. While we provide an average mean for early educators' knowledge, attitudes, and professional preparation and needs, due to the small sample size and the exploratory nature, we also provide percentage agreement and disagreement for each item of the scales. We also examined potential racial differences in responses between Black and White educators; other racial/ethnic groups were too small to include. Bonferroni adjustments were made to control for Type I errors due to multiple testing.

6. Results

6.1. Knowledge about AAE

Analyses of the knowledge items indicated a moderately reliable scale with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.68. On average, respondents were likely to report some knowledge about AAE (M= 3.74, SD=0.58). Furthermore, the majority of respondents were likely to endorse the statement that they can identify children who speak AAE (72% agree or strongly agree) and were knowledgeable about social, academic, and economic challenges that impact their AAE-speaking students (72% agree or strongly agree) (see Fig. 1 for response rates for each item). A *t*-test was performed to understand the differences in knowledge regarding AAE among Black and White teachers, who comprised the majority of educators surveyed. Analyses indicated no significant difference (p=ns) in average knowledge scores between Black (M=3.83, SD=0.55) and White (M=3.54, SD=0.58) educators.

As another marker of knowledge about AAE, educators were asked to identify which of the ten sentences provided were examples of AAE. Many respondents could not identify AAE statements, with the average number of AAE sentences correct being 5.41. There were only two items where over two-thirds of educators were correct on whether the items were AAE or not – "She finna do her homework" and "Pass me them apples" (both are AAE sentences). These outcomes were in contrast to knowledge item 2a, in which 72% of respondents indicated they could identify AAE.

6.2. Attitudes about AAE

Across the ten items designed to determine attitudes regarding AAE, the average score was 3.15 (SD=0.51), indicating educators had a slightly negative perception of AAE and its influence on children's learning. While over 80% of educators agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable teaching students who speak AAE, a plurality agreed or strongly agreed that teachers are likely to have lower expectations of children who speak AAE compared to children who speak GAE (46% agree or strongly agree) and that AAE is one of the many factors contributing to the achievement gap among Black and White children (46% agree or strongly agree) (see Fig. 2 for response rates for each item). A t-test was performed to examine these differences in attitudes regarding AAE among Black and White teachers. There was no significant racial difference in the attitudes (p=ns) of White teachers (M=3.33, SD=0.38) compared to Black teachers (M=3.06, SD=0.60) when all items were averaged. While some differences were apparent on some items, they were nonsignificant after correcting for multiple hypothesis testing (i.e., Bonferroni adjustment), indicating no evidence for racial differences in early educators' attitudes about AAE.

6.3. Professional preparation and support for AAE

The average for the six items regarding professional preparation and needs was 3.22 (SD=0.67), indicating educators have some skills and strategies to support children's language needs but would like more support. About one-third (31%) agreed or strongly agreed that their early education credential, professional development, and technical assistance trained them to address the language needs of children speaking AAE, but more than three-quarters (77% agreed or strongly agreed) have learned some teaching strategies on their own to address the language needs of their students (see Fig. 3 for response rates for each item). Over 50% of educators (56%) also noted that their school encourages them to reflect on their personal beliefs and biases about individuals from cultural and language groups that are different from their own. Furthermore, 71% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to learn some teaching strategies to address the language needs of their AAE-speaking students.

There were no significant differences between Black and White teachers in their average self-reported professional preparation and needs in supporting AAE speakers. While some differences were apparent on some items, after correcting for multiple hypothesis testing (i.e., Bonferroni adjustment), there were no significant differences in
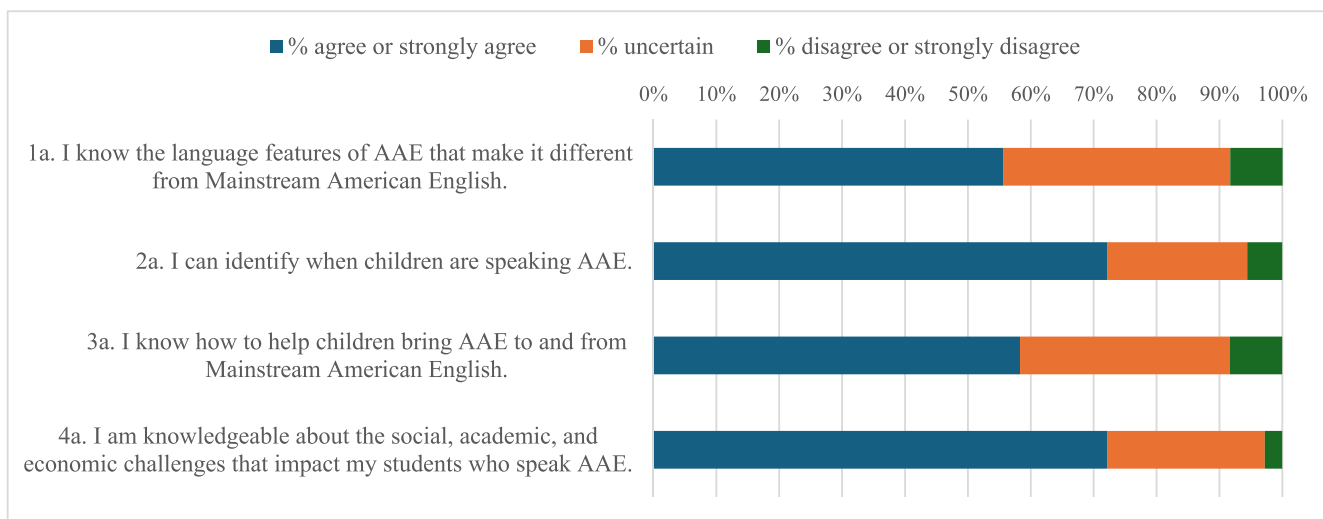

Fig. 1. Educators' Agreement with Knowledge Statements, Percentage.
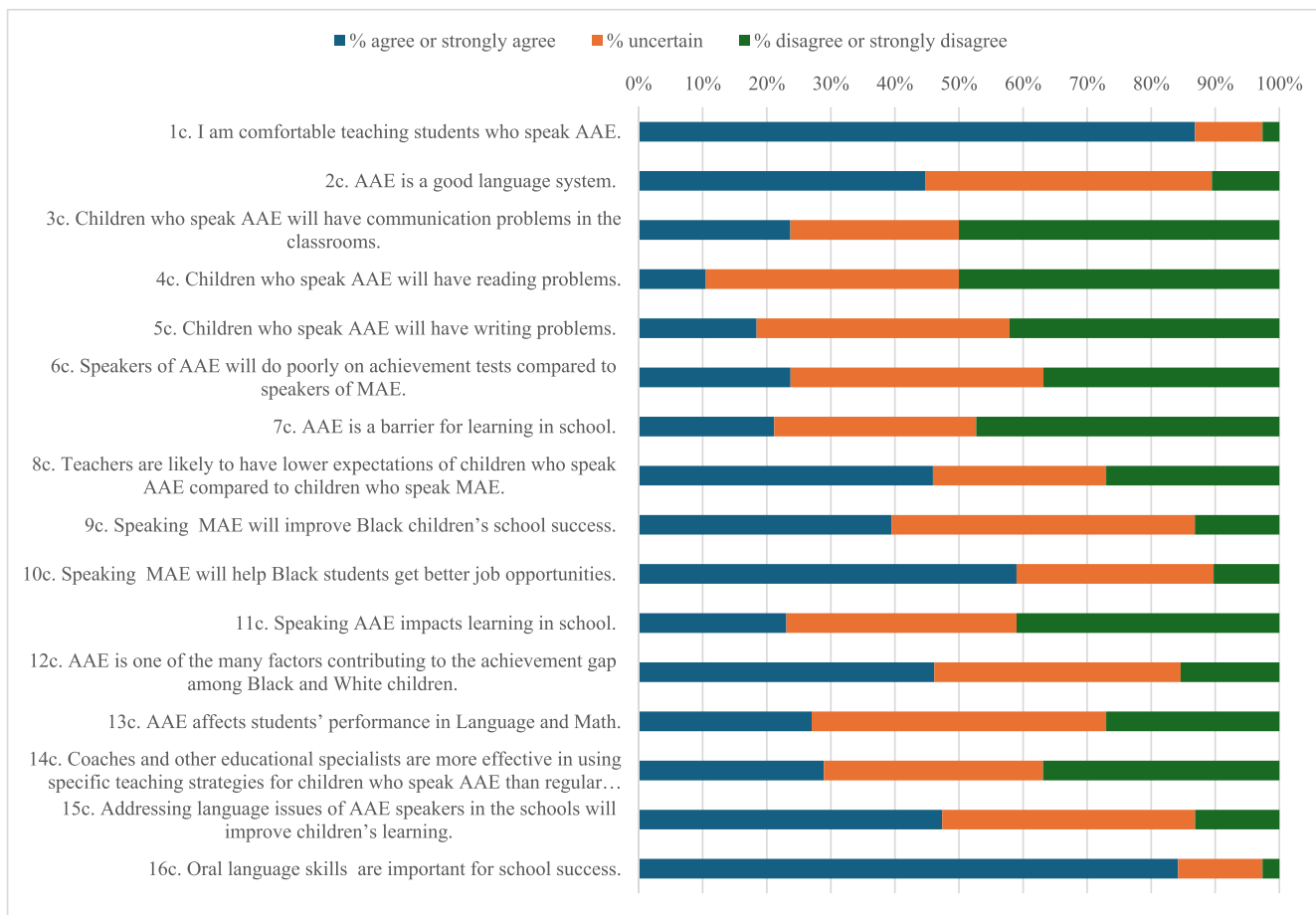Note. N = 36

Fig. 2. Educators' Agreement with Attitude Statements, Percentage.
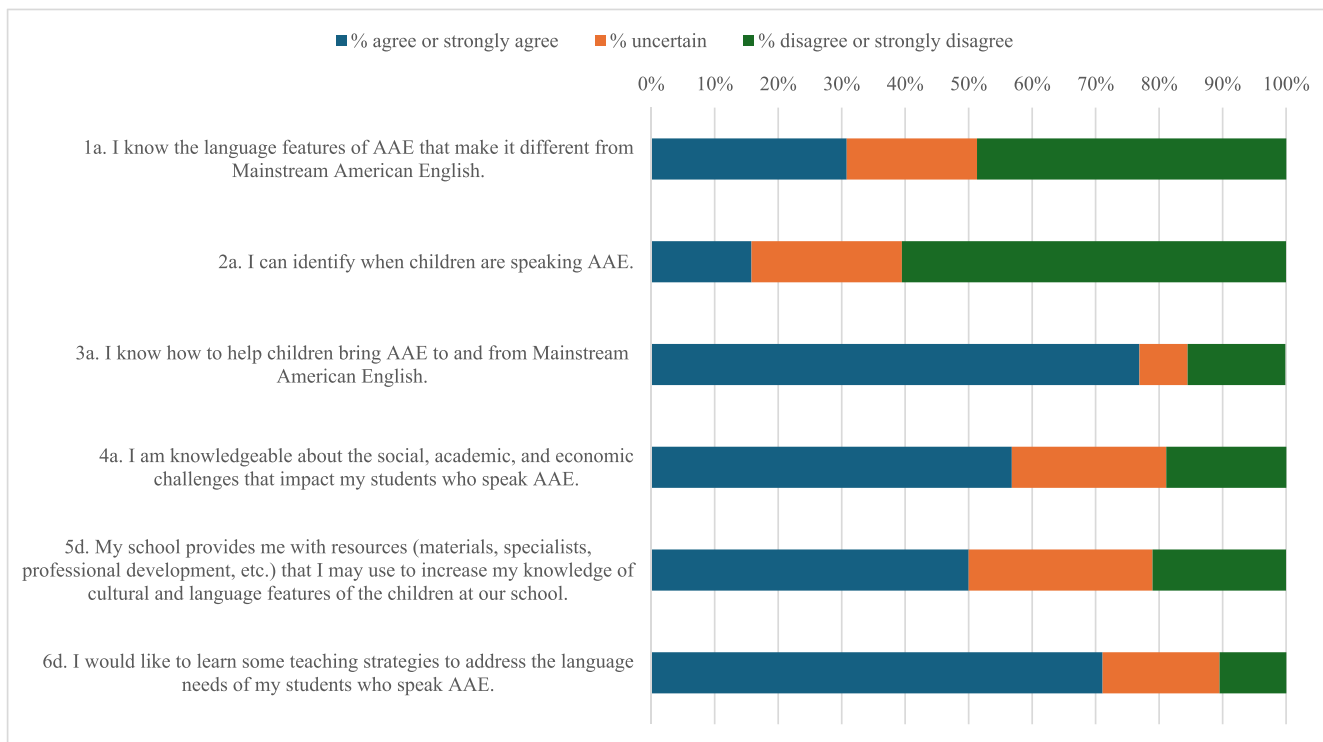

Fig. 3. Educators' Agreement with Professional Preparation and Need Statements, Percentage.

responses, indicating no evidence for racial differences in professional preparation and needs for AAE.

In sum, this racially diverse, well-educated, group of female-majority early education professionals reported knowledge of AAE, but the majority could not distinguish the unique features of AAE. Furthermore, educators were uncertain whether being a speaker of AAE impacted learning and the achievement gap, but they were concerned that AAE speakers would have communication and academic problems. In general, Black and White teachers did not significantly differ in their knowledge, attitudes, and professional preparation and needs regarding support AAE speakers.

7. Discussion

This case study investigation sought to gather preliminary empirical data exploring early educators' knowledge, attitudes, and professional preparation and training needs related to AAE and AAE speakers. With some caution in generalizing the data due to the small sample and single source (i.e., educators), findings from this case study from a Black-majority early childhood program indicate that these well-educated, racially diverse early childhood professionals believe that they know when children are speaking AAE, have confidence in their ability to teach children who speak AAE, and are sensitive to the social, academic, and economic challenges that impact their AAE-speaking students. Despite these certainties, however, they were not accurate in identifying specific features of AAE. Furthermore, while most of these early childhood professionals were uncertain in agreeing that AAE was the sole influence on AAE speakers' learning, most agreed that speaking GAE compared to AAE would improve teachers' expectations and children's school success. Furthermore, these early education professionals report a lack of educational credentials, professional development, and technical assistance on ways to support AAE speakers, likely contributing to them asking for teaching strategies to support children who use this cultural language system.

Situated within the context of structural racism, linguicism, and cultural wealth, the findings from this case study provide some insights into how macro-structures and interpersonal-individual biases about AAE may negatively impact AAE speakers, in addition to not seeing AAE as a linguistic asset. There has been limited attention to meeting the language needs of AAE speakers (i.e., structural racism), and part of this may be due to its low prestige and the belief that AAE is an inferior version of English (implicit bias) (Newkirk-Turner et al., 2013; Thompson, 2021). Cultural racism operates implicitly and explicitly by indicating whose ways, traditions, and approaches, including communication styles, are considered superior or inferior; in the current example, GAE is viewed as superior to AAE. Thus, while the early childhood professionals in this case study report feeling comfortable and confident teaching children who speak AAE, they did not know the grammatical rules governing AAE, and they felt that AAE speakers using GAE would experience more school and life success. This is a subtle form of implicit bias where teachers' statements and beliefs about AAE are incongruent.

Both Black and White teachers reported that speaking AAE may lower teacher expectations for children, which is an example of implicit bias in schooling based on language systems children use. Countless evidence shows that lower teacher expectations are associated with poorer outcomes for Black children (Gersherson et al., 2016). Furthermore, Gardner-Neblett and Soto-Boykin, 2024 work with 299 White educators found that those with less education had more negative beliefs about AAE on children's performance, and those who had training on cultural/linguistic diversity had more positive beliefs about AAE. It is essential to acknowledge that for some of the teachers in our case study, specifically African American teachers, these beliefs may be based on their personal experiences with race and racism directed at their use of AAE; for White teachers, these beliefs may be based on patterns they have witnessed. However, our data regarding this area is limited.

Considering these early education professionals are required to have credentials to teach children, most of them report that they did not have any courses, professional development, or technical assistance focused on language variation and learning. Further, considering that up to 80% of African Americans in the U.S. have spoken AAE at some point in their lives, it is disheartening that educational training focused on AAE is not a requirement for education, including early education credentialing. While there has been an increase in dual language learning courses, professional development, training, and technical assistance in early childhood focused on bilingual and multilingual learners (U.S. Office of English Language Acquisition, Dual Language Education, 2015), which has led to discernible improvements in teacher quality and language outcomes for these children (Markussen-Brown et al., 2017), this has not led to a corresponding focus on bidialectal/multidialectal speakers unless they are dialects of a language other than American English. AAE is the most studied dialect of American English and, by implication, the most well-understood. The lack of attention at the systems level to the education of children who speak AAE, despite its well-documented impact on educational attainment, is arguably a marker of systemic racism that has simultaneously made invisible the linguistic skillsets of AAE speakers while also continuing to promulgate the idea that AAE speakers are unintelligent and low achievers. This lack of training to support AAE is troubling, given that existing research shows gains in positive attitudes toward AAE among educators who participated in AAE-related training (e.g., Fogel & Ehri, 2006). Thus, there is a need to attend to supports that can strengthen teachers' knowledge, belief, and preparation to teach AAE-speakers, and subsequently practices that leverage children's linguistical capital.

7.1. Advancing language justice through translanguaging and linguistic accommodation

Even with some of these deficit perspectives about AAE from the educators in the case study, there is heterogeneity within these early education professionals who saw AAE as a sound language system and took the initiative to learn some teaching strategies to address the language needs of their students. While there is a need for valid approaches that support early educators as they meet the needs of AAE speakers, many scholars are calling for new strategies and approaches that create bridges between AAE and GAE in a way that recognizes and honors children's home language while creating a culturally responsive bridge to support AAE speakers' learning opportunities and school success (e.g., Asante, 1990; Baker-Bell, 2020; Paris, 2009). In fact, the case study data indicate that teachers report needing more resources and support to meet AAE speakers' needs, which is a call to action for schools and departments of education.

It is encouraging that these teachers express an interest in receiving resources and training focused on AAE. Whereas these resources in the form of curricula do not exist, accommodation and translanguaging theories provide promising frameworks that can be applied in the classroom. Linguistic accommodation and translanguaging offer lessons from bilingualism and multilingualism that, if applied to bidialectalism in teaching and learning contexts, both affirm the African American child's language use (building their resilience) and recognize the dialect's importance as a bridge for learning language-based skills in the classroom (providing resistance by maintaining children's native language system).

Linguistic accommodation requires that an individual adapt their communicative strategies based on the discourse characteristics of the speaker, which can be either divergent or convergent (Coupland et al., 1991). Divergent accommodation occurs when the individual (in this case, the teacher) accommodates in the direction of societal norms and expectations, pushing children to change their language use toward a reference group outside of their own. Divergent practices are common in research and classrooms as African American students are expected to accommodate linguistically by shifting their language use toward the

norms identified by society, the teacher, and the classroom. In this case, teachers are not accommodating to their students' language (Hallett, 2015).

Conversely, convergent accommodation occurs when the teacher signals acceptance of the child's language by making linguistic modifications that validate dialect forms. Modifications can be both oral and written. In the case of oral modifications, teachers may signal acceptance of the validity of varied Englishes by avoiding explicitly correcting students' language or insisting that students change their productions to match the established norm. In writing, linguistic modifications allow students to use features of their own language freely during early writing instruction and avoid treating these variations as 'errors.' In both cases, teachers signal their understanding that it is possible to support a child's use of their home language variety, without interference, by allowing the child to make necessary connections between the school and home without negative messages about AAE. Convergence does not ask that teachers use dialect when speaking to students but instead asks that teachers recognize and accept that the use of AAE may serve a beneficial purpose in learning rather than regarding variations as errors to be corrected. Accommodation, whether convergent or divergent, is, at its core, a representation of the teacher's mindset.

7.2. Translanguaging in the classroom

Linguistic accommodation and translanguaging are complementary. A convergent mindset is necessary for teachers to utilize translanguaging principles and practices that are supportive of African American students as the child does the work to make connections between AAE and GAE. García (2019) referred to translanguaging as "the internal mental grammar of speakers that is shaped in social interactions" (p. 163). *Translanguaging* does not ask children to code-switch but instead recognizes their linguistic capital as competent language users who bring to the table statistical and social knowledge that can be applied to a given context to support meaning-making. Translanguaging is student-driven (or speaker-centric) and flexible in its application. In a classroom, the teacher who supports a student's translanguaging practices accommodates the child's need to use all their linguistic resources to facilitate learning. In this case, students may mix AAE and GAE in their speech and writing to facilitate comprehension of new material. This is not dissimilar to bilingual and multilingual learners who use both languages in the classroom to support learning.

Translanguaging is controversial and emerging in bilingual educational contexts (Serai, 2019). It is controversial because it sets aside the notion that children must switch codes to succeed. Instead, it recognizes that children's prior cultural language knowledge is important not only outside of school but inside as well. Baker (2011) defined translanguaging as "the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages" (p. 288). Translanguaging is important for bidialectal speakers in the classroom, as it allows the linguistic scaffolding that bidialectal learners may need to demonstrate their linguistic competencies. Instead of being asked to think and learn only in a linguistic system to which they have only recently been introduced (GAE) and may represent less than half of their entire linguistic repertoire, translanguaging allows African American children to use their linguistic strengths in AAE to bridge the second variety, GAE, to which they are being introduced in the classroom.

Makalela (2015) presented translanguaging as a strategy that allows learners to use their home language to develop positive experiences. His participants, South African students who spoke one of six possible tribal languages in the classroom, were encouraged to speak any language with which they were comfortable, and that allowed them to communicate effectively with classmates to engage in classroom teaching and learning. These oral language experiences allowed students to internalize academic content within and across languages. Results demonstrated that students could understand the content more deeply, and

both languages were enhanced. According to Makalela, it was clear that *one language was incomplete without the other.* Translanguaging allows a safe, social space for language practices involving strategic linguistic choices to support learning. The most basic tenet of translanguaging is allowing children to utilize their full linguistic repertoires to support learning new or complex material.

Baker-Bell (2020) describes an approach in which educators "interrogate their own views of Black Language and the ways in which they perpetuate anti-black linguistic racism in their classrooms" (p. 18) and engage in experiences and activities where they and their students: (a) examine the intersection of language, culture, and identity within the Black community (b) participate in a language study that examines the historical, cultural, and political underpinnings of Black Language (c) examine the structural and discourse features of Black Language (d) investigate the intersection of language and power and (e) examine the intersections between language and race. This approach, Baker-Bell argues, "intentionally and unapologetically centers the linguistic, cultural, racial, intellectual, and self-confidence needs of Black students. In so doing, Black students have an opportunity to learn language, learn through language, and learn about language…at the same time as working toward dismantling anti-black linguistic racism…[and] provides space for other linguistically marginalized students of color and white students to develop useful critical capacities regarding anti-Black linguistic racism" (p. 18). Whereas the teachers in this case study expressed some confidence in their knowledge of AAE, their inability to identify its structural features and their views on the adequacy or inadequacy of AAE for supporting learning supports the need for the approach that Baker-Bell describes. For these educators of AAE speakers to engage in effective accommodation or translanguaging practices, some real conversations about their own biases and beliefs related to AAE and the communities that speak it are likely necessary for them to meet the wholistic needs of their African American students.

7.2.1. Limitations

Caution should be taken when generalizing the findings from this case study. First, this was a small, convenience sample of educators and not necessarily generalizable to the larger population of ECE educators. Importantly, this was a predominantly Black environment educationally and geographically, with a majority of teachers who shared the same racial identity as their students. This reality suggests that these educators are likely exposed to AAE daily and may have a better understanding of this cultural language system and the children who use it than in most communities and classrooms not exposed to AAE daily. Research suggests that the outcomes in these more typical racial and gendered environments might differ from those reported here (Skelton et al., 2009). Second, the data were based on one source and method – the early educators and quantitative survey, calling for future studies to utilize multi-methods and multi-informants. As these data were primarily quantitative, it did not allow us to gather in-depth information on how teachers understand, view, and support AAE speakers. While we had teachers who reported their racial/ethnic identity as Asian, Latine, or multiracial, their smaller percentage precluded including them when examining racial differences. Larger and more robust studies are needed that examine the knowledge, attitudes, and professional preparation and need of AAE across diverse racial and ethnic educators. Finally, we did not collect data regarding whether educators were AAE speakers or how many children in their programs spoke AAE, which may impact their own knowledge and perception regarding AAE.

8. Conclusion

"Children pragmatically use both of their languages in order to maximize understanding and performance in the home, street, and school" (Lewis et al., 2012, p. 643), therefore, it is unjust to require African American children to demonstrate linguistic flexibility while their cognitive resources are being allocated to learning the language of

the classroom along with a wide array of new academic and social skills which rely upon language (e.g., reading) without allowing them access to their entire linguistic capabilities (Vogel & Garcia, 2016; Washington & Seidenberg, 2021). Doing so denies the linguistic capital that African American children bring to schooling. Making the shift away from these harmful practices will require re-training for researchers and practitioners to transform their thinking away from a deficit orientation to one that centers on Black children and families' strengths and assets while also attending to the context of structural racism, systemic inequities, discrimination, and biases in the daily lives of Black families.

Importantly for schools, how do we move teachers away from current practices that support regulation of the language of African American children? In investigations of teacher beliefs about AAE in the classroom, a common finding across all studies was that teachers do not feel confident in their knowledge about what to do to teach AAE-speaking children to read and write (Diehm & Hendricks, 2021; Gupta, 2010; Newkirk-Turner et al., 2013). This finding was mirrored in the case study presented in this paper and suggests that teacher education programs and professional development for practicing teachers are critical for both changing teacher mindsets about within-language variation and giving teachers strategies for teaching and affirming students' language use in the presence of variation. On the other hand, Hallett (2015) noted accommodation of teaching to the student's dialect has to be balanced with the real need for the student to master the language of literacy, at least to the extent necessary to become a strong reader and writer. This is the challenge faced by teachers of bilingual students, just as it is for those teaching bidialectal students. In addition to learning more about the language variety used by students, research also suggests that many teachers need to reassess their ideas and beliefs surrounding how and which language is suitable for use in the classroom (Hallett, 2015; Newkirk-Turner et al., 2013). Our case study supported this need. Without this mindset shift, deeply held biases about language norms versus language varieties will likely persist (Ascenzi-Moreno & Seltzer, 2021).

AAE and GAE are socially distinct but linguistically equal; this needs to be reflected in both research and educational settings. Indeed, translanguaging and linguistic accommodation models recognize that each language and language variety is utilized in different spaces for specific functions. Both models reject the notion that one variety should be given power or superiority. Instead of expecting students to accommodate to the classroom and their teachers, these models support affirming linguistic assets and strengths in order to support optimal development. Interestingly, this was the outcome sought by the Oakland Black English Language resolution in 1996 (Messier, 2012). The resolution was appropriate but may have been premature. The value it sought to develop around AAE as a viable means for promoting teaching and learning is slowly coming to fruition in the 21st century. A shift in our thinking socially, politically, educationally, and linguistically will be required to realize the promise of bidialectal teaching and learning. The work of the child is to utilize their entire linguistic repertoire to support new learning. The work of the teacher is to let them do so (Table 1).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Julie A. Washington: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Iheoma U. Iruka:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Table 1
Knowledge of African American English Dialect – Percent of Correct Identification of AAE.

Sentences	No. correct (% correct)
#1. When the girls wins the track meet, we are going to the state championship!	24 (61.5)
*#2. They sure is crazy	25 (64.1)
#3. He been sick lately	12 (30.8)
*#4. She finna do her homework	28 (71.8)
#5. I love that dress	26 (66.7)
*#6. The pizzas cost twenty dollar	19 (48.7)
#7. He hit baseball	19 (48.7)
*#8. He is the baddest puppy we have ever had	18 (46.2)
+#9. Mr. Frank he hims best friend	13 (33.3)
*#10. Pass me them apples	27 (69.2)

Note. N = 39, *= sentence is AAE. + = although 'hims' is not AAE (see #9 question), the sentence does include the AAE appositive pronoun.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.linged.2024.101382.

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