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Liberatory praxis in preservice teacher education: claiming Afrocentrism as foundational in critical language and literacy teaching

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ABSTRACT

Four teacher educators describe their work to establish Afrocentric foundations through integrating literacy and linguistic pluralism courses. We build on realities that teachers and children "do not learn, systematically and deeply, about Black genius and worth" (Baines, Tisdale, & Long, 2018, p. 20) in schools or universities nor do they learn a critical consciousness, impacting their abilities to dismantle Eurocratic systems. We share challenges and outcomes (including university and PreK-3 teaching examples) in building liberatory praxis focused on the African cradle of civilization, anti-colonialism, African/African American erasure in schooling today, African and Diaspora languages, and the multilingualism of AAL speakers.

Today, a baffled lady observed the shell where my soul dwells
And announced that I'm "articulate" …
So when my professor asks a question
And my answer is tainted with a connotation of urbanized suggestion
There's no misdirected intention
Pay attention
'Cause I'm "articulate"
So when my father asks, "Wha' kinda ting is dis?"
My "articulate" answer never goes amiss
I say "father, this is the impending problem at hand"
And when I'm on the block I switch it up just because I can
So when my boy says, "What's good with you son?"
I just say, "I jus' fall out wit dem people but I done!"
And sometimes in class
I might pause the intellectual sounding flow to ask
"Yo! Why dese books neva be about my peoples"

Yes, I have decided to treat all three of my languages as equals
Because I'm "articulate" …
These words are spoken
By someone who is simply fed up with the Eurocentric ideals of this season
And the reason I speak a composite version of your language
Is because mines was raped away along with my history …

As much as has been raped away from our people
How can you expect me to treat their imprint on your language
As anything less than equal
Let there be no confusion
Let there be no hesitation
This is not a promotion of ignorance
This is a linguistic celebration
That's why I put "tri-lingual" on my last job application

Jamila Lyiscott (2014a)

Jamila Lyiscott's powerful TED Talk, excerpted above, is used across the United States as an entrée into discussions about African American Language (AAL) long recognized by language scholars as a language with grammatical structure, literary and social usage, and West African roots (Green, 2002; King, 2020; Mufwene, 2001; Rickford, 1996). In her linguistic celebration, Lyiscott moves across three languages – African American Language, Caribbean Patois, and standardized English – undeniably trilingual. And yet, recognition of such multilingual expertise is regularly denied as an uninformed society sends messages that AAL is broken, improper, or incorrect English, tying racist perceptions about language to racist views about speakers' intelligence (Smitherman, 2015). Dr. Lyiscott (2015) explained this regularly-occurring aggression as it happened to her when speaking as a panel member advising high school seniors about college. She was interrupted by a woman who congratulated her on being 'so articulate.' This pronouncement represents a racist/linguicist attack reflective of attitudes 'from classrooms to courtrooms to corporate boardrooms [when intelligence is only assigned] to Black Americans who don't sound "too Black"' (Alim & Smitherman, 2012, p. 24). As Lyiscott (2014b) pointed out, had she been speaking with 'people in my community who speak Black English vernacular, this woman would have maybe not seen the same worth and value in terms of my intellectual capacity' (n.p.).

This anti-Black attitude comes from centuries of brainwashing anchored in colonial quests for power and wealth – wealth made possible through the denigration of Blackness. The resulting Eurocracy 'raped away' (Lyiscott, 2014b, n.p.) not only languages but opportunities for us to know Africa and Africans contributions to the world's knowledge often claimed by colonizers as their own. This continues today as 'language is used as a means of social, political, and economic oppression to further marginalize racialized and minoritized groups' (Alim, 2016, p. 27). While schools would be the logical place to 'resist colonizing language practices that elevate certain languages over others (p. 27), the reverse is typical. Not only AAL but all languages other than standardized English (sE) and consequently the identities of their speakers, are regularly relegated to the dustbin of 'lesser than.' Certainly, the responsibility for challenging these attitudes begins in programs of teachers of education. However, while some programs critically examine linguistic injustices with regard to Euro-dominant languages, rarely is AAL or its rich history a part of the conversation. It should be no surprise, therefore, that classroom teachers are not equipped to recognize the expertise and linguistic dexterity (Paris & Alim, 2017) of AAL speakers. As a result, the heritage languages of Black children continue to be corrected, shamed, and silenced while monolingual sE speakers are rewarded as 'articulate.'

This paper focuses on the study of elements in a teacher preparation program designed to counter this reality by emphasizing educators' responsibility to dismantle and replace inequitable and inaccurate Eurocratic pedagogies in preschool through third grade (P-3) classrooms. The study looks specifically at experiences designed to support preservice teachers' abilities to teach about the benefits of multilingualism, realities of linguicism (language discrimination), Africa and African languages, and the African Diaspora, all as preface to teaching about AAL and the bi/multilingual expertise of AAL speakers. The research was guided by this question:

As preservice teachers prepare for and teach young children about multilingualism, African histories, the African Diaspora, and African American Language, what insights can be gained about barriers, successes, and shifts in thinking as they navigate this process?

In response to our research question, this paper reports findings from our work as early childhood teacher educators - two professors and two doctoral candidates – in the liberation of teacher education and early childhood schooling from their Eurocratic stronghold (King & Swartz, 2016). Data were collected over one semester as students developed and taught four lesson plans through the integration of two courses, one focusing on linguistic pluralism, the other on the teaching of reading. Both courses were required in an early childhood program at a flagship state university in the southeastern United States.

This work was informed by a 'well-spring of Black intellectual thought and experience' (Grant et al., 2016, p. xvii), Black linguists in particular (highlighted later in this piece), who have long called for critical and historical approaches to language education in ways that repair and recenter 'broken histories [and take back] stolen languages' (Lyiscott, 2014b, n.p.). Drawing on this background, we committed to providing preservice teachers with 'a critical understanding of [AAL's] historical, cultural, and political underpinnings' (Baker-Bell, 2013, p. 356) as well as its linguistic features while recognizing 'African Americans' wide array of linguistic practices and identities' (King, 2020, p. 290). Thus, while our teaching included an introduction to linguistic features/ grammatical rules of AAL and translating/contrasting across languages, we wanted our students and the children they taught to understand AAL's sociopolitical contexts and West African roots. This meant *first* exploring Africa in ways that would communicate the depth of humanity and histories of African Peoples and developing a critical eye to recognize and counter colonized versions of people, places, languages, and accomplishments.

Note: We have not found a sufficient term for what is commonly referred to as Standard English. Most terms – Standard English, Mainstream American English, Language of Wider Communication – perpetuate linguistic hierarchies and fail to highlight issues of power. We use the term standard*ized* English, abbreviated as sE to communicate that the language is not innately Standard but it is standardized in attempts to sustain 'social stratification and [maintain] the interests of privileged groups' (Watson, 2018, n.p.). We use the term African American Language (AAL) as opposed to African Vernacular English, Black English, or African American English because it emphasizes AAL as a *language* not a vernacular (nonstandard) or a 'dialect' which, for many educators, implies something 'less than a standard language variety' (Spears, 2015, p. 786).

Significance of the study and scholars who guide us

It is widely documented that new teachers enter the profession with little or no awareness of the history and dominance of colonial ideologies in which racist/linguicist views are anchored (Milner, 2015), the impact of linguicism with regard to AAL (Rickford & Rickford, 2000), the perpetuation of colonized oppression in schools (Baker-Bell, 2017), and strategies for replacing oppressive pedagogies. While some teacher education programs emphasize embracing African American community cultural resources, rarely do they include AAL as one of those resources nor do they focus on African sources of the world's knowledge, critical examination of representations of Africa, or the development of the African Diaspora as preface to exploring languages such as AAL. Particularly in early childhood education, preparing teachers to understand how and why they should teach about these topics is all but nonexistent (Johnson et al., 2018).

Recognizing this void, the authors of this article created a preservice focus on African and Diaspora history including a critical examination of colonization prior to the study of AAL's structures, roots, and literary and social use. We did so to acquaint preservice teachers with information silenced in classroom curricula and to address the reality that African and African American

children and adults continue to be defined by colonized views about almost every aspect of their being (Howard, 2014; Morris, 2016). We wanted our students to be able to teach children that Africans across the Diaspora *and* their languages represent 'an African history [that] wasn't one of inferiority [but] one full of glorious empires … full of intellects and innovators' (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020, p.126), 'rich in culture and heritage, histories of struggles, successes, failures, and opportunities' (Dei, 2010, p. xxi).

The colonized mind and the need to relearn histories

It is no secret that negative racial profiling and brutalization of Black men, women, and children have been realities from the days of colonization to the criminalization of Black bodies today (Alexander, 2012). Colonizers portrayed Africans as uncivilized and inhumane as rationale for stealing land and resources, claiming African expertise as their own, attempting to eradicate languages and cultural traditions, genocide, and enslavement (Kendi, 2016). This gross misrepresentation of Africa and Africans created an enduring legacy as, for 'the past 500 years [as] European peoples and ideas have dominated written history' (Dei, 2010, p. 3) while juxtaposing Africans as empty vessels (King, 2005).

Schools are directly implicated in perpetuating this propaganda as colonized portrayals of history were and are centered in school curricula (Smith, 1999). From the time of colonization, each new generation has learned about 'Europe [as] at the centre of all knowledge' (Dei, 2010, p. 15). African studies scholar Asante (1992) calls this 'White esteem curriculum' (p. 20) as colonized-tellings of history privilege European inventors, artists, explorers, and scientists while promoting images of Africans as poor, uncivilized, and in need of salvation. Centuries after the first colonizers took control, children are still taught via curricula that omit, distort, or marginalize African and African American heritage (King & Swartz, 2016).

However, it is not only curriculum that reflects colonized perceptions of Blackness in schools. Negative perceptions find their way into attitudes leading to the disproportionate referral of Black children to special education (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012), under-representation of Blackness in gifted programs (Ford, 2013), more expulsions and suspensions of Black than white students (Goff et al., 2014), and Black students unchallenged because of racialized low expectations (Gershenson et al., 2016). This in turn, feeds into perceptions that children take with them into adulthood impacting their views of themselves and each other.

For years, scholars have called for educators to relearn African histories through a decolonized, African-centered lens (Asante, 1992; Dillard, 2012; King & Swartz, 2016). As long ago as 1915, Du Bois (1915) wrote that we must learn African-told histories to counter 'so much false writing on Africa and of its inhabitants' (p. 2) emphasizing that this is not just for people of African descent: 'We all have a collective responsibility to know the importance of that history … as a necessary exercise in our decolonization' (p. 6). Over 100 years later, critical and decolonized understandings of history are still far from the norm.

African American language (AAL)

Deficit positioning of African Americans because of mislearned histories includes oppressive practices related to language. African American Language (AAL), spoken fluently by many African American children, is regularly under attack in schools due to teachers' lack of appreciation and awareness of its legitimacy (Boutte, 2016). In and out of school, speakers of AAL continue to be victims of linguistic profiling due to colonized views that position the language as improper English.

AAL, however, is far from incorrect or improper. While recognizing that there is a 'multiplicity of [linguistic] performances across and within speakers' (King, 2020, p. 296), AAL is recognizable

as a language by its linguistic structure, vocabulary, grammatical rules (Green, 2002; Rickford & Rickford, 2000), and West African and Diaspora roots (Smitherman, 2006). In our work with pre-service teachers, after exploring relearned African histories and the African Diaspora, we introduce vocabulary and linguistic features of AAL and parallels to West African and Diaspora languages: For example, AAL pronunciation rules such as first syllable emphasis (hótel not hotél) parallels the same rule in some West African languages; call-and-response styles of linguistic interactions are similar in AAL and West Africa; there is no controlled r in some West African languages just as in AAL (sistah, not sister), the use of d or t instead of the th (ting not thing, dat not that) is similar in AAL and some African and Diaspora languages, indicating possession by the position of words rather than 's (Angela hat) (Green, 2002; Smitherman, 1974), and so on. These examples constitute a very small snapshot of the complexities, variations, literary and social use, and spiritual histories of AAL that, when explored in combination with studying decolonized African and Diaspora histories, can help teachers move away from deficit positioning of the language (see Appendix A and References for resources to support that learning).

Calls to build teachers' knowledge about AAL

In 1949, Black linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner called for this kind of education about and appreciation for the languages of African descendants in the U.S. He was one of the first scholars to point out legitimacy and West African roots of the Gullah language spoken in some southeastern states in the US. Thirty years later, educators in Ann Arbor, Michigan were asked to develop appreciation for AAL after a federal judge ruled against the erroneous referral of children to speech therapy to 'correct' their 'Black English' (Smitherman, 2009). Twenty years after the Michigan ruling, the Oakland, California Ebonics debate resulted in similar calls for teachers to respect the legitimacy of AAL (Rickford, 1996). During and after that time, instructional programs were developed across the country to teach children to code-switch from AAL to sE, typically referring to AAL as informal or home speech and sE as formal or school language (Wheeler & Swords, 2004). While encouraging teachers to see AAL as a valid communication system, code-switching approaches are criticized for using contrastive analysis techniques in service of 'one-way assimilation' (Young et al., 2014, p. 64), failing to address linguistic power structures, linguistic hierarchies, and perpetuating deficit views of AAL and its speakers.

A few programs during that time moved beyond code-switching. LeMoine's (2007) work in Los Angeles focused on building students' knowledge about AAL's linguistic features *and* African roots. Her Culture and Language Academy of Success was grounded in African histories, ethics, and languages. Another example was Lee's (2006) cultural modeling approach. While focused on students utilizing AAL expertise as scaffolds 'for academic learning' (p. 309), this approach also focused on students as language experts, building awareness of their literary, expository, and improvisational abilities to interpret and craft texts in both AAL and sE (Lee & Majors, 2003, p. 64).

Criticality and language

Through these years, AAL scholar Geneva Smitherman (1974) called for a critical stance and a challenge to systems that kept AAL subordinate. She wrote that educators were too focused on 'preparing people for the mainstream but neer talkin bout changin the course of that stream' (p. 731). Toni Morrison (1981) also argued for changing the course of the stream pointing out the racist damage done when educators dismissed the linguistic expertise of AAL speakers and ignored AAL's African roots:

> With five different present tenses [an AAL speaker] comes to school to be faced with books that are less than his own language [and is] told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes

permanently damaging. He may never know the etymology of Africanisms in his language … This is a really cruel fallout of racism. (n.p.)

This call for criticality (and history) continued as linguists like Alim (2005) insisted on language pedagogy that critically examined power structures eventually conceptualizing *raciolinguistics* as a theoretical base from which to explore language, race, and power (2016). Others, including Godley and Minnici (2008) called for a critical language pedagogy that questioned language ideologies, valued democratic dialogue, and utilized students' linguistic expertise: Kirkland and Jackson (2009) insisted on classroom 'discussions of [linguistic] power, hegemony, and ideological control' (p. 147); and Young (2009) suggested that code-meshing (accessing elements of AAL and sE at the same time) provided a critical alternative to code-switching because it emphasizes AAL speakers' linguistic dexterity (Paris & Alim, 2017) and requires discussions of language, race, and power.

Finally, findings from Baker-Bell's (2017) work with Black high school students provides a summative rationale for this study. Baker-Bell wrote that her students were 'fed up with … uncritical language pedagogies that do not consider their language intellectually valuable [while] White students are not required to learn anything about Black Language' (p. 103–104). Her students easily recognized that their peers had no understanding of the linguistic strengths and histories they possessed and that teachers' biased views about language meant that their white peers were 'erroneously positioned as academically prepared to achieve' (p. 101). This study addresses these issues as we examine the processes of teaching white *and* Black preservice teachers about African histories, languages, and AAL to 'redress academic exclusion' (Smitherman, 2003, p. 13) so that they can bring a relearned history and criticality to the education of young children.

Theoretical framework

Three bodies of thought form our theoretical frame: critical race theory, decolonizing methodologies, and Afrocentricity. Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed in the 1970s out of concern by legal scholars that race and racism were all but ignored legal systems and that 'subtle forms of racism were gaining ground' (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 4). Whereas a range of concepts define CRT, this study was driven by one tenet in particular, Derrick Bell's (1992) notion of the permanence/ordinariness of racism or racism as 'the usual way that society does business' (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 7). We are informed by this tenet as aligned with King's (1991) concept of *dysconscious racism,* the tacit acceptance of 'dominant White norms and privileges' (p.135). Both concepts drive our teaching of preservice teachers, many of whom come to us with little knowledge of the systemic nature of racism, typically defining racism by overt actions (torch-carrying protests and shouting racial slurs) (Sullivan, 2014). CRT grounds our commitment to creating experiences through which prospective teachers learn the realities of structural racism, their own dysconscious roles in perpetuating it, and strategies for dismantling it.

With CRT at the foundation of our framework, decolonizing theories intersect as we commit to teaching for 'anti-colonial social change' (Carlson, 2017, p. 2). We are influenced by researchers who draw on Indigenous and Black scholarship as abolitionist routes to justice (Tuck & Yang, 2018), researchers who, as do critical race scholars, call for a rejection of normalized processes of dehumanization that are sustained by the stronghold of colonial thinking. Our work with preservice teachers is anchored in this ideology as we involve them in relearning histories through the lens of those whose humanity is all but erased when histories are told from a colonial stance (Smith, 1999). In this way, we can support students in critically examining accounts of histories so they can, in turn, help young children develop a critical eye. Finally, drawing from decolonizing theorists who are also pedagogues, we move from theory to practice as we guide preservice teacher to develop lessons for young children that 'confront the hidden standards of racism, colonialism, and cultural and linguistic imperialism in modern curriculum' (Battiste, 2013, p. 29).

These aspects of our framework connect intimately to guidance found in Afrocentrism. African studies scholar Asante (1992) describes Afrocentricity as 'placing African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena' (p. 2). As does decolonizing theory, this pushes us to support preservice teachers in seeking information about Africa told through African lenses. We also draw from Ghanaian-Canadian scholar, Dei (2010) who sees teaching about Africa as a transgressive act, 'crucial if we are to succeed in constructing new identities [of Africa] outside of Euro-American ideology and dominance' (p. xxi). We are further supported by Sengalese historian Diop (1987) who provides historical background to accomplishments of pre-colonial Africa, and Kenyan scholar, Thiong'o (1986) who, through his emphasis on reclaiming Indigenous African languages, informs our dedication to teaching about African and African American linguistic histories. Through the work of these scholars, we are better able to redress the invisibility of African genius by reconnecting curriculum to knowledge 'that has been silenced or distorted' (King & Swartz, 2016, p. 1) while cognizant of Dei's (2010) warning not to homogenize or romanticize. Thus, basic to our frame is centering African epistemologies as a form of liberation, supporting all children in appreciating the brilliance, humanity, and complexity of Black people (Boutte, 2016; Hilliard, 1991).

Methodology

Qualitative critical race methodologies supported the design of this study as we sought to gain insights for teacher education by examining preservice teachers' work to counter 'oppressive structures' (Huber, 2008, p. 160) and 'challenge traditional Eurocentric epistemology' (Brabeck, 2001, p. 170). In this way, critical race purposes aligned well with our commitment to reject 'sanitized interpretations of the past' (Dixson et al., 2018, p. 68) and 'refuse the ongoing deficiency and erasure' of Peoples of Color (Paris, 2019, p. 221). In addition, the critical race emphasis on valuing (counter)stories (Tate, 1997) allowed us to focus on students' narratives as windows into the barriers and successes they experienced and their shifts in thinking. Emphasis on narrative in critical race ideologies also spoke to our commitment to embracing strategies used historically by Africans and African Americans to tell their truths, counter misinformation, plan for activism, and heal wounds (Tate, 1997).

Participants

Participants in this study were 22 undergraduates in a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the southeastern United States: eight African American, one biracial (African American/European American), and thirteen European American students. All students majored in early childhood education and were members of the program's Urban Education Cohort designed to re-center denied communities, languages, histories, and heritage with a particular focus on race. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Undergraduates came to this experience with particular views about language uncovered through critical memoirs written during the first week of class their junior year. They were asked to write about: language(s) they speak around those they love most, perceptions of those languages by the wider society, and how those languages were positioned in schools. Results allowed us to create a profile of the group regarding their initial thoughts about language.

All of the white students felt most comfortable speaking some form of standardized English (sE). The Black and Biracial students identified AAL as the language with which they were most comfortable, some emphasizing that they changed to sE at school and in the company of white people. Two African American students described their trilingualism as speakers of AAL, sE, and Spanish or Gullah, recognizing it as a cognitive and social advantage. Every student was aware of sE as dominant in everything from television programming to jobs to school. They had been taught that speaking sE

was important to projecting an 'educated' image and felt that schools degraded languages that were not sE. Several African American students explained that if they spoke AAL at school, they were 'instantly corrected' feeling the need to 'turn off AAL' to be successful. This linguistic push-pull (Smitherman, 2006) and the need to develop a linguistic double consciousness (Young, 2009) was voiced by several African American students, one writing about the need to change her language as 'something that I struggle with because deep down I want to just be me.' Another student wrote about linguistic shaming when a teacher corrected her use of AAL: '[After that], I couldn't give my complete thought because I felt like what I had to say no longer mattered … my teacher made me feel stupid.' A white student witnessed similar shaming of Black peers as teachers 'set a powerful tone … about whose home languages were valuable and whose were not.' In sum, the participants came into this study having reflected on personal experiences surrounding issues that would be explored in-depth through their coursework.

Context

This study was conducted during spring semester of the students' junior year. Prior to this semester, students took a required course called Culturally Relevant Pedagogy which focused on critical examinations of self and institutions, oppression and privilege, hidden histories, and related pedagogy. This was followed by the two courses which provide the contexts for this study:

> **Linguistic Pluralism** taught by Susi (Dr. Long) prepares teachers to create linguistically plural P-3 classrooms; teach against language discrimination; and center marginalized languages and language histories. The course includes a six-week study of AAL that begins with African histories and ends by developing the four lesson plans. Jarvais (Mr. Jackson) co-taught the course during this study; Jennipher (Ms. Frazier) co-taught the previous year.

> **Reading Methods** taught by Kamania (Dr. Wynter-Hoyte) focuses on reading instruction grounded in social, cognitive, cultural, political, critical, and strategic meaning-making processes, fostering agency and critical eye, examination of marginalized communities, and curricular roles in the school-to-prison pipeline. The course is taught onsite in an elementary school where undergraduates work with K-3 'buddies' (child partners). During this study, all of the children were African American with the exception of one child who was Latinx.

This study centered around the students' development of four lesson plans in the Linguistic Pluralism course and taught to K-3 buddies in their Reading Methods course where they also completed post-teaching reflections. Lectures, readings, websites, and video clips (Appendix A) were used across both courses to build the dispositions and knowledge necessary to develop their plans. Foci for the plans were topics of instruction in the Linguistic Pluralism course and included: (a) benefits of multilingualism and damages of linguicism; (b) Africa, African languages, and African hidden histories; (c) colonization, enslavement, the African Diaspora, and the impact of West African languages on the development of AAL; and (d) AAL structures and literary use, and translation across three languages including AAL (Figure 1).

Course instructors

Kamania and Susi were the primary instructors in this work. They developed integrated assignments for and sometimes co-taught sessions of the Reading Methods and Linguistic Pluralism courses. Together, they deepened their knowledge by regularly alerting each other to and discussing resources regarding AAL, African and Diaspora histories, and #BlackLivesMatter and through their interactions within groups of critical scholars within and beyond their own institution. Eight years prior to this study, Susi worked with early childhood colleagues to develop the Linguistic Pluralism course.. The institutionalization of this and the culturally relevant pedagogy course was possible because of a critical group of equity-minded colleagues, administrative

LESSON #1 - Teach about the Beauty and Brilliance of Multilingualism to include:
- There are many beautiful languages within the U.S. and around the world,
- Bi/Multilingualism is good for you: cognitive, social, and global benefits,
- Meanings of *bilingualism, multilingualism*, and *translate,*
- Meaning of *linguicism* (language discrimination), the damage it does and how the students can stand against it.

LESSON #2 - Introduce Africa, African Brilliance, and African Languages to include:
- Africa as a continent with 55 countries and its relation to the rest of the world, particularly where your students live,
- Precolonial African kings, queens, leaders, and contributions to the world's knowledge (scientific, mathematical, inventions, explorers, agriculture, the arts, etc.),
- Africa as a continent with over 2,000 languages, let students hear and enjoy the sounds of a few languages, learn a few words, connect to specific countries.

LESSON #3 - Introduce African American Language to include:
- A review of content from previous lessons to show how this lesson builds from them,
- Brief and critical history of European colonization of Africa, enslavement of African Peoples, and creation of the African Diaspora,
- Languages brought with Africans and their influence on Diaspora languages,
- Introduction to African American Language as a language with rules; connections to West African language similarities.

LESSON #4 – Teach about AAL Structures and Translation Across Languages to include:
- AAL acknowledged by the Linguistic Society of America; the importance of Black linguists,
- Specific AAL structures and translations: sE to AAL and AAL to sE,
- Adding a third language and practicing translation across all three (AAL, SE, and one other)
- Creating a multilingual text.

Figure 1. Lesson plan requirements.

support for professional autonomy, and recognizing that trying to infuse in-depth study of cultural relevance and linguistic pluralism across other courses was ineffective.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected over a semester's period of time and uploaded into the Dedoose data analysis software system. Data sources are listed in Table 1 and the end-of-semester questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

The authors of this article scrutinized data and collaborated in the construction and coding of themes. Using constant comparative analysis, we merged and eliminated categories through collaborative 'talk' within a google document, prioritized categories, and named them as findings. Findings were member checked as we returned a draft of this paper to the preservice teachers. Their responses (incorporated into the final draft) included suggestions regarding clarity and comments about the need for this article as they recognized the degradation of AAL speakers in their practicum placements.

Findings

This study examined attempts to build preservice teachers' abilities to teach young children about AAL by first building knowledge about multilingualism, African histories and languages, and the African Diaspora. In this section, we share insights gained about barriers, successes, and shifts in thinking as our students navigated this process.

Table 1. Data sources.

Critical Language Memoirs: Preservice teachers described language positioning in their own schooling.
Students' Four Lesson Plans:
- Beauty and brilliance of multilingualism.
- Africa, African Genius, and African Languages.
- Colonization, enslavement, the African Diaspora
- Introduction to African American Language
Susi's Feedback to Lesson Plans
Post-Teaching Reflections: Preservice teachers' written reflections after teaching each lesson.
Instructional Materials and Emails: Course agendas, PowerPoints, weblinks, video clips, films, articles; and email communication among instructors.
End-of-Semester Questionnaire: Completed by preservice teachers (see Appendix B)

Barriers

Eurocratic stronghold

Analyzing lesson plans, Susi's written feedback to the plans, and the end-of-semester question-naire revealed the Eurocratic stronghold on preservice teachers' thinking as a barrier to planning and teaching. This information was so new to them that, in spite of readings, videos, lectures, and discussions, they sometimes defaulted to Eurocentric understandings of history and lan-guage from their own schooling. For example, Kerry wrote in her plans that she was going to teach about European colonizers as 'discovering new places' prompting Susi to respond: 'Remember that Europeans … did not "discover" anything. Every land they encountered was already inhabited by Indigenous Peoples … so work on getting that idea across.'

Another example comes from our requirement to include mini-lessons about Hidden African Figures (developed in the culturally relevant pedagogy course the previous semester). We required our students to teach precolonial African contributions to the world's knowledge so children would better understand the impact of colonial lies about Africans as barbarians. During the first weeks of class, Jarvais re-emphasized the importance of starting lessons with African greatness telling our students: 'Never start instruction about African American history with enslavement.' Although many students remarked on the power of this statement, *the long-ingrained tendency to describe Africans as defined by enslavement came through in some of their plans*. Susi's feedback referred them to Jarvais' words and reminded them to help children understand that Africans were teachers, astronomers, explorers, mathematicians, and artists: 'Do not let the children leave your lesson thinking that Africans were/are less than brilliant and accomplished.'

Sometimes Africa was simply left out of lesson plans. We saw this when our students neglected to plan for teaching West African connections to AAL, also revealed in Susi's feedback: 'I don't see, in your introduction of AAL … how it is connected to West African languages. You can't launch into creating AAL sentences without talking about AAL's rich history.' and 'You say that Africans could not bring their culture and language with them but they did. That's how we are so heavily influenced by West African languages and traditions.'

The stronghold of this Eurocratic habit of mind is not surprising given that most of our stu-dents reported learning about African Americans starting with enslavement. It demonstrated the need for us to reteach with a deeper focus on why we were building children's knowledge start-ing with African strengths. It also let us know that our students needed more opportunities to learn decolonized African histories than could be provided in segments of a couple of courses.

Fear of communicating harsh realities to young children

Another barrier to students' teaching was their lack of confidence in communicating harsh real-ities to young children. For example, we asked them to introduce the concept of linguicism and teach children how to stand up against language shaming. However, *ten of the 22 university*

Figure 2. Teaching the impact of linguicism.

students did not include linguicism in the first draft of their plans. Although Kamania and Susi shared examples of linguicism and preservice teachers had written about their own language traumas in memoirs, they did not readily transfer those experiences into lessons for children. In response, we offered further teaching examples and talked about how, rather than sharing videos of shouting racists using language inappropriate for young children, they could retell the stories of linguicism without losing impact. As a result, almost all preservice teachers communicated linguicism's damaging effects to their buddies. Catherine explained this when describing her buddy's response: 'I knew he was understanding linguicism when we talked about how some Peoples' languages may be discriminated against in places like school … and he talked about how English was the only language he saw in books at school.' Others shared their buddies' drawings about linguicism, one depicting the demeaning of Chinese speakers (Figure 2).

Initially, all of our students *avoided teaching the harsh realities of enslavement*. In their lessons, several used terminology like, 'They were made to work as cooks and housekeepers' or 'Slave owners were not nice.' This again reflected our students' Eurocratic educational backgrounds but also their unease in communicating difficult histories to young children. In class, we reiterated that the term 'slave' perpetuates the colonial lie that Africans were inhumane and property, and that phrases like 'enslaved African' humanizes, allows connections to prior lessons about African brilliance, and puts responsibility for enslavement on the colonizer. In written feedback, Susi let students know that they could and should communicate honestly with young children:

> Don't let Europeans off the hook as merely being 'not nice.' Use words like cruel, brutal, taking families apart. Saying that they came to work as housekeepers and babysitters puts enslavement in a realm that children can only envision through their images of those words. Besides, it's inaccurate. Also, they weren't beaten simply for not listening, but as a way to control human beings they saw as less than human. It's not only okay but important to say that to young children.

Successes

In spite of their struggles, analysis of preservice teachers' post-lesson reflections revealed that most of them ultimately framed their teaching in decolonizing approaches. For instance, they expressed excitement as their buddies gained an *appreciation for speakers of multiple languages*. Daniella shared her buddy's explanation that 'speaking different languages is good for your brain and good for your heart' and Katie wrote, 'This has been one of the best lessons that I have taught so far … It was exciting to see how happy my buddy was to learn a new language. I told him that knowing two languages keeps your brain healthy and makes you smarter; he couldn't wait!'
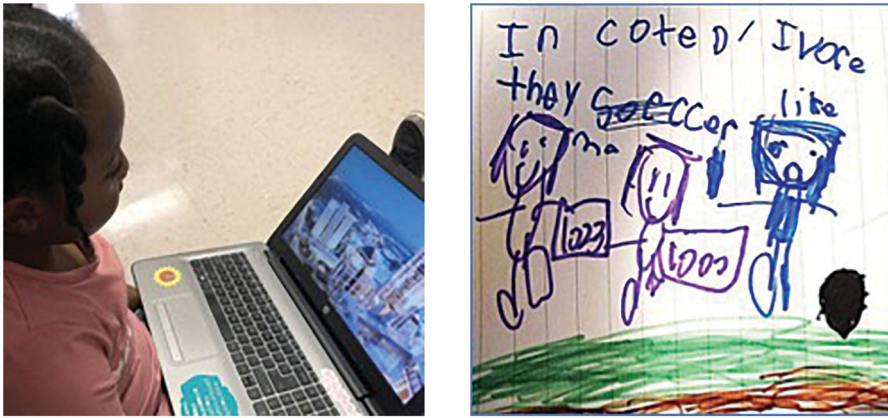
Figure 3. Teaching Africa beyond stereotypes.

Similarly, preservice teachers reported excitement that their buddies learned to identify Africa as a continent with 55 countries, name some countries, and *counter stereotypes of Africa* as only about wild animals and thatched huts. Children demonstrated this by illustrating, for instance, African cities with skyscrapers and children playing soccer (Figure 3). As Alicia put it, 'This was an important first step in helping to get rid of stereotypes and misconceptions about Africa.'

Reflections also revealed feelings of success when teaching about the *thousands of languages spoken on the African continent*. Our students played videos featuring children speaking Igbo, Swahili, and Yoruba and connected languages to countries in which they were spoken. Elisa described the impact on her buddy's knowledge: 'Before this, he was not aware of the fact that Africa had so many languages. He thought they just spoke "African."'

Some preservice teachers wrote about their success in teaching about *pre-colonial African scientists, historians, explorers, astronomers, artists, and mathematicians*. For example, Alana introduced Abubakari II as the 14th century Mansa (Emperor) of Mali who initiated global exploration, constructed flotillas rivaling those of Europe, and established African cultural influence in the Americas long before European explorers (Van Sertima, 2003), she wrote:

> It was exciting to see my buddy's reaction when I told him that Abubakari II sailed to North America 180 years before Christopher Columbus – he was shocked; I could tell this was the first time that he was hearing this.

Others shared photos of their buddies' fascination with the Dogon people of Mali, astronomers before Europeans; Ugandan mathematicians from 18,000 BCE; technical and medical advancements from precolonial Rwanda and Tanzania; and stone calendar constructions predating England's Stonehenge in Senegal, South African, Gambia, and Egypt (Figure 4).

As lessons segued to the African Diaspora and *influences of African languages on Diaspora languages including AAL*, although our students felt less confident in this area, they were able to establish important connections. Some introduced call-and-response as an African and African American interactional style using a video of Nigerian children (Writerwoborders, 2012) juxtaposed with examples of call-and-response in African American churches and songs by American singer Ella Jenkins (1999). Some used music to teach about West African-AAL linguistic features, for example, Sweet Honey in the Rock's (1992) song *Juba* was used to introduce the use of 'd' instead of 'th': 'Juba dis and Juba dat.'

Following our demonstrations, preservice teachers used picture books (Appendix A) to teach about AAL as literary and structured. We ask them to counter linguistic hierarchies by teaching translation-not-correction, engaging children in translating from sE to AAL as often as they translated from AAL to sE. In addition, students were required to add a third language (Spanish, Gullah, Mandarin, French, etc.) when translating to reinforce AAL as one of many legitimate
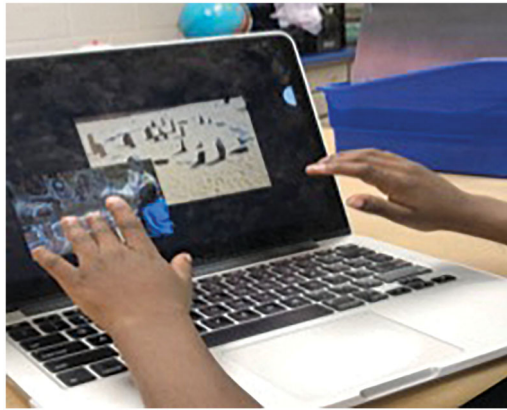
Figure 4. Examining the reconstructed calendar circle from Egypt, 7500 BCE.

languages (Figure 5) and to demonstrate parallel structures across languages, for example, the double negative used in AAL, Spanish, and French; and the use of adjectives instead of 's' to indicate plurality (four pencils), an AAL rule that is similar in Mandarin. Katherine explained her success in using these juxtapositions:

> This powerful lesson increased my buddy's confidence in his capacity of being multilingual … He sees that the way he talks is not wrong. Seeing AAL beside both SE and Spanish, he understands that AAL is a language.

Anna's reflection provides a summation of the success felt by many students:

> I honestly think this might be one of the most important lessons we have taught so far. My buddy hears AAL on a daily basis without knowing that it is an actual language. This lesson helps to … stop any stereotypes he may think about AAL.

Shifts in thinking

As our preservice teachers built knowledge about the racialized nature of language positioning and historical omissions and distortions, many of them came to see decolonizing and Afrocentric perspectives as not '*against* history [but] *for* … correct, accurate history, and against marginalizing African American children' (Asante, 2017, p. 67). This was indicated by comments like this one from Allison who wrote in her end-of-semester questionnaire:

> Most of us have been brainwashed into believing that Africans are poor defenseless souls who have no language and culture. They just run wild all day and that's not true. So, we have to show how brilliant, resourceful, and advanced Africa is in order for them to believe that AAL is a valid language and much they know about Africa is wrong.

Through Jarvais's teaching, *they learned about the African Diaspora and Gullah*. A few students had some knowledge of Gullah because of their P-12 schooling in the South Carolina low country and one student spoke Gullah, but no one had prior knowledge of Gullah in the context of the Diaspora. In fact, the concept of the African Diaspora was new to all of our students. In addition to history, they were particularly impacted with recognition that, as Mary Grace reflected, 'languages learned at home are often the way we best express ourselves, communicate with those we love, and identify with culture and heritage.'

The notion of *AAL as a structured and history-bound language* was another growth area. Preservice teachers reported being particularly influenced by Boutte's (2015) emphasis on AAL speakers as bilingual, AAL and sE as 'parallel language systems' (p. 39), and the importance of adding sE to children's 'language repertoires without denigrating' AAL (p. 39). Several students indicated their growth in

Figure 5. Translating across two and then three languages.

understanding that correction – rather than translation – silences children; devalues families, history, and identity; and keeps children from learning about AAL as a language they can employ as readers and writers. Erin explained this shift in thinking: 'I used to think I was so smart to be able to "correct" someone's grammar; double negatives for example, but now I know that double negatives are a grammatical structure for African American Language' and Jalen noted: 'I used to think AAL was … just a way we speak … but now I know it is a legit language with many different structures.' While sometimes still defaulting to the habit of calling sE 'proper English,' the preservice teachers began catching themselves mid-sentence, shifting to a dual language stance (Kinloch, 2010). Erica wrote about this as a kind of liberation:

> When I was [with] White people, I was careful to speak "proper" English … [but] I did not feel comfortable because I felt like I was putting on a front, not being myself. However, I was enlightened to know that I was speaking African American Language all along!

Many of our students also expressed thoughts that reflected convictions about *establishing African genius* before talking about enslavement so that children would know that people forced from their homes brought great expertise with them. Comments like Camryn's were not uncommon: '[We must] stop starting off teaching slavery but instead talk about the beauty and brilliance of Africans [so we can] teach children about the languages and culture they brought to America.' Preservice teachers also connected this to their understandings about, as Kaitlyn put it, 'African American Language [as] a powerful language structure that honors ancestors in West Africa.' Similarly, Kara wrote:

> In order to teach about AAL, you must start teaching about Africa as a place of knowledge and the languages spoken in African countries because that is the foundation and history of AAL. By teaching about Africa as a place of knowledge … it becomes much easier to explain AAL to people who may not believe that this teaching is necessary.

Learning by teaching, further shifts

While our students gained insights from the university classroom, their responses to the end-of-semester questionnaire demonstrated that even deeper learning and shifts in thinking occurred through the act of teaching children. For instance, several students reported changes in their beliefs about the capabilities of young children. Cassie wrote: 'The only reservation I had about

teaching about AAL was that my buddy wouldn't get it. After I began to teach, I realized that the topics aren't hard to discuss and [young children] are smarter and wiser than we realize' and Stephanie explained: 'I worried a lot about [my buddy] becoming bored with all the information. However, she wasn't bored at all and loved learning about Africa.'

Some preservice teachers also deepened their convictions about the importance of this work after teaching their K-3 buddies. For example, Keana was astonished when she asked her first grade buddy what she knew about slavery and her buddy replied that 'Brown people were bad and sent to America.' Keana told her that when Africans were taken away from their homes, they were moms, dads, grandparents, doctors, teachers, and scientists – 'They didn't do anything to deserve the treatment they were given.' Angela also expressed how teaching this content to children convinced her of its importance. She wrote: 'At first, I was doubtful; I am not ashamed to admit it. [However], after teaching my buddy … I couldn't be more sure that this is the kind of work we need to be doing.'

Implications

Year-to-year, as we deepen our knowledge and reflect on our teaching, we rethink our courses. Analyzing data through this study, however, allowed us to reflect in more focused ways leading to the following implications for ourselves and other teacher educators.

Provide frequent demonstrations and examples

Throughout the semester, we wondered why, when students verbalized convictions about countering linguicism, racism, and Eurocratic curricula, they sometimes struggled to envision those convictions in practice. Examining end-of-semester questionnaires, we realized a few things:

- In the spring of their junior year, they had little teaching experience particularly involving lessons beyond Eurocratic norms;
- Their own schooling included little or inaccurate information about Africa, African languages, the Diaspora, and AAL *and* they had limited or no background examining power structures so there was a lot to digest in a short period of time;

This meant that it was important for us to *provide practical demonstrations* and *connect students – virtually, through articles and books, and in person – with teachers* doing the work. For example, Kamania worked closely with teachers in the school where she taught Reading Methods, so our students were able to observe this kind of teaching firsthand. Susi had worked with the two teachers – Janice Baines and Carmen Tisdale – who co-authored one of the course texts (Baines et al., 2018) so she shared videos from their teaching. She also introduced students to Kentucky teacher, Shashray McCormack who virtually shared Afrocentric practices from her classroom.

Require criticality but back it up with support

At the end of the semester, our students were still trying to grasp the notion of criticality, particularly in early childhood classrooms. In addition to more practical demonstrations, they needed extended opportunities to 'interrogate dominant notions of language' (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009, p. 356). This included the need for more critical discussions about approaches that focus on teaching children to code-switch in service of the dominant sE; and examination of code-meshing as using elements of multiple languages fluidly (Young, 2009). As a result, we recommend course revisions that we incorporated the following year whenwe *spent more time*

discussing criticality and *required that every lesson involve children in identifying lesson-related injustices and doing something about them*. We backed up the requirement by sharing *more examples young children acting critically* (making Public Service Announcements, writing letters to people in power, creating PowerPoints to teach others)each focused on issues of power, history, misrepresentation, and re-representation. We also required revisions of lessons until our students were able to articulate viable plans for engaging children in acting critically.

Establish a foundation in African strengths

We highly recommend that preservice pedagogy of this kind begin with multilingual and African strengths and require the same in the teaching of young children. When we and our students initiated this teaching by focusing on benefits of multilingualism and damages of linguicism, precolonial African contributions to the world's knowledge, and colonization and the African Diaspora, as preface to exploring AAL, their buddies saw multilingualism and Africa as sources of strength and were better prepared to recognize falsehoods of colonial propaganda and misperceptions about AAL.

Reinforce AAL legitimacy in a variety of ways

The success of our students reinforcing the legitimacy of AAL for children in a variety of ways, leads to our recommendation that teacher educators:

- Promote the use of both AAL and sE in academic and literary contexts,
- Introduce the array of scholars/linguists who study AAL,
- Emphasize translation from sE to AAL as often as AAL to sE to dispel hierarchies,
- Support preservice teachers in engaging children in reading and creating multilingual texts using AAL as one of several languages not just sE.

Teach Africa

In our end-of-semester questionnaire, every preservice teacher wrote about the need to learn more about Africa and the Diaspora. Only two students had studied Africa in any in-depth and that was through elective courses at the university level. One student learned about Egypt in sixth grade and others mentioned learning stereotypical views of Africa as 'not well developed' and 'needy.' No one had learned anything about African languages or AAL. Consequently, even though we devoted six weeks to this work, they voiced the need for deeper knowledge. Keana told us: 'I think that we should have to take an actual class on African history and languages … [to give us] more confidence and the ability to contribute to lessons using our own knowledge.' and Camryn reiterated: 'I wish the program had a class on just African history. Trying to learn history while making the lesson plans [was] not impossible but it was hard.' As a result, the following year, we incorporated more African history into the culturally relevant pedagogy course and, at the time of this writing, a proposal for a required course in *African and African Diaspora Literacies in the Early Childhood Classroom* is making its way through the university approval system.

Conclusion

As we continue to grow in this work, we are proud of our students who pushed the boundaries of what they knew. Many utilized these experiences in internship classrooms providing models for teachers in their schools. They were active in their schools' professional development, offering

knowledge about topics like AAL, African hidden figures, and #BlackLivesMatter. However, we know they could easily lose what they have gained without maintaining ties to us and each other. We are fortunate that social media connects us. We also know that they are strong. In our commencement celebration, Keana spoke for many sharing that she uses now a critical lens 'with every aspect of my life.' Finally, we will not abandon them. We will follow our graduates as partners in the work to liberate and reclaim African histories, languages, and AAL as foundational to 'linguistic celebrations' (Lyiscott, 2014a) in every classroom.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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Appendix A

Sampling of resources used with preservice teachers

Picture Books: Multilingualism	Ada, A. F. & Savadier, E. (2013). *I love Saturdays y Domingos*. Atheneum Books.
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	LostPeopleFilms (2010, November 24). *Schooling the world.* [Video]. https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/schooling-the-world-2010/
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Appendix B

End-of-Semester Questionnaire

1. Describe your schooling experiences.
   - Whose history did you learn primarily?
   - When/What did you learn about African history (if you did)? Countries of Africa? Languages of Africa?
   - African American history?
2. What does it mean to decolonize schooling, curriculum, and instruction? Is this important? Why or why not?
3. In "*We've been doing it your way long enough*", the authors talk about grounding teaching in Afrocentric praxis because Africa is the cradle of civilization. What do you think about that? How do you see that reflected in current curriculum? Or not?
4. Is teaching about Africa as a place of knowledge, languages brilliance an important preface to teaching about AAL? Why? Why not?
5. If you have reservations about this kind of teaching, explain them. If any reservations were resolved as you taught your buddy, explain. If new reservations emerged, what were they?
6. Has your thinking changed about AAL through this course and teaching your buddy? How? What does that mean to you personally? professionally?
7. What more do you need to know to teach about African history, languages, and AAL? What suggestions do you have for the program in terms of doing this better?