Our Language Belongs in Our Learning: A Culturally Responsive Approach to Improving Literacy in West Philadelphia

Author

LUKE COLEMAN, (formerly) Director of Tutor Education at the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania; Fulbright Teaching Assistant at IES Miguel de Cervantes in Madrid, Spain

KEYWORDS:

African American Vernacular English, culturally responsive curriculum, reading initiatives, reflective teaching, sociolinguistics

KEY TERMS

African American Vernacular English (AAVE)- the dialect of American English that most African Americans descended from enslaved people speak (Rickford, 2003).

Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships- an organization that uses the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) resources to help solve universal problems manifested locally in West Philadelphia partly through establishing mutually transformative relationships with the community (Netter Center, 2019).

Culturally Responsive Teaching- from Gloria Ladson-Billings, this is a "pedagogy of opposition" committed to empowerment through academic success, the development of cultural competence, and the development of a critical awareness that pushes students to question current social contexts and social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Mainstream American English (MAE)- often called the "standard" form of English, this dialect is the most spoken English dialect, which is also used in professional and academic settings (Rickford, 2003).

Penn Reading Initiative (PRI)- a student-run organization at the Netter Center whose goal is to improve reading skills in West Philadelphia; this organization works in Comegys and Hamilton Elementary Schools, two University Assisted Community Schools.

Problem-Solving Learning Paper (PSL)- a paper whose overall goal is to identify a universal problem manifested locally, understand it, develop a solution, and identify strategies for implementation.

ABSTRACT

Millions of Black Americans speak a version of English not reflected in the American education system. This version of English—African American Vernacular English (AAVE)—is rule-governed, oral, and systematically different from the "standard" form of English (referred to as Mainstream American English (MAE) from hereon) used in academic spaces. Though

many young Black students enter the education system knowing AAVE, classroom instruction occurs in MAE. Black students are instructed in a language different from the one used at home yet are expected to perform at levels similar to those of students who already speak MAE. This expectation contributes to the well-documented achievement gap, wherein Black students, on average, perform at lower levels than white students on educational evaluations.

This manuscript is a community-centered attempt to address the achievement gap in two West Philadelphia elementary schools by leveraging the University of Pennsylvania's resources. This article describes qualitative problem-solving learning research, where the author works alongside the community to address using the Penn Reading Initiative as a vehicle for change to support students' cultural and sociolinguistic backgrounds in the classroom, ideally improving literacy through culturally responsive pedagogy. This article lays out the problem of dialectical miscomprehension and details a solution developed alongside community members in West Philadelphia. This article also reflects on the progress made in the two years since the original solution was implemented. It highlights the development of the Netter Center's Professional Development Associates team and the Anti-Racism Working Group—both having been influenced by work in this problem-solving learning framework.

INTRODUCTION

ESSENTIAL CONTEXT AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This problem-solving learning (PSL) article is a community-centered approach to addressing the lack of culturally responsive educational opportunities for Black students in the American education system (Cook, 2015). It focuses on developing a program that enhances early literacy learning for young Black children in West Philadelphia. A PSL is a unique framework for an article. In a PSL, the author identifies a universal problem manifested locally. This means the author looks for an issue—whether through direct experiences, quantitative data, interviews, etc.—widely present in society and breaks this issue down to the local level. The author begins seeking community input to learn how the issue is manifested in the area. This entails interviewing community members and stakeholders in the problem and working alongside the community to comprehend better an issue's complexities and how its local context impacts local citizens. A collaborative solution begins as the author moves through the PSL process alongside community members. After months of intensive work with the community, the result of a PSL is an implementable solution that relies on various stakeholders to come to fruition. It is, above all, an attempt to solve a problem with the community. It is not work done for a community nor upon a community but a mutually transformative approach to collaboration that yields a new understanding of the problem and a new way of addressing it. While taking part in this PSL, I was a student in the Penn Program for Public Service (PPPS) at the Netter Center—a program whose long-term goal is to "contribute to the radical transformation of research universities to function as democratic, civic, and community-engaged institutions dedicated to advancing learning and knowledge for democracy, social change and the continuous betterment of human life" (Harkavy et al., 2020). Netter is an organization whose mission is to foster mutually transformative relationships for the University of Pennsylvania and West Philadelphia communities. A main strategy of Netter is partnering with local schools to transform them into University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS). One of Netter's UACS programs, the Penn Reading Initiative (PRI), aims to improve reading skills through a 1:1 tutoring model. This involves improving elementary literacy at two UACS sites: Hamilton and Comegys Elementary. This article, attacking a universal problem manifested locally, will focus on PRI's methods to yield a more culturally competent program—capable

of producing competent tutors prepared to teach conventions of the English language to speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

The tutors PRI funnels into West Philadelphia (undergraduate and graduate students from Penn) possess sociolinguistic privilege. Most of the tutors in this program speak Mainstream American English (MAE), while a vast majority of the students they teach do not (Bynum, 2020). Additionally, these tutors are generally very privileged—class privilege, white privilege, and educational privilege (Abbott, 2020). This linguistic, socioeconomic, cultural, and racial misalignment gives way to miscomprehension, hampering the development of language skills in students working with the program (Horwitz, Improving Cross-Dialectical Comprehension in our Community 2020). This problem has a wide range of effects, solutions, and characteristics that make it difficult to solve. This article will reflect on each of these.

STATEMENT OF IDENTITY & AWARENESS

Self-awareness is critical when working to ameliorate social issues. As a Black biracial man of a particular socioeconomic class who attended an incredibly well-resourced university, I speak on these issues from the point of compounded privileges. I feel as though, based on my social and cultural upbringing, I rarely struggled with dialectical miscomprehension in a professional or academic setting, nor have I experienced a significant lack of quality education. Thus, I came to this problem with limited insight but respect and the best intentions. I am also not a linguist, and much of this paper grapples with linguistic complexities—adapting solutions to fit each cannot be accomplished in one body of work. Nonetheless, I have worked to counteract my lack of understanding in West Philadelphia classrooms by gathering input from tutors, program coordinators, Netter staff, and local elementary school faculty.

Also, throughout this work, I do not refer to Black people as African Americans, though I refer to the language they often use as African American Vernacular English. There are three reasons for this. First, many communities have moved away from the term "African-American" to describe themselves (Eligon, 2020). Second, calling the language "Black" English is not accurate. Many Black people worldwide speak English but do not use AAVE. For example, the Black community in the UK does not speak AAVE—calling AAVE "Black English" may lead to misunderstandings of which communities use this language. Third, the scholarly linguistic community has referred to AAVE as such, and this phrase is maintained to avoid confusion

THE PENN READING INITIATIVE: A LOCAL VEHICLE FOR CHANGE OVERVIEW

The Penn Reading Initiative is a student-run organization created by a partnership between the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center and the Penn Linguistics Lab (Netter Center, 2018). Using a 1:1 tutoring model, PRI tutors instruct students at Comegys and Hamilton Elementary Schools with the Reading Road curriculum. Their schools place elementary students in the program (Faulstich, 2020). This occurs when students fall below the required proficiency (Faulstich, 2020). On the tutor end, students from Penn apply at the beginning of the year to be tutors (Faulstich, 2020). The Reading Road curriculum focus on the cultural context of its intended audience—employing themes aimed at children in under-resourced communities (Faulstich, 2020; Netter Center, The Reading Road). It has been used with children of varying races.

IDENTIFIED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

PRI tutors lack a degree of community with West Philadelphia students (Bynum, 2020). An important facet of effective teaching is building a personal bond with students, and, as the PRI assignment is 1:1, that relationship is imperative (Georgetown Center for New Design in Learning and Scholarship, 2020). The students have trouble connecting with the tutors, especially within the 1-hour per week time constraint (Faulstich, 2020; PRI Evaluation Team, 2020). At the beginning of this PSL process, PRI tutors lacked the cultural competency required to build these relationships with students in West Philadelphia. Penn students are generally removed from the Philadelphia community—especially areas west of 40th street. This divide has historically served as a cultural, resource, and communal barrier—preventing the two communities from positively interacting with each other (O'Mara, 2015). This degree of separation yields the infamous "Penn Bubble." Before the collaboratively built solution was identified, PRI offered linguistic and basic cultural training for tutors, but not enough sustained and reflection-based education dissecting race, privilege, culture (AAVE), the school-to-prison pipeline, and more (PRI Evaluation Team, 2020). The solution and problems sections detailed later address these identified areas further.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: AMERICAN CLASSROOMS AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

The problem outlined here has multiple arms—it involves understanding AAVE to combat dialectical miscomprehension and implementing culturally responsive pedagogy to create more effective learning opportunities for students. Key stakeholders were interviewed to identify a starting point for this work and develop it to fit the community's needs (see table 1). Alongside these interviews, existing research in education, sociolinguistics, and urban studies was examined to understand the root causes of the problem.

WHAT IS AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH?

AAVE refers to the variety of English used by many Black Americans (Rickford, 2003). AAVE is spoken and systematically maintains grammatical and phonetic distinctions from MAE along with words unique to the Black experience (Rickford, 2003). While AAVE has been a topic of debate in education and linguistics for millions of Black Americans, AAVE has a strong cultural significance (Nero & Delpit, 2006). In West Philadelphia, a majority-Black neighborhood home to hundreds of thousands of Black people, AAVE is a staple in daily life.

Distinctive Features

The grammar variations between MAE and AAVE are not erroneous; classifying them as such fails to recognize that deviations from "standard" rules are not accidental (Horwitz, Improving Cross-Dialectical Comprehension in our Community 2020).

For example, a frequent grammatical discrepancy between the two dialects is the function, presence, and even absence of the conjugations of the auxiliary verb "to be" (Rickford, 2003). The present tense conjugations of "to be" are systematically removed from phrases in AAVE (e.g., he runnin' (AAVE) vs. he is running (MAE)). However, when referencing what an individual habitually does in the present, the auxiliary verb is included in its unconjugated form (e.g., he be runnin' (AAVE) vs. he is usually running (MAE)). This selective inclusion and omission point to rules accepted in the AAVE speech community.

Also, a common structure unique to AAVE is negative inversion. A negative inversion involves switching the negative quantifier and auxiliary verb (Rickford, 2003). For example, nobody (negative quantifier) and

Table 1

Key Stakeholders for the Penn Reading Initiative

NAME	ROLE	CONTRIBUTION
Faustine Sun	Academically Based Community Service Coordinator	Discussing how to address literacy problems locally
Regina Bynum	Netter Center Director of Teaching and Learning	Defining how PRI operates and how the curriculum is built
Cory Bowman	Associate Coordinator of the Netter Center	Specifying the needs of the Netter Center
Mickey Gulino	Student Group Coordinator	Laying out the organization of Netter student groups and who leads them
Joyce Abbott	Dean of Hamilton Elementary School	Outlining the goals and needs of the school at large
Brian Rogers	English Language Arts Teacher at Hamilton Elementary School	Highlighting what skills elementary students need to be strengthened
Sarah Horwitz	PRI Evaluation Team Member	Discussing sociolinguistics and its effects on students of color in the classroom
Andrew Faulstich	PRI Graduate Coordinator	Reflecting on the needs of PRI and the issues facing tutors, specifically
PRI Evaluation Group	Holistic evaluation of PRI	Specifying what needs to be improved in PRI

can't (negative auxiliary) are inverted to become "can't nobody." This appears to be a question. Instead, it is an emphatic statement meaning no one. This can cause confusion between speech communities because these constructions mean different things in different linguistic contexts.

AAVE also has words specific to the dialect that are staples of Black culture and identity. These words, largely because of the influence of Black culture, frequently transcend racial boundaries (e.g., lit, swag) and are appropriated by speakers of MAE. For example, AAVE has often been cited as slang from Generation Z. This misunderstanding of where the language hails causes misuse.

There are many grammatical distinctions between MAE and AAVE; this section is small but represents these differences. Words in AAVE are frequently omitted, conjugated differently, and inverted compared to MAE.

These phenomena may impede understanding between speech communities.

Cultural Significance

AAVE is a cultural treasure. Its rules have been passed down through generations. When coming to the table—especially those of us who are not Black or enjoy certain privileges—to discuss AAVE in education, there must be a recognition of the dialect's importance.

The language took root with ancestors of the current Black population whose origins, much like AAVE, cannot be accurately traced (Rickford, 2003). The dialect is significant because it is one of few things Black communities could maintain throughout American history—family, riches, and power often erased by racism and colonialism—that connects the past and the present. Beyond this historical perspective, AAVE is the language in which millions of Americans first experience love and joy (Nero & Delpit, 2006). AAVE is essential in continuing Black identity because it is a fixture of daily, communal life.

IMPLICATIONS OF AAVE AND THE CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM

Implications in the Classroom

The American education system frequently conflicts with AAVE and culturally responsive teaching—often opting to instruct all students in MAE with a neoliberal education model (Terry et al., 2015). A neoliberal education model refers to policies in schools (like standardized testing and homogenous curricula) that measure scholarly performance and prioritize learning for production in a free market (Terry et al., 2015).

The lack of recognition of AAVE in the classroom poses a critical problem in education—a significant additional cognitive load for young AAVE speakers taught and tested in MAE (Terry et al., 2015). In schools, this contributes to the onset of the achievement gap. The achievement gap is the rift in success between students of color (specifically Black students in this article) and white students. This rift can be partially attributed to the inaccurate assessment of Black students, as classroom instruction is not built for their language (Cook, 2015). For example, linguist John Rickford found a racial dichotomy when studying California's Palo Alto school district. He determined that predominantly white schools in Palo Alto could build on students' skills and talents, but predominantly Black schools in the area could not (Rickford, 2003). He notes that Black students in this region did steadily worse from 3rd grade to 6th grade. His analysis points to an issue of literacy that disproportionately afflicts Black students.

Though it is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting the connection between the achievement gap and the school-to-prison pipeline—both having disproportionate effects on Black students. Without culturally responsive teaching and lessons reflecting the language they know, many Black students have their achievement trajectory set for them (Cook, 2015). Their "underperformance" is often criminalized by schools whose overall performance increases with the removal of underachieving students (ACLU, 2020). The classroom implications for students who only speak AAVE in the current education system are, at best, a cognitive overload or, at worst, juvenile criminalization of "underperformance."

Implications in American Society

Neoliberal reforms—by negating the importance of context and culture—detract from the empowered learning that culturally responsive pedagogy supports (Sleeter, 2012). This has dire consequences in the classroom for students of color and reinforces outdated notions of racial superiority in broader American society. Because students, regardless of their culture and identity, are taught similarly with the same curriculum, students whose identities are not adequately represented disproportionately fall behind while their culture is systemically erased from education (Cook, 2015).

The societal implications for people in the American education system who speak only AAVE can be devastating. Because neoliberal reforms frame education as a practice that builds workers, those who are viewed as underperforming are also considered unfit to participate effectively in an economic environment (Sleeter, 2011). Those at the intersection of Blackness and "deficiency" are funneled into the criminal justice system through zero-tolerance policies and increased policing of schools. Victimized students face reduced high school graduation, college attendance, and recidivism rates.

THE PRESENT CONDITION: ARRIVING AT THE PROBLEM

Having detailed what AAVE is along with its implications in American education, the problem can be adequately articulated. In schools, many Black students experience a significant, additional cognitive load at the beginning of their educational career (Terry et al., 2015). This cognitive load transcends disciplinary boundaries, and without specific support to counteract this burden, many students are placed on an educational trajectory below their white peers (Terry et al., 2015). Lacking support, Black students are often pushed out of schools and into the criminal justice system (ACLU, 2020). Criminalization jeopardizes employment and education prospects. Many who stay in the education system do not have these gaps corrected, so they may leave the system unprepared (Cook, 2015). This is a prevalent problem in American society that cannot be surmounted in a single article. Rather, this article chronicles a community-centered attack on this vicious cycle.

The root problem this article faces is a lack of culturally responsive quality education, which, because of institutional constraints, cannot easily be circumnavigated by teachers under budget and structural pressures. Using PRI as a vehicle for change, the Penn community can better work with teachers as they traverse this treacherous educational terrain. In attacking the problem of illiteracy, West Philadelphia and Penn (through the Netter Center) come together to attack the achievement gap, the school-to-prison pipeline, and cyclical poverty (Charity Hudley et al., 2019). We address this problem because, after community input, it appears to break down educational stereotypes and racist frameworks in two of the Netter Center's partner schools, Hamilton and Comegys Elementary Schools.

THE SOLUTION: LEARN, PRACTICE, REFLECT

The identified solution—built alongside stakeholders, Netter staff, and PRI—is to implement sustained tutor education modules focusing on responsiveness and reflection. The first training module focuses on understanding culturally responsive teaching, privilege, and oppression. These are topics identified by stakeholders to be of utmost importance (Abbott, 2020). Following this first training, modules occur as part of the PRI's biweekly board meetings. Each module has a reflection component where the tutors reflect on their experiences through the lens of the last module and connect it to the current module. Based on feedback from faculty at Netter partner schools, these modules will be made available to teachers of our tutees, so they know what we are discussing and can offer input as learning continues.

HOW SHOULD WE TRAIN OUR TUTORS?

How to Be a Good Educator: An Understanding of Critical Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Theorists of pedagogy, politics, and punishment often overlap in education. Paolo Freire, in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, poses a question that guides this PSL: "how can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation" (Freire, 1968)? How can PRI facilitate the

destruction of debilitating structures locally? Freire's solution is to have the subjugated perceive the reality of their oppression not as inescapable but as a limiting situation they can transform (Freire, 1968). PRI must thus reaffirm tutees' culture to counteract the notion that their identities are deficient. To do this, tutors must understand this goal, educational power dynamics, educator efficacy, critical reflection, critical pedagogy, race relations, and so much more—an effective way to foster these understandings is to have a sustained method of learning, practicing, and reflecting (Freire, 1968).

These education modules must emphasize self-care and self-awareness. Michel Foucault posits we cannot care for ourselves without knowledge of ourselves (Foucault et al., 1987). If the health and awareness of our educators are essential to effective education, as research has demonstrated it is, and care for oneself is knowledge of oneself, a process of critical reflection must take place (Nero & Delpit, 2006). Thus, the general outline for the education that must occur takes form, as the graphic below demonstrates (see figure 1). One, learn— understand the concepts we must be aware of as we engage in education. Two, practice— implement the lessons into interactions with tutees. Three, reflect—self-evaluate, and self-advocate as a self-care practice to enrich tutee interactions and foster a better understanding of the self.

What must we know and do to be culturally responsive?

As culturally responsive teaching relies on engaging with students' culture, language, and community to support their identities, tutors must be knowledgeable of their students. This involves a sustained practice of critical reflection, which pushes educators to confront their personal biases (Richards et al., 2007). With these biases and perceptions under review, tutors are more effective in our student interactions. Maintaining focus

> As culturally responsive teaching relies on engaging with students' culture, language, and community to support their identities, tutors must be knowledgeable of their students. This involves a sustained practice of critical reflection, which pushes educators to confront their personal biases (Richards et al., 2007).

on reflection, work must also be done on understanding students' culture. Knowing students' identities and interests fosters trust in relationships but foraying further into actively experiencing their community to bring it into learning effectively is necessary (Sleeter, 2011). Thus, communal interaction is imperative: bring speakers in from the schools, bring tutees to Penn, and practice community enrichment programs on-site as often as possible.

Figure 1 *Workshop learning process*

As discussed earlier, AAVE has an intense cultural significance in the Black community (Nero & Delpit, 2006). Communicating that AAVE is not "wrong" is fundamental. Doing so demonstrates that tutors appreciate the people who speak it (Woo & Curtis, 1996). Nonetheless, it must be simultaneously recognized that not teaching students "standard" English may inevitably hamper their prospects given current societal norms (Nero & Delpit, 2006; Abbott, 2020; Rogers, 2020).

A principal problem at play in this problem-solving learning research is that of dialectical miscomprehension. AAVE speakers in classrooms prioritizing MAE exist in quasi-foreign language situations (Horwitz, Improving Cross-Dialectical Comprehension in our Community 2020). Though current Penn students are not responsible for this, there is potential to exacerbate these challenges (Horwitz, Interview 2020). PRI's goal is to enhance reading skills in West Philadelphia students, so tutors must consciously understand what students are saying, reaffirm their sociolinguistic identity, and demonstrate, through the curriculum and their support, what MAE sounds like.

The most important takeaways from this subsection are the significance of understanding the tutor's role in the communities we work in, the language of these communities, and the culture with which they identify. When these identities ate recognized as assets and tapped into, we create an optimal environment for learning (Educators Team at Understood, 2020).

THE NEW TRAINING

PRI has three different groups: coordinators, tutors, and tutees. The coordinators' responsibilities include recruitment, organization, training, and evaluation (Bynum, 2020; Faulstich, 2020). The tutors' main responsibility is teaching the tutees (Bynum, 2020). The tutees' responsibility is to learn, but the interaction between the tutees and the tutors is intended to be mutually transformative. I have visually detailed this organizational model below in figure 2.

Figure 2. Organizational model for the Penn Reading Initiative
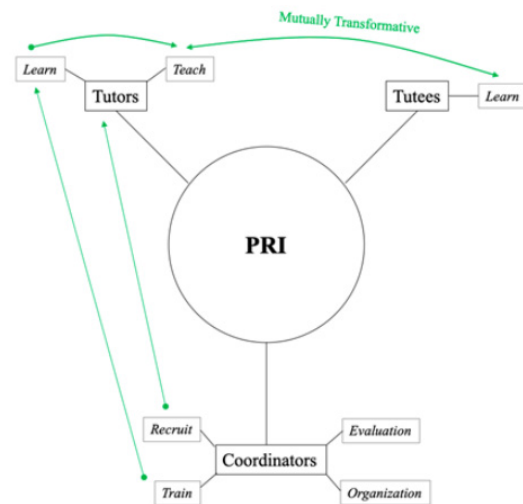
The current training methods, as evidenced by the information gathered in this article, have not been able to achieve the desired goal of the PRI: to improve reading skills in West Philadelphia Schools (Faulstich, 2020; Netter Center). This could result from the training's lack of focus on critical reflection, cultural responsiveness, privilege, and systemic racism. Based on conversations with stakeholders, generating training is laborious. As such, a new position at PRI has been added to focus solely on tutor education. The new trainer position takes over the responsibility of educating tutors (see figure 3).

Figure 3. New organization structure for the Penn Reading Initiative
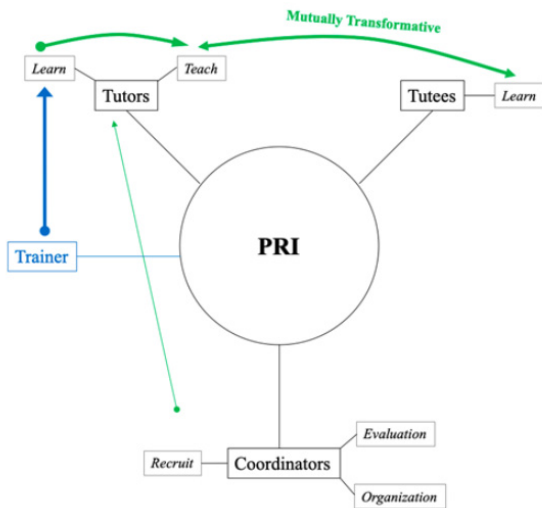
Structure of the Training Modules

The training modules have a structure designed to push PRI tutors to learn the module discussed, practice that learning in their interactions with tutees, and critically reflect on that informed interaction individually and during the proceeding training module. The figure below demonstrates the outline and structure of the modules (see figure 4).

The learning component of this training starts with each module. After the workshops are complete, the learning component does not stop. Instead, tutors carry what they learn into their interactions with their

students. In this engagement, the tutors learn how the concepts alter or reinforce their relationships with their students. As part of the reflections they complete under the current PRI structure, they also discuss how this learning affected their teaching experience (Bynum, 2020). At the following training module, group and individual reflections on the past weeks clearly focus on how that experience relates to the current training: how do we connect these models? Why is it necessary to connect them? How do they influence one another? This structure makes learning adaptive and continuous; new dimensions to our understanding are added, and their places within the communal context are reflected upon.

Another integral facet of this training is practice. Practicing learned topics must be emphasized to be successful in culturally responsive pedagogy. The practice portion is facilitated by the presentation of skills for implementation in each module—offering tips for adjusting teaching styles based on the module that has just been presented. It also includes small portions of discussion and example scenarios to model what informed practices look like and how to tailor interactions to mirror content. The practice portions of training occur during work with students in tutoring sessions.

The last aspect of the program is reflection. Reflection pushes tutors to review behavior, beliefs, and biases— interrogating negative stereotypes or untruths about the community. The reflection component provides time

Figure 4 New workshop learning process

for this evaluation and encourages critical discussion through a system of sustained activities that occur before, during, and after the training modules. To do this, the trainer identifies the desired outcomes, designs reflection activities that support those outcomes, engages in sustained reflection, and has systems to assess learning and implementation (Critical Reflection, 2012).

Implementation

At the first biweekly board meeting of each academic year, the trainer presents a module on the most important facets of the work tutors are doing: AAVE, culturally responsive teaching, critical reflection, the philosophy behind the training, and strategies for implementation in tutor/tutee interactions. After this first meeting, the first interactions between tutors and tutees occur. At the second meeting, the trainer presents new content on oppression and privilege to analyze power dynamics that may strain educational relationships. At the end of the module, tutors are prompted with a series of questions that urge them to reflect on their most recent interactions with students and the last training module from the prior meeting through the lens of the current module. This is to foster an interconnectedness between all the modules. The structure for the second meeting is the general structure that continues throughout the academic year. As new modules requiring expertise or communal knowledge are created, speakers from Netter, the partner schools, and the community are included.

The most important part of these sessions is that they are designed to be changed. Because cultures, communities, identities, and the needs of our students and teacher partners in West Philadelphia change, having a static set of training modules is almost counterproductive. The modules are under review based on evaluation from the trainer, PRI tutors, coordinators, Netter staff, and faculty in UACS schools.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

AAVE is a cultural artifact that holds significance for many Black Americans. When young Black students enter the classroom, many speak a language not reflected in their education. Many of these pupils are instructed in a language they do not understand and are expected to succeed in an education system that does not care for their cultural identity. Attempts to navigate this dialectical miscomprehension in the public education system have had limited success. The solution this article discusses is a sustained, culturally responsive tutor education program that attempts to increase literacy in West Philadelphia by preparing Penn students to engage effectively with a different community.

The overarching goal is to use the human resources of Penn to assist in the navigation of institutional barriers which make culturally responsive education a logistical challenge. This problem-solving learning article is one piece of a larger culturally responsive puzzle, one that Penn, the Netter Center, and the country must work harder to assemble.

> Black students enter the classroom, many speak a language not reflected in their education. Many of these pupils are instructed in a language they do not understand and are expected to succeed in an education system that does not care for their cultural identity.

The foundational writing of this research occurred more than two years ago, during the summer of 2020. That summer, when COVID-19 and protests against racial injustice dominated global headlines, this project was taken on to support early literacy in West Philadelphia.

This PSL process continued after this summer with establishing of the director of tutor education position at PRI. I held this position for two years until I graduated in May 2022. With a team of Netter staff, modules (on linguistic identity, privilege, trauma-informed education, etc.) were built and presented to PRI's tutors.

The inaugural year of this program had difficulties—with scheduling, content creation, and COVID—but it culminated in creating of the professional development associates team at the Netter Center. As one of the founding members, I, along with four remarkable peers, centered community voices to expand reflection and development modules to all 23 Netter Center UACS programs—not just PRI. Each associate tailored modules to fit a specific subject. For example, modules to support the linguistic identities of students were built for programs like PRI, while modules on unconscious bias in STEM were facilitated for programs with STEM-based goals. Each of these modules had a goal of centering communal voices.

The second and final year of my direct work on this project allowed me to serve as another inaugural member of a new team at Netter: The Anti-Racism Working Group. This group's mission is to "advance the Center's efforts to further develop approaches, strategies, and actions to actively combat and ultimately eradicate racism in all its forms" (Anti-Racism Working Group, 2021). Alongside six of Netter's full-time staff and community leaders, I co-convened this working group—comprised of dozens of West Philadelphia and Penn stakeholders. My specific focus with this group was to co-lead the safe spaces subcommittee. The goal of this committee is to create events for staff, K12 students and parents, and partners. These events would be safe spaces for discussion, professional development opportunities for staff and Penn students, and opportunities to share anti-racism and social justice ideas. Safe spaces are created with the safe-spaces toolkit (a product of this subcommittee), outlining procedures and practices to foster comfortable

engagement that allows for positive growth. The work of this subcommittee also culminated in the Netter Center's first annual community block party, where individuals from Penn and West Philadelphia came together to learn about, experience joy with, and engage with each other.

After graduating, I left Netter and the University of Pennsylvania. Nonetheless, the solution generated by the community lives on through new programs established and new students eager to create a more just society. The work of PRI (and its new director of tutor education), the PD Associates, and the Anti-Racism Work Group continues with goals to counteract racism around West Philadelphia to better support a community that has been marginalized for decades.

References

Abbott, J. (2020, July 11). Interview with Joyce Abbott. personal.

ACLU. (2020). School-to-Prison Pipeline. Retrieved July 2020, from https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline

Anti-Racism Working Group. (2021, June 18). Anti-Racism Working Group Mission. About the Center. Retrieved September 29, 2022, from https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/about-center/anti-racism-working-group

Bynum, R. (2020, July 21). Interview with Regina Bynum. personal.

Charity Hudley, A. H., Mallinson, C., Bucholtz, M., Flores, N., Holliday, N., Chun, E., Spears, A., & Leonard, W. Y. (2019, May). Linguistic Society of America Statement on Race. Linguistic Society of America. Retrieved July 2020, from https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/lsa-statement-race

Educators Team at Understood. (2020, February 14). Culturally Responsive Teaching: What You Need to Know. Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Guide. Retrieved July 31, 2020, from https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/for-educators/universal-design-for-learning/what-is-culturally-responsive-teaching

Eligon, J. (2020, June 26). A debate over identity and race asks, are African-Americans 'black' or 'black'? The New York Times. Retrieved January 17, 2023, from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/us/black-african-american-style-debate.html

Faulstich, A. (2020, July 6). Interview with Andrew Faulstich. personal.

Foucault, M., Fornet-Betancourt, R., Becker, H., Gomez-Müller, A., & Gauthier, J. D. (1987). The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault. Philosophy & Social Criticism, 12(2), 112–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/019145378701200202

Freire, P. (1968). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Bloomsbury Academic.

Georgetown University Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship. (2020). Top Qualities of an Effective Teacher. CNDLS. Retrieved July 30, 2020, from https://cndls.georgetown.edu/at-program/twl/effective-teacher/

Harkavy, I., Simmonds, T., & Moyse, N. (2020). Seminar 08. URBS 208. Philadelphia.

Horwitz, S. (2020, July 2). Interview with Sara Horwitz. personal

Horwitz, S. (2020). Improving Cross-Dialectal Comprehension in Our Community (thesis).

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Theory Into Practice.

Nero, S. J., & Delpit, L. (2006). What should teachers do? Ebonics and culturally responsive education. In Dialects, Englishes, Creoles, and education (pp. 93–100). essay, Lawrence Erlbaum.

Netter Center for Community Partnerships. (2019, June 24). Our Mission. Retrieved July 2020, from https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/about-center/our-mission

Netter Center for Community Partnerships. (2018, August 9). Penn Reading Initiative. Retrieved June 2020, from https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/what-we-do/programs/university-assisted-community-schools/penn-reading-initiative

O'Mara, M. P. (2015). Building "Brainsville": The University of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia. In Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley (pp. 142–181). essay, Princeton Univ. Press.

Richards, H. V., Brown, A. F., & Forde, T. B. (2007). Addressing Diversity in Schools: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Teaching Exceptional Children, 39(3), 64–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990703900310

Rickford, J. (1996, December). Ebonics Notes and Discussion. Retrieved July 1, 2020, from https://web.stanford.edu/~rickford/ebonics/EbonicsExamples.html

Rickford, J. (2003). Using the Vernacular to Teach the Standard. Retrieved July 14, 2020, from https://web.stanford.edu/~rickford/papers/VernacularToTeachStandard.html

Rickford, J. R. (2003). What is Ebonics (African American English)? Retrieved July 1, 2020, from https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/what-ebonics-african-american-english

Rogers, B. (2020, July 22). Interview with Brian Rogers. personal

Sleeter, C. E. (2011). An Agenda to Strengthen Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. English Teaching: Practice and Critique, 10(2), 7–23. Retrieved July 2020, from http://education.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/files/2011v10n2art1.pdf.

Sleeter, C. E. (2012). Confronting the Marginalization of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Urban Education, 47(3), 562–584. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085911431472

Terry, J. M., Hendrick, R., Evangelou, E., & Smith, R. L. (2015). Dialect Switching and Mathematical Reasoning Tests Implications for Early Educational Achievement. In The Oxford Handbook of African American Language (pp. 637–658). essay, Oxford University Press.

Woo, E., & Curtis, M. (1996, December 20). Oakland School District Recognizes Black English. Los Angeles Times. Retrieved July 14, 2020, from https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-12-20-mn-11042-story.html