The Penalties of Anglo-Saxon King’s English vs. The Missed Opportunities of the African Kings’ English: Acknowledging AAVE, Understanding its use, and Addressing the Related Opportunity Gap in West Tennessee Public Schools

Jamie LeMond Elliott

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by

Jamie LeMond Elliott

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Dedication

None of this would have been possible without the power of the ONLY God for all that he has done in my life. I have experienced throughout this dissertation process how God has renewed my strength even when I felt like giving up. I dedicate this dissertation to my wife Lyn McIntyre Elliott whom God has made for me to be my helpmate and support during this time of growth. My dear wife, thank you for pushing, encouraging, and allowing me to complete this endeavor that I have always wanted to complete. Your love and support made the hardest days of this process easier for me to endure. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleader. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my dear daughter, my twin, JaLeena. My dear daughter, you were born during the time of my dissertation. You are my firstborn, and I cannot imagine a life without you now. You were born into this world at the right time, but because of you and your gorgeous eyes, I was inspired to continue the race to the completion of my dissertation. This dissertation is also dedicated to many who helped me to get where I am today. I do not think that I could be here right now if it was not for my family. I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my beloved father, Reverend James Lee Elliott, and my mother, Evangelist Paula Elliott. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my siblings Donna, Alex, and Angie who over the years have remained my greatest supporters. God bless you all!

Above all things, I would like to thank God for giving me the chance and opportunity to get to this level of my education. I am convinced that you are God and God alone. It was because of you that I can stand here right now and confess that I could not have done it without your precious Blood.
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I would like to take this time to express my appreciation to Dr. Eric Platt for being my advisor, mentor, motivator, and at times my safety net. Your feedback and your ability to work with me while at the same time being the department’s chair, made me feel as if I too was important. You will never be forgotten in my eyes, Dr. Platt. I also want to share my appreciation with Dr. Beth Stratton, Dr. Stephen Zanskas, and Dr. Verner Mitchell for taking the time to provide me with feedback during my dissertation adventure. Your advice was incredible, and I would like to say thanks. The time that you spent helping me to achieve the completion of my dissertation has been extremely phenomenal. You all took time out of your busy schedules to help me during this learning experience. Without your feedback, motivation, and time, this all could not have been possible. From the bottom of my heart, I want to say Thank You!

I would also like to thank the participants for their time to allow me to interview each of them. Your experiences have made my research very valuable, and it has enriched my dissertation and my heart. I know many of you are now choosing a path forward in your lives now that you have graduated from high school. I pray that you will be successful in all that you do.
Abstract

In 2011, the legislators from the State of Tennessee amended a state law known as the English and Legal Language Code Section 4-I-404. This state law was formally passed in 1984 as a symbolic gesture to accept various languages. Under this state law, languages besides Standard English were not allowed in public facilities such as public schools. This included print and formal teaching from being taught, printed, and recognized in public facilities such as public schools. Under the new state law, those that did not speak Standard English as their home language are now obligated to learn a new language known as Standard English. The new state law also created a gap between those that speak fluent Standard English to those that were not born into the Standard English community. West Tennessee has a vast array of languages besides Standard English, and all of them are affected by the new Tennessee law. Such languages involve African-American Vernacular English.

The purpose of this study is to explore and discover the achievement gaps between those that speak African-American Vernacular English and Standard English. Using the theory of Critical Race Theory, I will present an analysis of how Tennessee’s new law is a form of systemic racism that has deprived many African-American AAVE speakers in West Tennessee of an equal education simply because of the language they speak. Using the approach of qualitative research, data was gathered from seven participants. From their experiences major themes were developed: 1) Pre-Knowledge of AAVE, 2) Social interactions at school, 3) Inside the ELA classroom, 4) Standardized tests, 5) Code-Switching. This study will use the experiences of these participants to create a research analysis as to how the prohibition of AAVE in public schools has caused a social and achievement gap between the two languages.
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<td>2. SE-Standard English</td>
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<td>3. ELA-English Language Arts</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2008, Dena Simmons, an expert on African-American identity spoke at a Ted Talk conference. She stated there is emotional damage done when young people cannot be themselves. The damage occurs when they are forced to edit who they are to be acceptable. The emotional damage can, for some, become permanent if not altered. As an African-American male growing up in a predominantly Caucasian community, I only knew and understood one language- Standard English (SE). My parents spoke African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) otherwise known as Ebonics, but they would not allow my siblings and me to speak their native language at home. They taught us that if we mastered SE and spoke it well, we could receive promising benefits and great opportunities in the future as opposed to speaking AAVE which they referred to as slang, broken English, and thought of as thug talk in public schools.

My elementary school was in a rural city in Hardeman County, Tennessee. There were very few African-American students at the school. We communicated and learned to live with being in a school that was centered around standard English. Our school was always recognized and rewarded for scoring well in Literacy, Writing, and Language Arts. The teachers were amazed at our accomplishments and rewarded us for our efforts. Our books, curriculum, and lessons were centered around the acquisition of SE. Throughout my years at elementary school, I was amazed by the fact that I never read a book pertaining to African-Americans nor did I read books written by African-American authors. To the African-American students at my elementary school, speaking perfect SE was the norm, and recognizing any part of AAVE, whether speaking, writing, or reading was not acceptable to the teachers at my elementary school.

The middle and high schools that I attended in Hardeman County were very diverse because of the numerous elementary schools that blended to form the high school population.
This combination created a diverse student population with African-American students comprising the majority of the population. The student population was a mixture of urban and rural students which was quite different from my elementary school. I was weary of the words such as “bathroom”, “sup yo”, or “is you”. The first two years of high school were undoubtedly very hard for me because I was criticized for being “too White” by my African-American classmates and “not White enough” by my Caucasian classmates. I soon became emotionally damaged. I never understood why I was bullied by both African-American and Caucasian students simply based on how I spoke. I realized that my years of speaking SE and avoiding the usage of AAVE had a tremendous effect on how I communicated and related to classmates of my own culture. I tried very hard to fit in by speaking AAVE in school, but every time I tried, I was always corrected or penalized by my teachers and parents. When I asked my teachers why I should embrace SE and avoid using AAVE, they would reply, “If you master the way you speak SE, then you would be guaranteed great opportunities in the future”.

I realized that the way I spoke allowed me to receive a lot of recognition and praise unlike my friend, Anthony. Anthony and I were both honor students in high school. We were similar in almost everything. He and I made the same grades, attended the same classes, and had similar dreams of attending a college or university. However, the biggest difference between Anthony and myself was our vernacular. I spoke more SE while Anthony, who grew up in an urban neighborhood, spoke AAVE primarily. Between the two of us, I was always the one the teachers and school leaders asked to speak at programs or join clubs. I was regarded as an exceptional African-American student while Anthony was not recognized nor regarded as exceptional but just “another Black kid”. In Anthony’s case, he was always ignored. The school leaders never asked him to speak or participate in any clubs or organizations.
Days before graduation, I was awarded many scholarships, accepted into prestigious schools, and received high recognition from the school. At the same time, my best friend had to struggle to find scholarship opportunities and acceptance into colleges. He later informed me that because of the way he spoke, teachers, students, college recruiters, and people in general often assumed him inferior, a bad person, or a thug. He said to me, “If only I could have spoken like you Jamie, then I don't think that I would have missed so many opportunities”. So, I concluded that African-Americans who master SE language are recipients of greater opportunities than those that have limited use of it.

As an educator, I realized that at every school where I taught many of the students that passed the ELA state assessments were Caucasian, and those that scored low on these tests were African-American AAVE speakers. I wondered whether these AAVE speakers were socially, academically, and emotionally damaged when they saw that every year their scores were much lower than their Caucasian classmates. I began to think about my best friend Anthony and the similar struggles he had with AAVE and acceptance in an SE setting.

I realized that throughout West Tennessee there was a similar pattern with predominant African-American schools typically scoring below those schools that were suburban and predominantly Caucasian (Baker-Bell 2013). The curriculum and the schools’ policies were designed by local and state lawmakers and policyholders (predominantly Caucasian) to propose programs that would benefit and reward students that spoke SE and used it correctly, while at the same time penalizing those students that spoke AAVE. This agenda could only result in one of two conclusions. One conclusion is that poverty, mismanagement of schools, and low teacher morale lead to low scores (Johnson, 2007). A second conclusion is that the curriculum or policies are biased and lack support for African-American AAVE speakers that attempt to raise the scores
in ELA and reading among African-American AAVE speakers above or equal to Caucasian SE
students would be flawed and a waste of time (Theobald & Freeman 2014). So, my research
began in an attempt to discover which one of these assumptions was correct.

**Statement of the Problem**

In West Tennessee, the English Language Arts (ELA) gap along language demographics
is alarming when it comes to the TNReady ELA assessments. In the 2018-19 school year, Tipton
County Schools (72% are Caucasian students), Henderson County Schools (65% are Caucasian
students), and Gibson County Special School District (87% Caucasian students), ranked highest
in West Tennessee in ELA scores according to the Tennessee Department of Education in 2019
(TN DOE, 2019). These schools were awarded the title *Exemplary*. However, at the other end of
the spectrum, the schools that scored the lowest scores in West Tennessee in the ELA TNReady
assessments in 2019 came from school districts that had predominantly African- American
students. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2019), the school districts in
West Tennessee with the lowest ELA scores were Shelby County Schools (75% African-
American students), Jackson Madison County Schools (57% African-American students), and
Humboldt City Schools (73% African-American students). These school districts were not
awarded an exemplary title. Instead, they were penalized and labeled, *Needs Improvement*
(Randolph, 2019).

Such numbers in West Tennessee are not surprising. In fact, it reflects what is also taking
place statewide. Throughout the state of Tennessee, the ELA state assessments in urban African-
American schools are lower than those from Caucasian suburban schools (TN Department of
Education, 2019).
Although the United States Congress has not approved an English-only policy nationwide, many states, including Tennessee, have passed, and implemented English-only policies. While some of these English-only policies are symbolic in states such as Hawaii and Illinois (Asensio, 2010. Tennessee has gone beyond being symbolic. In 2011, the State of Tennessee revised and amended an English-only policy that was previously adopted in 1984 called the *English and Legal Language Code Section 4-1-404*. The policy that was revised in 2011 mirrors the same policy of 1984:

> English is hereby established as the official and legal language of Tennessee. All communications and publications, including ballots, produced by government entities in Tennessee shall be in English, and instruction in public schools and colleges of Tennessee shall be conducted in English unless the nature of the course would require otherwise. (English-Official and Legal Language code Tenn. Code Ann Section 4-1-404 et seq (2011)

The latter part of the Tennessee code refers to instruction in public schools that would also have to be completed in English, “unless the nature of the course requires otherwise”.

The move by the Republicans led state legislature and governor (predominately Caucasian) set in motion certain standards, codes, and guidelines in public schools that would ultimately penalize students throughout Tennessee for speaking AAVE and other languages contrary to SE (Padilla, et. al., 1991).

**Critical Race Theory**

My qualitative research study used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as its theoretical framework. CRT describes the opening of reality when it comes to inequalities within an organization based on race. It also indicates and acknowledges oppression and racism in the United States (Vargues 2014). David Stovall (2005) believes that the overall objective of CRT is to analyze racism in organizations that are important for the development of society as a whole.
These organizations can produce policies and standards that threaten ethnic minorities and their communities (Price, 1981). CRT defines the intentions of Caucasian privilege by arguing and defending the need for equality in organizations (Delgado and Stefancic, 1993). According to Nicholas Daniel (2009), there are five major tenets that critical race theorists use as the basis for determining whether racism or inequality exists within an organization. These tenets included the following:

a. The notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational
b. The idea of an interest convergence
c. The social construction of race
d. The idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling
e. The notion that whites have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation.

These tenets served as building blocks to discover whether there was a biased agenda in the public schools in West Tennessee towards AAVE speakers.

When applying the tenets of CRT to this study, I explored whether there was inequality when it comes to those that speak AAVE over SE. By also using the tenets of CRT in this research, I contributed to an anti-racist agenda (Stovall, 2010). It allowed me to hear, obtain, and develop a series of stories from former African-American high school students that were impacted by language deprivation from SE-only schools. In this research, I used the tenets of CRT and explained whether there is language deprivation for students that speak AAVE as opposed to those that speak SE. In this research, I also used the tenets of CRT.
Purpose of the Study

In West Tennessee, the public-school systems’ standards, teaching practices, and curriculum have rarely changed over the years when it comes to testing results in ELA (Welsh, 2018). Every year, the results are relatively the same. Urban African-American schools score lower than suburban Caucasian schools in ELA state assessments in Tennessee (Ericksen, 2012). The concept of always scoring less than Caucasian schools in ELA may deceive African-American students into thinking that the language that they speak at home is inferior to SE they are taught at school (Rickford, 2010). The state government of Tennessee reiterates this concept by publicly acknowledging students and schools that embrace SE fully by rewarding them with the title of exemplary status. The rewards often extend within the classroom ranging from extra stipends for teachers, more funding for the school, community involvement, praise, and resources. At the same time, the state also publicly acknowledges students and schools that do not embrace SE by penalizing them with labels such as “needs improvement”. These penalties often extend into the school and classroom which ranges from the firing and removal of teachers and school leaders, a state takeover of the school, and also public acknowledgment that these students “cannot read” (Jones, 2010).

The public schools in West Tennessee are adamant about demolishing AAVE (Godley, 2008). In fact, students who speak AAVE are often met with fierce resistance from teachers, parents, and school leaders (Shedrow, 2017). African-American Vernacular English or Ebonics as it has been known, has been one of the pillars and foundations of African-American culture and language. The refusal to acknowledge and recognize AAVE in the public-school systems in West Tennessee may be an indication of language deprivation. It is an attempt to weaken and at times demoralize African-American culture through deprivation of the AAVE language.
In this study, seven recently graduated high school African-American AAVE speaking students in West Tennessee shared their experiences about AAVE in their high school through the interview process. The participants were eighteen years old, and although they all spoke AAVE, they all came from various socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews recorded and analyzed experiences from former students who are alumni at a rural high school located in the southwestern region of West Tennessee. The school district had a high number of AAVE speakers and is located thirty miles from Memphis, Tennessee. Overall, the objective was to discover the experiences AAVE speakers faced in ELA classrooms in West Tennessee, whether or not AAVE speakers knew the differences between AAVE and SE, and if they knew the grading policies in their ELA classrooms were SE centered.

Using the tenets of CRT as my guide and discovering the answers to my research questions allowed me to discover if there is a biased agenda toward African-American AAVE speakers in the public schools in West Tennessee. The following questions were used to help determine supportive questions for the interviews and assist in concluding sufficient evidence that AAVE speakers were being deprived in public schools.

**The Research Questions**

According to J. Agee (2008), research questions give shape and a sense of direction to a study or circumstance that are often ignored or underestimated. Questioning, especially in a qualitative study, plays an important role in designing a qualitative case study. A researcher’s credibility rests on the specific nature and behavior of people who are currently in any given situation (Geertz, 1973). Research questions are what Geertz calls “microscopic details of society and communities of individuals” (p. 10). In my research, questions played a pivotal role in
discovering facts about the ELA conditions for African-American AAVE speakers in high schools throughout West Tennessee.

As stated earlier, the overall objective of my research case study was to discover the experiences AAVE speakers faced in an ELA classroom, whether or not AAVE speakers knew the differences between SE and AAVE, and if AAVE speakers were being deprived with low scores because the assessments were SE focused. These objectives as well as the use of the tenets of CRT have allowed me to develop the following research questions:

1. What are African-American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school ELA classrooms in West Tennessee?
2. How do African-American AAVE speaking students navigate SE language policies that deprive AAVE in high school?
3. How do African-American AAVE speaking students understand the differences between AAVE and SE?

The research questions helped me to explore and discover if there were a bias toward African-American AAVE speakers in high schools across West Tennessee. A description of these research questions is discussed as follows:

**What are African-American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school ELA classrooms?**

The overall goal of this research question was to understand stories of those that have experienced setbacks and penalties for speaking AAVE while attending ELA classes in West Tennessee. This is a research question that was valuable for the CRT process of raising the issue of bias within the school. The interview questions for this research question will be parallel to the way the students learned and felt when they were learning SE at school. The question focused on the students' view of their ELA classes as a whole and indicated what the students
saw as a norm and deprived the existence of AAVE in their ELA classes. The research pivoted into more specific interview questions that related to the overall research question.

**How do African-American AAVE speaking students navigate SE language policies that deprive AAVE in high school?**

This second question was crucial in determining whether or not African-American AAVE speakers were aware of the grading policies in their ELA classes, which prohibit the use of AAVE in class. The interviewers will tell stories of how they were scored differently when they wrote or spoke AAVE in their ELA class. The policies of SE only in the ELA classroom may be the reason why so many AAVE speakers were not able to progress in ELA assessments. This research question went deeper in-depth with the social and academic experiences of AAVE speakers while they were in high school. It described in detail the opportunities missed by AAVE speakers for not knowing much SE to be termed as exceptional. The research focused on how life in high school would have been if the school adopted both SE and AAVE platforms in their classrooms. The objective of research question three was to determine whether or not the student had been socially and academically deprived of speaking AAVE. It also will help the researcher to determine steps to take so that future high school AAVE-speaking graduates do not have to experience the same deprivation.

**How do African-American AAVE students understand the differences between AAVE and SE?**

This research question was the underlying opportunity for high school AAVE speakers to detail and recount their experiences of differentiating between AAVE and SE in school. The research question focused on words that were both spoken by SE and AAVE but had different meanings. However, students may be aware of SE and AAVE vernaculars in school language
otherwise known as code-switching. The students then recount times when they felt that they had to relinquish their AAVE and use SE. The interview questions will consist of words and phrases that the students interpreted in their own words and reminisced about their time among SE language speakers and how they felt in school trying to learn SE.

These research questions helped guide me into making discoveries about language practices in high schools throughout west Tennessee. It is important to realize that research questions such as the ones described above formulated a plan for the entire qualitative research design. In fact, research questions are so important that many researchers such as Lyn Richards (2005), suggest that a study cannot begin without a plan and it would be “unacceptable for both ethical and practical reasons (Richards, 2005, p. 14). With these research questions that I pose, I am now able to move into writing my exploratory case study, which is also the essence of a qualitative research design.

**Methodology: Exploratory Case Study Research**

The research used a case study as its methodology. Exploratory Case Studies (ECS) have the objective of simply exploring a current situation and developing a case in which the current situation needs to be changed (Mills, et. al., 2010). The overall objective of an exploratory case study investigates the needed research of a situation that lacks research on a particular issue. The lack of research on whether or not AAVE could be a useful component in public schools in West Tennessee is the ideal reason why ECS is needed for this research.

The approach as to whether AAVE can play a significant role in schools in West Tennessee requires an exploratory case study to investigate if AAVE speakers are being penalized for the language that they speak. The case study will also indicate if this research will also impact many African-American AAVE speakers to argue their case that the reason for poor
ELA state assessments is the deprivation of the language they speak and how it does not correlate with what is on the state assessments. Using the tenets of CRT, the researcher developed a successful ECS approach to make a crucial argument to implement AAVE in the school districts in West Tennessee.

Summary

Chapter one is an indication of the intent of the researcher to prove the need for the implementation of AAVE in public schools in West Tennessee. Through personal experiences and those of his students, I am determined to argue that AAVE is a different language and should not be considered slang or ghetto. AAVE (Ebonics) has a history of evolution and usage throughout the African-American community. Therefore, it should be regarded as a language that should be practiced, studied, and recognized. Currently, the use of AAVE in public schools in West Tennessee has not been regarded as an optimistic approach, but rather, it has been regarded as a language that should not be spoken or recognized in West Tennessee’s public schools.

Chapter One gives highlights of what is in store for the research approach. Throughout the ECS, I presented proof as to why AAVE is needed in public schools. The study presented additional chapters that provided strong proof for the need to implement AAVE in public schools.

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One provided an introduction to the study and how AAVE is one of the significant pillars of African-American culture. It explained the theoretical framework as the personal statement and purpose of this study. Chapter One also addressed why CRT is needed to analyze and address language deprivation that African-American high school students received when they are speaking AAVE at a public school in West Tennessee. This chapter also listed the major research questions and defines important terms critical to this research.
Chapter Two focuses on theory and literature. The theoretical framework of CRT will be introduced as well as the tenets it possesses. Upon the completion of describing in detail the theoretical framework, Chapter 2 addressed any juxtapositions of how CRT drives the content. The literature review presented itself in Chapter Two and presented a well-versed knowledge of the current research in detail and explain how it will contribute to the study.

Chapter 3 focused on the methodology, methods, trustworthiness, and ethics for the creation of this research. The methods conducted for this research consisted of semi-structured interviews in which seven participants were chosen to play a role. The conclusion of Chapter Three focused on the analysis and implicit interpretation of the data that was collected during the interviews.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

Chapter two presents a literature review that provides an in-depth look at the history and use of African-American Vernacular English and a description of the theoretical framework that will be used in this research study. The comprehensive study includes the research questions and the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT). An explanation of how AAVE became a vernacular language due to a series of various West African languages spoken by many African kings intertwined with English, came into practice. The literature review also explains how AAVE became the main communication source for African-Americans in West Tennessee. Grammar rules, usages, and definitions of AAVE will also be included in the literature review.

Roadmap of Chapter Two

Chapter two is divided into three phases: (1) A review of the theoretical framework—Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be used in my research study as well as its objective, origin, and description of its five tenets that have made CRT an opportune force in theory. These tenets will be used throughout the research to prove that the school policies and laws have deprived AAVE speakers of a language; (2) A background of AAVE will also be introduced in this research. This will indicate that AAVE is not just a dialect of English or slang, but it is a language spoken by ninety percent of the African-American population (3) A review of the research questions that are used in research as ways of discovering the answers to those questions. As stated previously the research questions are: (1) What are African-American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school ELA classrooms? (2) How do African-American AAVE speaking students navigate SE language policies that deprive AAVE in high school? and; (3) How do African-American AAVE students understand the differences between AAVE and SE?
Chapter two also used renowned researchers who offered their analysis and expertise throughout the research design. The researchers within this chapter offer extensive knowledge of topics critical to my research design. These researchers include John Obgu, James Haskins, and Hugh Butts with their extensive knowledge of verbal behavior and the social system of African-Americans nationwide and in West Tennessee. Other researchers such as Geneva Smitherman, William Labov, and Joseph Dillard are used in this research for their comprehensive understanding and analysis of AAVE and how it should be implemented in public schools. And finally, Richard Delgado, Tara Yosso, Jean Stefancic, and other prominent researchers explain why Critical Race Theory (CRT) is needed for the formation of this case study.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Critical Race Theory**

My research examined the language practices of recently graduated African-Americans who attended a school in the southwest region of West Tennessee. It also used CRT as its theoretical framework and examined the current oppressions that AAVE speakers suffered. Critical Race Theory has been used to help activists and researchers uncover policies that are unequal against people of color (Delgado, 1993). It also countered the advancement and intentions of those of privilege by challenging their attempts and how making new policies would stop their progress (Alexander, 2012). Throughout the decades CRT has proven itself as a powerful mechanism to fight against bias.

**Origins of CRT**

According to Fransico Valdes, Jerome Culp, and Angela Harris (2002), “Despite the doubts, sneers, and attacks, CRT has not only survived, but it is flourishing as it enters its second decade” (p. 4). In its twenty years of existence, CRT has made many accomplishments toward
equalizing educational opportunities for students of diverse cultures and correcting and changing laws and policies. Its objective is to focus on issues of race and bias within laws and policies that work to change these laws and policies to improve the lives of people of diverse cultures (Delgado, 2000).

Critical Race Theory was founded through two movements-critical legal studies and radical feminism in the 1970s (Taylor, et. al., 2009). However, despite its progression in the ’70s, CRT gained popularity at the St. Benedict Center in Madison, Wisconsin in 1989 (Delgado and Stefanic, 2001). Since then, CRT and its tenets have made many strides in urban housing, politics, and education. For this research, I used the tenets of CRT in the educational spectrum and its implications for language deprivation of AAVE-speaking students.

The Tenets of CRT

Solorzano, et. al. (1999) believe that CRT uses the experiences of underrepresented populations, such as African-Americans, to gather information to combat the ideologies of an organization’s policies and standards that are often seen as unequal. By using the tenets of CRT, I have designed ways to explore if students are being marginalized for speaking AAVE in the public-school systems in West Tennessee.

There are five tenets to CRT: (1) The notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) The idea of interest convergence; (3) The social construction of race; (4) The idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling; and (5) The notion that whites have benefited from civil rights legislation (Ledesma and Calderon, 2015). In this section, I described these tenets.

First, racism is ordinary and not aberrational: this allows Caucasian people to be neutral. In fact, they have what Gloria Ladson-Billings (1997) calls color blindness. The notion that they do not see color allows them to avoid feeling responsible for the hardships that people of color
face everyday. Color blindness allows them to do whatever is necessary, without hesitation, to maintain power. Caucasians never give this power away unless it becomes useless (Ladson-Billings, 1996). When this useless power is given away, they do so knowing that it will benefit them in the end in some way.

The second tenet is the idea of interest convergence: This tenet describes how Caucasians are advocates of social and racial justice as long as it will benefit them as well (Milner, et. al., 2013). When policies and laws are made to benefit people of color, there exist loopholes within those policies and laws that benefit Caucasians. The voters of Arizona in 1990, for example, voted on a referendum that rejected the recognition of Martin Luther King’s birthday as a state holiday (Rugg, 2019). The National Football League (NFL), which had previously awarded the state with the opportunity to host the 1993 Super Bowl Championship game, protested the move by the Arizona voters and moved the Super Bowl’s location from Phoenix to Los Angeles (Hanson, 2020). Because of the move, Arizona lost revenue and suffered boycotts from companies and movie stars (Walker, 2017). The state reversed its voters' decision by recognizing MLK Day as a state holiday. Arizona legislators recognized MLK Day as a state holiday solely because Caucasian businesses and organizations were losing money.

The third tenet is the social construction of race. The United States and the Social Construction Theory have been intertwined throughout America’s long history. American society has worked tirelessly to pass laws and policies to deny a race or people of color (Solomon et. al.,2019). Examples include *Dred Scott v. Sandford* which ruled that African-Americans were not citizens (Graber, 2006), Jim Crow’s Separate but Equal laws which segregated and oppressed people of color (Fremon, 2000), and the 1935 Social Security Act.
which exempted workers and house servants from receiving any kind of government assistance (DeWitt, 2010).

Fourth is the idea of storytelling and counter storytelling. CRT uses this tenet to counter the falsehoods of what is taking place within an organization (Hackman and Rausher, 2004). Schools in West Tennessee, for example, tell stories that they are neutral and fair institutions. The schools say that they are inclusive and that every student, despite their race, is treated fairly. However, achievement gaps, graduation rates, and literacy levels among African-Americans and Caucasians continue to widen in the same schools, which tells a different story. The outside appearance in schools seems to show a sign of unity, but in reality, the curriculum used within those schools benefits Caucasian students the most, while marginalizing the students of color.

Lastly, is the notion that Caucasians have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation. Whether through the courts or the legislative process, Caucasians have benefited greatly from civil rights legislation (Delgado, 2009). Brown v. The Board of Education, for example, has been historically referred to as one of the greatest achievements in the civil rights era. However, it soon became an absolute victory for Caucasians. Adriennne Dixon and Celia Rousseau (2006), believed that although school buildings may have been desegregated under the Brown v. Board of Education decision, the curriculum, and structure of the entire educational system and process were still segregated which ultimately benefited Caucasian students.

**Applying the tenets of CRT to the research.**

In this research design, I used the tenets of CRT to discover the conditions that African-American AAVE speakers face in the public schools in West Tennessee. The tenets of CRT are an important tool in my research because they will highlight the persistence of bias across the whole frame of education in West Tennessee. Critical Race Theory helped me to discover how
race and bias manifest themselves in public schools (Ladson-Billings 2005). The roadmap of how I am going to make these discoveries is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**
The Application of the Tenets of CRT to the Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenet of CRT</th>
<th>Using the Tenets in West Tennessee Schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational</td>
<td>In West Tennessee, schools that score the lowest in ELA state assessments come from predominantly African-American schools (Tennessee, 2011). Many suggest that low morale of the staff, family issues, and classroom behavior are the cause of these low-test scores (Sabin, 2015). However, I used this tenet to discover if Caucasian people are trying, by leveraging Caucasian privilege, to maintain power, yet feeling irresponsible for the hardships students of color face daily in the public schools in West Tennessee.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The idea of interest convergence</td>
<td>The ELA standards in West Tennessee look fair and equal on the surface; however, through extensive research, I used this tenet to see if the standards are equal and/or fair or are they in place to benefit Caucasians. The assessments given to all the students in West Tennessee are distributed fairly; however, in reality, the test itself benefits Caucasian people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The social construction of race</td>
<td>African-American AAVE speaking students nationwide and in West Tennessee are labeled and marginalized because of the way they speak (Pearson, Conner, &amp; Jackson, 2012). I used this tenet to discover that the past laws and policies of West Tennessee that oppressed people of color for generations in West Tennessee continue to have a significant impact on how the current generation of African-American AAVE speakers view SE.</td>
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Table 1 (Continued)

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<td>4.</td>
<td>The idea of storytelling and the counter storytelling</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>There is a perception that low ELA scores among African-Americans in West Tennessee are an indication</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that African-Americans cannot read. However, I used this tenet to discover that African-American</td>
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<td></td>
<td>AAVE speakers can read well if the text were presented in their own language and applied in the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>classroom alongside SE.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The notion that Caucasians have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brown v. The Board of Education has been classified as the pillar of many civil rights achievements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Harvey, &amp; King 2012). The Brown case has also made significant changes in West Tennessee’s schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The social construction of race theory will be applied in this research to determine the Brown case</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>actually desegregated the schools but further segregated the ELA standards by prohibiting AAVE from</td>
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<td></td>
<td>West Tennessee’s schools.</td>
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Background

On January 1, 1808, the United States Congress, on news of rebellions in the Caribbean, abolished the US slave trade. This was also the time of the great expedition westward into present-day Tennessee (Snelgrove, et., al., 2014). Many slave owners from the Carolinas took all of their belongings, including their Gullah-speaking slaves, to settle in the new territories of West Tennessee (Phelan, 2016). The first generation of African-Americans in West Tennessee soon began to teach their children Gullah. However, the dialects of the first generation were different from that of their children. The first generation of African-Americans was able to speak their primary African language alongside Gullah, but the second generation of African-Americans could only speak Gullah (Abdou, 2014).

As the second generation began to fuse Gullah and SE after the closure of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the Gullah language soon evolved into a language known as Plantation Creole.
The Plantation Creole language eventually developed its own vocabulary, grammar rules, and diction. Since slaves were forbidden to read or write in Standard English, Plantation Creole became the dominant language of slaves throughout Tennessee for hundreds of years (Bakker, 2014). This new culture soon laid the foundations of what is today known as the culture of African-Americans. They developed a language in which they could communicate with themselves more effectively while at the same time communicating with their owners.

To prevent the advancement of intellect, thought, and literacy among the African-American population, the slave owners prevented their slaves from learning to read and write SE (Labov, 1999 p.12). An African-American in Tennessee, like many throughout the country, who were caught learning or reading SE would be harshly penalized. Yet, after the American Civil War, thousands of freed African-Americans attended schools created by northern missionaries and began to learn and speak SE. This was also carefully taught as the first generation of freed African-Americans began to slowly understand the differences between the language at their school as opposed to the language that they spoke at home. The language of their forefathers, Plantation Creole, still had an important role in their lives (Mufwene, 1996). The traditions and culture of their forefathers were also continually passed down, but what separated this generation from the previous enslaved generations was their understanding of both AAVE and SE. For the first time, many African-Americans had to adopt a technique called code-switching (Keller, 2016).

Code-switching happens when a person who is multilingual switches between languages, much like when a person who natively speaks Spanish must switch their brain to English speaking (Hill & Fink, 2013). Not many African-Americans during the post-Civil War era could code-switch (Tyack and Lowe, 1986). In the post-Civil War era, many African-Americans in
Tennessee had not developed a technique of how to switch their brains to speak SE in their schools. However, they shared Plantation Creole at home and among their own communities during the post-slavery era.

Years after the Civil War, many African-Americans traveled throughout Tennessee (Tolnay and Beck, 1990). They took all of their belongings, culture, and AAVE language (Tolnay, 2003). As more and more African-Americans encountered Caucasian SE-speaking Tennesseans, Plantation Creole soon began to change and adopt more Standard English vocabulary, yet it kept intact the grammar rules, phonics, and pronunciation of AAVE. Despite the attempt to differentiate with other racial groups and languages, African-American Tennesseans, as well as many African-Americans throughout the South, were once again isolated under unpleasant conditions brought about by the ruling of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) and Jim Crowe laws, within the African-American community (Bernstein, 1963). African-Americans soon began to communicate more with their own race while also trying to adapt to SE in their schools.

After *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), African-Americans in Tennessee were forced to desegregate in schools where AAVE was not recognized but ridiculed (Ogletree, 2003). African-Americans were now taught to speak SE in public schools in Tennessee while at the same time forced to use less of the language they were taught at home (Baugh, 1983). This was hard for many African-Americans, particularly the poor (Dillard 1972). The literacy and writing skills among African-Americans were unfairly compared to Caucasian students who had spoken SE all their lives during this time. Many African-Americans were forced to recognize SE as the standard in public school ELA. Unable to keep up with this standard, many African-Americans began to drop out of public schools (Horton, 2004). This led to an exceptional low graduation
rate among African-Americans throughout the country including Tennessee. Those who did not drop out of school were forced to repeat the class numerous times until they mastered the curriculum and policy.

This decerolization language method soon gave way to an important court case in the state of Michigan known as the Ann Arbor Decision (Fiske, 1981). In 1979, representatives of poor African-American children at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary (Ann Arbor School District) filed a petition at a district court in Michigan. The plaintiffs claimed that when the school district desegregated the student population, they did not take into consideration the major language of many of the African-American students when they created educational standards for the district. Such actions violated the 14th Amendment according to the courts (Labov 2008). The court ruled that it is the school district’s responsibility to identify African-American English and “use that knowledge in teaching such students how to read standard English” (Labov, 1999). The inability to recognize AAVE denied their equal protection of the law since language itself is a benefactor of a race’s social and cultural existences. Judge Charles Joiner of the East Michigan District Court agreed. He ordered that Ann Arbor establish a system that recognizes AAVE barriers between AAVE and SE in the classroom. In his ruling, Judge Joiner mandated Ann Arbor to use AAVE as a standard for African-American students to also learn SE (Freeman, 1982). The case with Ann Arbor laid the foundations for other urban school districts to also adopt AAVE. None became so controversial as Oakland’s resolution which became one of the first school districts to accept and recognize AAVE for what it was: the language of many African-Americans (Croghan, 2008). The resolution became a nationwide controversy that furthered the agenda of Caucasian privilege to adopt new rules that extinguished AAVE in public schools everywhere, including the state of Tennessee (Duggan, 1998). Despite the attempt to
eliminate AAVE altogether, AAVE still exists in the African-American communities throughout Tennessee as it has been for generations.

**Applying the research questions to the research design.**

As stated earlier, my research questions helped to evaluate and discover if African-American students are being marginalized for speaking AAVE in public schools in West Tennessee. These questions were formed for the overall objective of this research design. My objectives were to discover the experiences of African-American AAVE speakers in high school ELA classrooms, to discover how African-American AAVE speakers navigate SE grading policies in high school, and if African-American AAVE speakers see the difference between AAVE and SE. That is why my research questions are: (1) What are African-American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school ELA classrooms? (2) How do African-American AAVE speaking students navigate SE language policies that deprived AAVE in high schools?; and (3) How do African-American AAVE speakers see the differences between AAVE and SE?

In this section, I focused deeper on the research questions. I applied what research had already provided about these questions and discovered through interviews if the same experiences were present among African-American AAVE speakers in West Tennessee’s public schools. With the application of these research questions and with the tenets of CRT, I was able to discover if there is a biased agenda toward language deprivation of high school students that speak AAVE.

**What are African-American AAVE Speakers' Experiences in High School ELA classrooms?**

It is important to understand the significance AAVE has in the African-American community. African-American Vernacular English serves as a sense of identification for
African-American AAVE speakers, and it also serves as part of their culture and heritage (Filmer, 2003). Their views on AAVE stretch back to the day AAVE speakers were born, and over time further appreciated their language in the community in which they lived (DiOrio, 2011). Within these communities, AAVE speakers adopted verbal behaviors that are hard to change in an ELA classroom (Johnson, 1999). The influences from their community make it difficult for AAVE speakers to fully embrace SE in a public school.

It is also important to understand that AAVE speakers in an ELA classroom are unlike any other minority group because of their status as involuntary immigrants (Obgu, 1998). Unlike voluntary immigrants who come to the US seeking better opportunities through their understanding and acceptance of SE, African-Americans are involuntary immigrants (Obgu, 1993) who do not see SE as a gateway to better opportunities after they graduate.

**Involuntary Immigrants**

For the past thirty years, John Obgu has dedicated his expertise to the identification of minority groups in the United States. He believes that among the minority groups, there are two types—the voluntary and involuntary (Obgu, 1999). He uses SE as the focal point in identifying these two groups, and the way that both of these groups view SE. Obgu suggests that the perceptions of SE are seen in different lights (1999).

The African-Americans of West Tennessee are involuntary immigrants. Many, similar to those AAVE speakers nationwide, see SE as a language of oppression and not a language that provides hope and opportunities (Hartman, 2010).

- They see AAVE as their language because it functions in three ways (Haskins and Butts 1975): (1) It shows unity among African-Americans against biased behavior among Caucasians; (2) It is a pillar of the African-American way of life that provides a sense of
unity, protection, and affection within the community; and (3) It provides a place for African-Americans to release rage, fear, and guilt.

As involuntary immigrants, African-Americans share their negative views of SE in communities nationwide and particularly throughout West Tennessee. African-American AAVE speakers work against learning SE while at the same time preserving their culture which includes AAVE (Baugh, 1999). Many students have identified the struggles of learning SE in their ELA classrooms. They see the ELA classroom as a place of deprivation where they have to relinquish their identity and verbal behavior in exchange for a language that has been withheld from their ancestors for generations (Obgu, 1999).

**Verbal behavior in AAVE speakers in West Tennessee.** Understanding the development and importance of AAVE in the African-American community is very important for those that are outsiders. It is important to understand the full extent AAVE has in the African-American community because it may provide teachers and school leaders in West Tennessee with the linguistic reality of African-American AAVE speakers as well as their experiences in ELA classrooms.

For the purposes of this study, I used the African-Americans living in West Tennessee and their usage of AAVE to further explain the experiences AAVE speakers have in their ELA classrooms. A majority of African-Americans in West Tennessee speak AAVE, and although it is widely used in the Black communities, it is shunned in West Tennessee’s schools as is in many schools throughout the country (Blake and Cutler, 2003). The perception of AAVE as being immoral, slang, and uneducated has become a continuous description of the language of African-Americans (Jones, 2008). Throughout my research, I discovered that AAVE speaking students’ experiences nationwide of code-switching from AAVE to SE is very difficult in ELA classrooms.
(Bukowski, 2019). Baskins and Butts (1973-2005) have spent years proclaiming to teachers and school policymakers that the result of low ELA assessments among high school AAVE speakers is in part because of their verbal background and behavior.

Baskins and Butts (1973) also continue to assert that an African-American child’s language or verbal behavior is a technique that he first learns at home. According to Baskins and Butts, the child is not only learning the language at home, but he is also learning the culture’s system of meaning and its ways of “thinking and reasoning” (pg. 42). Therefore, the community in which an African-American AAVE speaker resides will have a greater impact on them than any ELA classroom. The African-American communities in West Tennessee are identical to many African-American communities across the United States. The verbal behavior created by many AAVE-speaking students in West Tennessee can be contributed to the social system within the community as well.

The social system’s impact on an AAVE speaker’s verbal behavior and experiences in ELA classrooms. In their book entitled, *The Psychology of Black Language (1993)*, Haskins and Butts describe the social system in African-American communities as layers that overall create the verbal behavior of an AAVE speaker. The following is a description of these layers described by Haskins and Butts (1993) of the social systems in the African-American community:

- The Black Child: Born to imitate its surrounding culture and language
- The Black Family: The child develops its language through reasoning and vision from his immediate family members.
- Subsystems within the Black Community (churches, neighborhoods, gangs, Black radio/newspapers, shops, and restaurants): The
child can now communicate very well with others who also have the same language. AAVE is further advanced as the child hears and communicates with others within his/her community subsystems

- Subsystems outside the Black Community: (school, state governments, social media): The child is often required to leave his community and enter into another subsystem that is unlike his own and discovers that there are others that have a different culture and language and find it difficult to communicate (Haskins and Butts, Psychology of Black Language, 1993)

These levels of the social system exist in African-American communities throughout the United States (Allen, 1995). I adopted this same social system theory to the African-American communities in West Tennessee to explain the difficult experiences African-American AAVE speakers endure when they enter an ELA classroom. The understanding of verbal behavior and how it evolved within the African-American social systems in West Tennessee will shed light on the language challenges AAVE speakers face when they enter a community outside their social system such as a high school ELA classroom.

**The ELA Classroom in West Tennessee Public School and the Experiences of AAVE Speakers**

In the State of Tennessee, thirty-seven percent of the students are of color, but teachers of color represent only thirteen percent of the teacher population (Tennessee Department of Education, 2018). This gap between students and teachers of color statewide mirrors the gap in West Tennessee. For many African-American AAVE speakers, this is a difficult circumstance and experience for them. More than likely, they will experience being in an ELA classroom with a Caucasian, middle-class, monolingual SE speaking ELA teacher who has little experience in
understanding AAVE, their verbal behavior, and social system (Nieto, 2003). This will ultimately make the AAVE speaker retreat from the rules and grading policies of the ELA classroom and embrace AAVE more. As stated earlier by Haskins and Butts (1975), their ability to speak AAVE shows unity among their fellow African-Americans against what they believe to be biased behavior among Caucasians.

As in many ELA classrooms nationwide that have a large number of African-American AAVE speaking students, the students are left in disarray and cannot find any opportunities of mastering SE (Cook-Gumperz, 1993). So, as a result, many of the AAVE speakers find little interest and would rather do poorly on SE assessments than abandon their verbal behavior and social systems. This may also be true with the African-American AAVE speakers in West Tennessee. The result of low ELA state assessments can possibly be viewed as the schools’ inability to embrace AAVE.

The authors of the ELA standards in Tennessee find little time for ELA teachers to fuse both AAVE and SE within the curriculum, and it leaves the ELA teacher with only one option: to teach SE (Samson and Collins, 2012). In most cases, the ELA teacher will prohibit AAVE in the class and use the color-blindness technique as described in CRT’s Tenet 1 to persuade them that they are not responsible for the hardships African-American AAVE speakers suffer within their classrooms or the low-test scores they receive in ELA state assessments (Gay, 2010). So, if the findings and studies of the experiences of AAVE speakers are correct nationwide, then more than likely I will prove the same outcome in West Tennessee.
How Do African American AAVE Speaking Students Navigate SE Language Policies that Deprive AAVE in High School?

When it comes to navigating policies such as SE in a high school for students who are not proficient SE speakers, a debate emerges (Baratz, 1970). The debate emerges on whether students have a right to speak, write, and be taught in their own language (Parks, 2000), or whether the school is obligated to provide education to all its students while at the same time fulfilling the state’s standards and policies (Willingsky, 1998). This debate on whether to include AAVE in public schools’ curricula has taken root in many school districts throughout the country (Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). For many non-SE speakers, the gift of code-switching is needed to navigate through SE policies while for many it is just a simple adventure never desired (Crawford, 2001).

However, to discover the answer to the second research question, I reiterate that African-Americans are involuntary immigrants. This means that the mastering of SE has little to no perceived benefit to them because they do not see the gains nor opportunities for learning SE. It is also important to know that African-American verbal behaviors of AAVE run deeper than in any ELA classroom because AAVE serves as a sense of identity (Delpit and Dowdy, 2002). To discover how an AAVE speaker navigates through SE language policies in West Tennessee, it is important to look at the current SE language policy in Tennessee and how it became a major policy in West Tennessee’s schools.

Tennessee’s Common Core State Standards Initiative

In 2008, the state of Tennessee launched the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). It became the driving force in its attempt to compete with the global economy. The objective of this program was to provide an understanding of what students were expected to
learn so that teachers and parents could also know what they had to do to help that student learn and become successful (Tennessee, 2011, p.3). Under this program are three main objectives:

(1) to provide clear standards and policies that would align with the expectations of colleges, careers, and better opportunities; (2) to promote consistency by guaranteeing all students were prepared to compete with others in the United States and abroad; and (3) to allow collaboration among neighboring states (Tennessee, 2011, p. 3)

The state officials redefined an educational policy as “learning expectations” (Tennessee 2011, p. 11) in which the local school boards, particularly in West Tennessee, would define the learning expectations into the curriculum. Within a year, the state’s new policies and learning expectations in ELA were validated and enforced throughout every school district in West Tennessee. These new policies have become the norm for the school districts in West Tennessee for the past three years (Tennessee 2011, p. 4).

The board that created the CCSSI program consisted of lawmakers, former governors, principals, and educators (predominantly Caucasian) (Tennessee 2011, p. 8). All of these standards promoted SE only. According to Ladson-Billings (2010), students who cannot incorporate their culture and the experiences they have at home in their community suffer from an academic impact which automatically creates an achievement gap between them and SE-speaking students in their ELA classroom. This also had a huge impact on AAVE-speaking students in West Tennessee’s high schools. This prompted African-American AAVE speakers to retreat to their cultural social systems and verbal behaviors, as indicated by Baskin and Butts (1993), thus creating an achievement gap between them and SE speakers. This left many lawmakers to again use the color-blindness scheme (Tenet 1 of CRT) to overlook
accommodating AAVE speakers in the ELA classroom. So, instead, AAVE speakers are left to accommodate the expectations of the standards and policies of their school districts.

The notion of establishing a SE-only policy in ELA classrooms has made it difficult for AAVE speakers in West Tennessee to navigate through those SE policies in the classroom. This is also true in many states nationwide (Leeper, 2003). However, the state continues to exert its authority that the policies and standards of the CCSSI are fair, yet in reality, their purpose is to only benefit those that speak SE, mainly Caucasians (Tenet 2 and 4 of CRT). Therefore, the policies implemented by the CCSSI have made student life more difficult for African-American AAVE speakers in West Tennessee. My research case study will examine the impact of AAVE speakers in ELA classrooms as they continue to navigate through SE policies.

**How do African-American AAVE speakers see the difference between AAVE and SE?**

Geneva Smitherman, William Labov, and Joseph Dillard are top experts on AAVE. They are renowned for their study of AAVE and its origin. These theorists suggest that the grammar rules of AAVE evolved from a combination of West African languages and English (Labov, 1972). Smitherman (1977), goes on to indicate that AAVE, unlike SE, is a combination of West African languages fused with English to serve as a reminder of African-American servitude, oppression, and discrimination. Both Labov and Dillard believe that AAVE is spoken in English, but its dialects and rules are West African (Dillard 1975). All of these theorists share a common point, that AAVE is a language and not slang or dialect of SE.

The key focus points in which SE and AAVE are different are (1) Tense structure, (2) The understanding of the Copula Deletion Rule; (3) The Invariant Be Rule; (4) The -th rule; and (5) the double negative rule. These rules according to Smitherman (2006), Labov (1999), and Dillard (1999) are indications that the West African grammar rules still exist today among the
African-American communities and are different from SE. It also supports Haskins and Butt's (1975) assumption that the verbal behavior of African-American children proceed from SE and its usage. This means that before African-Americans familiarize themselves with subject-verb agreement, the present participles, and infinitive usages of SE, they have already adopted the principles and grammar rules of AAVE. The differences between AAVE and SE are evident in the grammar rules that are shared. They can be seen below:

**Understanding the differences between AAVE and SE in tense structure**

For many African-Americans there is a difference between AAVE and SE. Among the most important fundamentals in learning the differences between SE and AAVE is the fact that tense structure is not as important as gender and status in AAVE as it is in SE (Bernstein, 1988). Since AAVE rarely uses the -ed at the end of verbs to indicate past tense, it uses words such as *done* and *been* while giving the subject noun respect to indicate that the phrase is being spoken in the past tense. This is often known as the Perfective “Done” (Rickford, 2015). As shown in Table 2, the differences between SE and AAVE when using the tense perfective “been and done” are used differently.

**Table 2**

*SE and AAVE Usage of the Perfective Been and Done*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SE</th>
<th>AAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jason watched the movie</td>
<td>Jason done watch the movie.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I lost my pen</td>
<td>I done lost my pen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have changed a lot</td>
<td>You done changed a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you do your homework?</td>
<td>You done your homework?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He has worked on his project all day</td>
<td>He been workin on his project al-day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As long as I have known you...</td>
<td>Long as I been knowin you...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The future tense is also different between AAVE and SE (Stell 2012). In most SE phrases, the word “will” indicates that the phrase or clause is in the future tense. However, in AAVE the less respected words such as imma, finna, and gonna are used to indicate the future tense in order to give respect to the noun. Table 3 shows the differences between SE and AAVE when using the future tense.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SE</th>
<th>AAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I will buy the milk tomorrow</td>
<td>I’m gonna buy the milk toma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She will study in a few minutes</td>
<td>She finna study inna few minutes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They will call you tomorrow</td>
<td>They gonna call you toma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You will be a great bride</td>
<td>You finna be a great bride</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Copula Deletion Rule

Another important difference between SE and AAVE is the use of the copula verb. For many, the name for the copula verb is normally called the linking verb in SE. In SE the copula is one of the most important elements in establishing communication (McWhater, 1995). In AAVE, however, the copula verb is understood and can be deleted. The Copula “be” in the present tense is often dropped. This is common in many languages, such as various African languages, as well as Hebrew and Arabic (McElhinny, 1993). All these languages characterize their nouns and verbs into classes and not tenses. In languages descended from Latin (Spanish, French, and Italian), the usage of subject pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we, they) are rarely used in communication, and their presence in sentence structure is often deleted. AAVE carries the same principle, but
instead of deleting the subject pronoun, it deletes the copula verb (Holm, 1976). The deletion of the copula verb is very important to learn in AAVE because it is a rule that has been recognized as the official grammar usage in the African-American community.

The Copula Deletion Rule is one of the most distinctive rules that separates both SE and AAVE (Rickford, et. al., 1991). The Copula Deletion Rule in AAVE also states that if the linking verb is omitted, it is still considered understood or worthy of use. In AAVE the copula verbs such as “is” and “are” are often deleted but still considered just as important. Table 4 shows how the copula is used and deleted between AAVE and SE

**Table 4**

*Usage of the Copula Deletion in AAVE as opposed to SE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SE</th>
<th>AAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Julia is pretty.</td>
<td>Julia pretty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are going to school.</td>
<td>We goin to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is she coming?</td>
<td>She comin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you coming to the party?</td>
<td>You comin to the party?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. From Holme 1987*

In most standardized tests, the use of the copula is very important and is used frequently (Winford, 1990). Research has indicated that African-Americans score poorly on written standardized tests because of their misunderstanding of the Copula Deletion Rule (Labov, et. al. 1969). Because the copula verb is important in SE and is often deleted from AAVE, the need for the students to differentiate and study the comparisons would be paramount in understanding and mastering SE.
**The Invariant Be**

Another feature that stands out between SE and AAVE is the usage of the word “be” (Bailey, et. al., 2007). In SE the word “be” is rarely used; however, in AAVE this word is used quite often. Since tense does not play a major role in AAVE as it does in SE, the word “be” is used to justify tense structure (Dayton, 1996). The word “be” is as important to AAVE as the copula verb is to SE. The invariant “be” in AAVE indicates a repeated event in communication. It never changes. It always takes the form of “be” instead of using the more SE terms such as *is*, *am*, and *are*. The Invariant “be” is constant in AAVE and is used regularly. It does not indicate something that has happened in the past, but rather it is used to indicate that something may happen or will happen in the future. It is a habitual action.

Unlike many languages, AAVE uses the invariant “be” free from being conjugated. It is so important to AAVE that the invariant *be* is the exception to the grammar rule. When AAVE combines the invariant “be” to the present participle (ending in -ing) then “be” is normally used and also spoken in a respectful form. It also permits the present participle to drop the -g. Table 5 demonstrates how the Invariant BE in AAVE is used frequently in AAVE as opposed to SE.

**Table 5**

*Usage of the Invariant BE in AAVE compared to SE (Bailey, 1993)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SE</th>
<th>AAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He is playing basketball.</td>
<td>He be playin basketball.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan and James are taking a long time.</td>
<td>Ryan and James be takin a long time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are playing video games</td>
<td>We be playin video games.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In questions, the invariant “be” takes on an alliance with the auxiliary verb “do”. Such an alliance is rarely used in SE but appreciated in AAVE. In most cases, the invariant “be” with “do” forms a communicative sentence alliance in AAVE. When the auxiliary verb “do” is used with the invariant “be”, the present participle also omits its ending -g. Table 6 shows how the Invariant Be is used in questions in AAVE but not used in SE

### Table 6

**Invariant Be usage in Questions in AAVE as opposed to SE (Loflin, 1967)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SE</th>
<th>AAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does DeQuan play video games every day?</td>
<td>Do DeQuan be playin video games everyday?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does Aliyah eat vegetables?</td>
<td>Do Aliyah be eatin vegetables?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you in your office a lot?</td>
<td>Do you be in yo office a lot?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do they go to their parents’ house every day?</td>
<td>Do they be goin to dey parents house erday?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because SE is the language of most professional workplaces in the United States, the invariant “be” principle is rarely recognized. Instead, it is used as the hallmark by many to indicate that AAVE is broken English. However, such an important rule for AAVE should be recognized as a key element to understanding AAVE and the African-American culture (Bailey, 2001).

**The -th rule**

AAVE and SE have another common difference. Words that begin with letters -th are normally transformed into the -d sound in AAVE. This is quite common in many Caribbean, American Creole, and West African languages as well (Labov, 1969). Since many African-derived languages use an inward tongue when it comes to speaking, words beginning in -th are very difficult to pronounce which requires an outward tongue. Most people of African descent choose to characterize their words beginning in -th with the -d sound. English and other
Germanic languages have the opposite effect when it comes to pronouncing words that begin with the letters -th. For example, the most commonly used pronouns in SE are pronounced differently in AAVE. In Table 7, I indicated the differences in how an AAVE speaker uses the -th rule as opposed to the SE speaker.

### Table 7

*The -th rule used in AAVE as opposed to SE (Poplack & Tagliamonte, 1999)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SE</th>
<th>AAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Them</td>
<td>Dem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They</td>
<td>Dey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That</td>
<td>Dat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This</td>
<td>Dis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These</td>
<td>Dees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such pronouns are very important to differentiate because they are used constantly in assessments. The Oakland Resolution was aware of these different pronouns and wanted to develop a literacy system that determined this situation and recognized the various differences.

**Negative Phrases**

The use of double negatives is common in AAVE, yet it is rarely seen, used, or spoken in SE. Double negatives have been frowned upon in SE (Weddington, 1973). In AAVE double negatives are welcomed and used on numerous occasions. Many languages have adopted the double negative rule in their language which also shares the class structure system. As a matter of fact, some of these languages cannot communicate without the usage of the double negative. In Latin-derived languages; for example, it is common to use the double negative. This is also known in Arabic and African languages (Twailesh, et. al., 2014). In SE, double negative use is prohibited. In SE and many common Germanic languages, if a negative word (no, not, never,
nor, etc.) is used once in a sentence, it cannot have another negative in the same sentence in order to establish proper communication sentence structure.

With AAVE, the usage of a double negative is different. In AAVE, the word “ain’t” is used frequently to substitute the words “have not” or “am/is not”. For example, when someone says, “He does not have a pen” in SE, an AAVE speaker can translate it as “he ain’t got no pen”. Although many linguists are not able to determine the origins of the word “ain’t”, many have speculated that the word is of West African origin (Martinez, 2010). As shown in Table 8, The word “ain’t” has historical significance in the African-American community. It is seen and spoken in both the Gullah and Plantation Creole languages. One should keep in mind that the word “ain’t” can only be used in the understood present and future tenses but never in the past. Today, the word “ain’t” is used in AAVE to indicate negation.

**Table 8**

*Negation usage in AAVE compared to SE (Stover, Sparrow & Siefert, 2016)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SE</th>
<th>AAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am not going.</td>
<td>I ain’t goin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He is not going.</td>
<td>He ain’t goin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She is not here.</td>
<td>She ain’t here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are not going.</td>
<td>We ain’t goin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are not coming.</td>
<td>They ain’t coming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With double negation, the word ain’t can also be used (Table 9). One should keep in mind the usage of the double negative is common in AAVE, unlike SE.
Table 9

*Usage of the word -ain’t in AAVE as opposed to SE (Stover, et. al., 2016)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SE</th>
<th>AAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carmen does not have any money.</td>
<td>Carmen ain’t got no money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are not going anywhere.</td>
<td>We ain’t goin nowhere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not have anything.</td>
<td>I ain’t got nothing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In these examples, we can clearly identify the difference. Double negatives are shunned from SE, yet they are used constantly in AAVE (Weddington, 1973). This rule is also important when it comes to understanding negation in both SE and AAVE. Many urban students commonly use the double negative rule. However, they are oftentimes not aware of the rules in SE that do not allow the double negation rule to exist. In fact, many literacy assessments penalize students for using double negatives. The use of the double negative in AAVE as opposed to SE which eliminates the validity of its usage is a stark contrast between the two languages.

**African American AAVE Speaker’s View Both SE and AAVE**

Since the founding of the United States, language has been a symbol of power and control (Hartman, 2010). It is used in many ways to determine which group will be granted the power and which group will be in power until they can speak it the same way as those with precedence. In 1969 James Sledd, wrote of how language in the US is used:

The person who talks right (SE) is one of us (SE speakers). The person who talks wrong (AAVE speaker) is an outsider, strange, and suspicious. Those that talk right (SE speakers) should make those that cannot talk right (AAVE speakers) inferior if we can.

That is the main purpose of education- upward mobility. They (AAVE speakers) must be
denied upward mobility and must therefore be made to talk White English in their contacts with the White World. (Sledd, 1969, p. 1307)

Public schools in West Tennessee have developed policies and curricula, under the CCSSI, a SE-only policy and agenda. Obgu (1999), portrays this as tarnishing African-American’s collective identity, because as involuntary immigrants, African-American AAVE speakers see SE as a language of oppression, and they believe that speaking SE is a sign of disloyalty to their community. As stated earlier by Haskins and Butts (1975), African-Americans see AAVE as a pillar of the African-American way of life that provides a sense of unity, protection, and affection within the community.

For many non-AAVE speakers, AAVE to them seems strange, lazy, mutant, or broken (Linguistic Society of America, cited in Taylor, 1999, p. 38). However, according to Lambert & Tucker (1972), AAVE speakers appreciate their language and feel more comfortable in places where AAVE is spoken and appreciated. Such appreciation for AAVE leaves little room for people outside their community to change their negative views of AAVE. So, in truth, African-Americans see the differences between SE and AAVE as the language of deprivation and a language of limited use

Creating a Navigation Guide for AAVE Speaking Students in an ELA Classroom

Throughout my literature review, I presented major reasons as to why AAVE should be considered a language and should be entered into the school’s curriculum. Historically, AAVE has been a major pillar in the African-American community. Therefore, learning another language that has also historically inhibited or dominated their ancestors has proven to be very difficult for African-American AAVE speakers. Therefore, it is important for schools to create a navigation guide that would help AAVE speakers; (1) create a better experience and atmosphere
for AAVE speakers in ELA; (2) navigate through SE language policies; (3) distinguish the differences between SE and AAVE.

As mentioned earlier, AAVE speakers experience their usage of SE much differently than other people of color because of their perceptions of SE. Therefore, they rely on their social system to show their identity among their fellow African-Americans. The social system consists of layers that through time will create a language behavior that is shared by every AAVE speaker within the community. By using the social systems that are enacted in African-American communities through a process of language behavior, a navigation guide can be created in order to help AAVE students from falling behind in the ELA classroom. The navigation guide will require three elements: (1) The Four Layered Equity Model; (2) Culturally Responsive Teaching Theory; (3) Culturally Relevant Instruction Theory.

**Four-Layered Equity Model**

For several years Dr. Ghoncetsar Muhammad has studied documents on how literacy works among communities of color including African-Americans. Her commitment, efforts, and hard work has provided her with a pathway in which early African-Americans defined literacy (Muhammad, 2012). She has discovered that there is a lot an ELA teacher can do to improve how ELA is being taught today. She argues that the way African-Americans were taught in the past supersedes how they are taught now. Dr. Muhammad believes as I do, that learning SE requires teachers and AAVE speakers to focus on African-American identity and criticality (Muhammad, 2018). Through her research, she created the Four-Layered Equity Model that I used in my research to fuse it with the language behaviors and the social system of AAVE speakers in West Tennessee.
Identity

Muhammad (2018) describes identity as one who is and what others say they are, and what one desires to be. High school AAVE speakers need to understand that their language is more of who they are and that it is also their identity. The identity of an AAVE speaker reiterates their beliefs as stated earlier in the research about their views on AAVE. To AAVE speakers it is a language that shows their identity among other AAVE speakers and that it is a safe haven for them toward the implementation of Caucasian policies. When it comes to an ELA classroom, AAVE speakers must see themselves in the learning process. They must also learn about themselves and their identity while the teacher is presenting the lecture. Overall, they must know that their identity is being recognized and appreciated.

Skills

Skills are used and designed for AAVE speakers to better understand the standards that teachers use to lecture and where each content has its own descriptions and set of skills that students are expected to master. When a teacher lectures and provides expectations of the skills that an AAVE speaker must learn, they must include literature that advances African-American culture toward freedom and not deprivation. Skills which an African-American obtains are different from what a SE student obtains through their culture.

Intellect

Intellect is what an AAVE speaker has already learned or understood about various issues from their experiences. In this case, an AAVE speaker can learn more, not less, about their language and ways in which they can study the language and become smarter in it. Muhammad (2018) cautiously advises that there is a distinct difference between intellect and skill. Skills are related to what a student is expected to learn and what a teacher is expected to teach. However,
intellect comprises what the student has already learned through their experiences and time. They are now ready to advance in what they have already learned.

**Criticality**

According to Muhammad (2012), criticality is the process of how power, oppression, and privilege are present in society. It is important for teachers and students to understand their ways of knowing and experiencing the world outside of their social system. Criticality teaches AAVE speakers to understand power, missed opportunities, oppression, and social justice works in systems and relationships (Tatum and Muhammad, 2012). This will also require that truth needs to be taught and the experiences of AAVE speakers in an ELA classroom are present and continues to endure (Brown, 2013).

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

In the United States, there is much controversy as to whether to include diversity in the ELA classroom. This is also present in West Tennessee. The controversy allowed many teachers to hide behind it and create a color-blindness effect that creates a classroom in which every student, despite their color or culture, is taught the same way (CRT, tenet #2). Such a disadvantage has created an environment in the ELA classroom, according to Chu (2011), where teachers hold lower expectations of their students of color. Though many ELA teachers accept and appreciate diversity in the classrooms during calendar events such as Black History Month, Cinco de Mayo, and International Day, it holds no value until the ELA teacher can implement diversity in their lesson plans and lectures throughout the year.

Providing a diverse classroom that focuses on the whole child allows the child to fully engage and empower himself intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This is why it is important to include what Gay (2010) has created as a pathway
toward a successful theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CURT). Gay (2010) lists the elements of a successful culturally responsive classroom:

- Teachers are socially and academically empowering by setting high expectations for students with the commitment of every child.
- Teachers are multidimensional because they engage cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives.
- Teachers validate every student’s culture, bridging gaps between school and home through diversified instructional strategies.
- Teachers are socially, emotionally, and politically sympathetic to educating the whole child.
- Teachers are transformative of schools and societies by using students’ existing strengths to drive instruction and assessment.
- Teachers are emancipatory and liberating from oppressive educational practices and ideologies as they lift the veil of absolute authority from conceptions of the truth that is taught in schools (CRT tenet 4).

**Culturally Relevant Instruction**

African-American AAVE speakers represent an involuntary minority group. As stated earlier, AAVE speakers do not see SE as a language of opportunity, but because of their experiences of SE throughout their history, SE is known as the language of deprivation. The unwillingness of AAVE speakers to accept SE, and the State’s standards that oppose AAVE have left an achievement gap between those that speak AAVE and SE. As stated before, lawmakers in Tennessee have developed Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have provided little room for ELA teachers to teach nor accept any other language besides SE.
However, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2010), has given me the opportunity to explore ways in which to include the current CCSS to that in the social system of AAVE speakers in West Tennessee. By using the studies of Ladson-Billings I can use her components of Culturally Relevant Instruction (CRI) to discover ways in which I can contribute to a formulation of introducing AAVE in ELA classrooms throughout West Tennessee. Ladson-Billings (1995) constructed three components of CRI:

- Culturally Relevant Instruction does not focus on yearly tests but on the long-term academic achievement of the student.
- Culturally Relevant Instruction helps students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while also adopting the cultures of others in the classroom. This will also allow students to find ways to equip them with the knowledge needed to succeed in a school system that oppresses them (Delpit, 2006)
- Culturally Relevant Instruction seeks to develop sociopolitical consciousness which includes a teacher’s obligation to find ways for “students to recognize, understand, and critique current social inequalities” (Ladon-Billings, 1995, p.476)

Culturally Relevant Instruction is just one of the elements that I will use to formulate a path that provides navigation for both teachers and students to use when implementing AAVE into an ELA classroom while at the same time keeping accords to the CCSS. The next section fused the works of Muhammed, Gay, and Ladson-Billings to formulate a navigation guide that helped AAVE students in West Tennessee in being successful in an ELA classroom that focuses on SE only.
Toward Helping AAVE Students in an ELA Classroom by Using the Navigation Guide

Throughout Chapter 2, conducted a literature review that ultimately provided a navigation guide that, through documenting stories and experiences through semi-structured interviews, allowed me to explore a mechanism that may help to create a curriculum that includes AAVE in a SE only classroom. Through the help of Muhammad, Gay, and Ladson-Billings, I used their elements and components to fuse together a guide that will help AAVE students in West Tennessee.

Summary

As involuntary immigrants African-Americans have developed a community and language that; (1) shows unity among African-Americans against a biased behavior among Caucasians; (2) It is a pillar of the African-American way of life that provides a sense of unity, protection, and affection within the community; (3) It provides a place for an African-American to release rage, fear, and guilt. Since African-Americans were allowed to learn and read, the language that was taught to them was AAVE (Hester 2001). AAVE has been shown as the dominant language of African-Americans because overall it gives them a sense of pride and identity.

Historians, researchers, and legal analysts strive to indicate that AAVE is a language to be recognized (Wolfram, 1993, Muñawene, et. al., 1998, Gay, 2010, & Rickford, 2010) yet even today there are forces that keep that from happening. It is because those that hold the power of change and policy do not understand AAVE and the impact it has on the African-American community or either they have a color-blindness mentality (CRT tenet 1), no set of interest convergence (CRT tenet 2), or their continuous false interpretation of race (CRT tenet 3). The state’s CCSSI program has given SE a green light to only teach SE while diminishing other
languages. This program was designed simply to allow ELA classrooms to continue to marginalize AAVE students through their grading policies and expectations.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Research is defined as “the formal, systematic application of the scientific and disciplined inquiry approach to the study of problems” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 3). To study problems, a methodology must be made in order to solve the problem. Madsen (1992) reiterates this notion when she said, “once you have set forth the research problem you must set forth precise steps you propose to take to answer your research question and solve your problem” (p. 68). In this chapter, I shared the methodology of this study, the methods that will be used, and the analysis of the data.

Roadmap of Chapter Three

To provide the systematic application of the scientific and disciplined inquiry approach to the study of the problem, I designed chapter three to inform how I am going to carry out my research and fieldwork. The chapter is divided into five parts. The first part of the chapter is the methodology. For this study, exploratory case study research will be used to form the methodology. Proceeding the description of case study research, I provided a brief history of case study research which addressed its genesis as well as notable researchers who took part in making case study research vital to education.

The second part of chapter three described the participants and how they were selected. The third part of chapter three detailed the importance of data collection and why I chose semi-structured interviews as my data collection method apart from the other types of interviews. The semi-structured interview questions are also present and how they align with the research questions. The fourth part of chapter three discussed my positionality, ethics, and dependability. And the last section deals with data analysis and the steps toward creating ethical data.
The Methodology

Case Study Research

I used exploratory case study (ECS) research as my methodology. I chose ECS study as my methodology because it is one of the most widely used qualitative research methodologies in educational research (Yazan, 2015), and it allowed me to examine data within a small geographical region such as West Tennessee. According to Handfield and Melnyk (1998), case study research has four purposes: (1) exploration theory building, (2) theory testing, and (3) theory refinement. It is a methodology technique that answers how and why. There have been many definitions and objectives for case study research. I will use the objective stated by Yin (1989) when he stated that, “the objective of case study is to try to illuminate decisions or set of decisions, why they are taken, and how they were implemented, and with what results” (Yin, 1989, pps 22-23).

In a case study, one uses a descriptive qualitative form of research (Stake, 1995). It is often used to look at issues and raise awareness of what is happening at a particular place in time (Merriam, 1998). The research is solely based on the perspectives of the participants (Gummesson, 1988). It has historically ideal for those that are researching anthropology, history, education, and sociology (Savin-Baden & Major 2013). Qualitative researchers use case studies as a methodology to explore people’s lives, experiences, and how they feel about a particular issue that affects them and their families (Merriam, 1988).

Over the years, exploratory case study research has evolved to become a useful tool for professions ranging from education, social science, and health (Harrison et al., 2017). It has been re-established as valid and credible for the exploration of people and humanities (Yin, 1998). With a case study, researchers look at small groups or a group as a whole. The reason why case
study research is ideal for this study is it takes a versatile stance in its approach to a particular position and explores it (Yin, 2003). This is probably the reason why case study research can be described as both a method and methodology in many research designs. Former high school African-American AAVE speakers are the key players in this research. As in all case study research, interactions with the participants are necessary to receive proper data (Merriam, 1988). I used the method of interviews to determine if students are being penalized for speaking AAVE in public schools in West Tennessee.

**History of Case Study Research in Education**

Case study research has existed for an extensive period. Over the years, it has become a major methodology for many disciplines with anthropology and sociology, for gaining knowledge of people’s lives in the changing world, and in the political sciences for involving international and domestic relations around the world (Yin, 2014). But it was not until the 1970s that case study research rooted itself in the educational field (Merriam, 2009). Its objective was to evaluate the socio-political effects of curriculum and policy changes (Stake, 1995). It also focused on the need to determine if policies in education affect the various populations in a negative or positive way and provide evidence supporting the claim (Stake, 1995).

Over the years, Robert Yin, Sharan Merriam, and Robert Stake developed a series of approaches to case study research in education. Merriam (2009) used a case study to explore, analyze, and study educational programs, and Yin and Stake (2014) used it to construct an exploration of analysis that would be used to help analyze and evaluate policies in education. All of these methodologists provide educators of today with a series of procedures when conducting a critical case study in education (Creswell, et. al., 2017). With case study research in education, the ultimate goal is to conduct a well-rounded analysis within its boundaries and to understand
the issue from the perspective of the participants (Simmons, 2009). The case study’s objective is to raise awareness of social injustice among a group of individuals. With data collection, interviews, and observations, case study researchers can give light to the secret oppressiveness in the educational field. The alignment between CRT and the case study research aligns well for the audience to gain knowledge of injustice as well as methods of defeating it.

Participants

When it comes to the selection of the participants, J.W. Creswell and Donna Mertens (2013) state that the selection of these participants must come from groups that are rarely sought for study. In my case study research, the participants have experienced of being marginalized for speaking AAVE because of the controversies surrounding the language. In the summer of 2020, a memo was sent out to African-American students who recently graduated, to encourage them to participate in a service event that may benefit other students of color in their school (See Appendix A: sample memo). Of the ninety-five students that received the memo, twenty-six agreed to participate in the study. Out of the twenty-six who agreed to participate, seven were purposively sampled. Purposive sampling is the ideal method to use in my research because it offers a cost-effective and fewer time constraints in the research. These seven were selected based on their willingness to engage in the study, their knowledge of AAVE, and their rapport with student AAVE speakers. This selection process allowed me to provide participants that could benefit the most from the research. According to Patton (2001), the purposive selection provides rich information for the researcher and accurate data when needed.
### Table 10:

*The participants and their descriptions*

| Participant 1 | Participant 1 is a female AAVE speaker. She was raised in a dual family (father and mother) in an African-American community in West Tennessee. She is currently employed at a full-time job near her home. In high school, she was very involved in organizations in the school. She was a member of the student government association. While in honors classes, participant 1 dreamt of becoming an attorney. |
| Participant 2 | Participant 2: Is a male AAVE speaker. He was raised in an African-American urban community in West Tennessee. He was overall an A student in school, yet he proudly classifies himself to me as a Gangster Disciple. After being released from a juvenile detention center, participant 2 was successfully accepted into a local Historically Black College and University (HBCU). He is currently studying business administration. |
| Participant 3 | Participant 3: Is an African-American male that was raised in an African-American rural community in West Tennessee. He, at the time of the interview, was currently unemployed and is seeking employment. While in high school, Participant 3 was involved in the arts ranging from rapping and stepping. While he was a freshman, the participant attended a private school for three months, but he later returned to public school because of being regarded by some at the school as “trouble”. |
| Participant 4 | Participant 4 is an African-American female that was raised in an African-American urban community. in an out-of-state HBCU. She was also the captain of the cheerleading team. Upon graduation, Participant 4 graduated ninth in her class. |
| Participant 5 | Participant 5 is an African-American male that was raised in an African-American rural community in West Tennessee. He is a gifted rapper that travels throughout Tennessee to perform. Participant 5 was an entertainer at events while in high school. Participant 5 expressed to me to be a member of the Vice Lord gang in which he is currently a member at the time of the interview. |
| Participant 6 | Participant 6 is an African-American male that spent his life in various African-American urban communities throughout West Tennessee due to situations that took place at his home. Participant 6 loves tatoos. He has tatoos on many parts of his body. Upon completion of high school, Participant 6 has been a constant resident of the criminal justice system. As a matter of fact, Participant 6 participated in the interview knowingly that he would attend court for the sentencing of a crime within the upcoming days. |
| Participant 7 | Participant 7 is an African-American female that was raised in an African-American urban community. Participant 7 loves to sing. She is currently singing at many church events including weddings and funerals. Upon completion of high school, Participant 7 got involved in a local gospel choir organization. |

The students were not given incentives or compensation for their participation. The participation field is diverse ranging from participants graduating with honors to some engaging in gang affiliation. All these participants are eighteen years or older, and they all have recently graduated from a public high school in West Tennessee. A consent form was given to all the participants to read and sign before any semi-structured interview took place. The stories and data collected from the interviews were critical in the formation of the case study research. I explored the situation that which these participants were involved during their past experiences in high school.
Data Collection

Data collection in qualitative research, there are several methods. These methods range from observations, visual analysis, and interviews (Shanks, 2001). In qualitative research, the most common approach to researching AAVE in public schools is through the interview process. The method of interviewing as the data collection tool will proceed and follow the guidelines in accordance with the University of Memphis. I will seek permission from the university to conduct my research. I will also request permission from the university through the school’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Upon obtaining permission from the IRB, proceeded with the proper data collection techniques that will help to explore the following research questions: (1) What are African-American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school ELA classrooms? (2) How do African-American AAVE speaking students navigate SE language policies that deprive AAVE in high school?; and (3) How do African-American AAVE speaking students see the difference between AAVE and SE? After permission has been granted from the IRB, I will focus my attention on seven recently graduated high school black AAVE speakers to help explore the circumstances surrounding AAVE in public schools. (A copy of the completion of the IRB can be seen in Appendix C)

The Semi-Structured Process

The interview process is a useful method of data collection in qualitative research. It allows the participants to fully express their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic (Tyson, 1991). Furthermore, interviews are a key aspect of exploring the views, beliefs, experiences, and motivations of participants that have firsthand experience with AAVE and how it is used in schools (Brown and Danaher, 2017). Semi-structured interviews provide a deeper
understanding of how AAVE is viewed among those that do not study it as extensively. It also provides flexibility for the participants to express their views in their entirety which does not happen with observations or questionnaires.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with my participants via an online communication network called ZOOM (Archibald, et. al., 2019). The interviews were recorded. If the participants agree to be interviewed a copy of a confidentiality agreement will be sent to the participants. A copy of that agreement is noted in Appendix B. Under this agreement, the high school in which the participants were enrolled were omitted and no questions will be asked to permit the participant to reveal where he/she graduated. The research will then proceed with the actual data collection method.

Types of Interviews in Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, there are three fundamental types of interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (O’Reilly & Dogra, 2019). Determining which interview method to use is of the utmost importance in collecting data. To understand further the three fundamentals are discussed as follows:

Structured Interviews

These interviews were given verbally through questionnaires in which the questions have already been determined by the researcher. With structured interviews, there is a little variation or follow-up questions that may require more explanations. Structured interviews are very easy and quick but give little depth to the knowledge of the topic the researcher is seeking (ERIC/AE Staff 1996).
Unstructured Interviews

These interviews do not reflect any theories or ideas and are often performed with little or discrete information and organization (Dana, et al., 2013). The interviews start with an opening question and ultimately progress from opening questions to more questions relating to that response. Unlike the structured interview questions, unstructured interviews require follow-up questions and are often used to progress the research of the researcher. The balance; however, lies within the concept of time consumption. Researchers are often known to spend minutes and possible hours conducting unstructured interviews (Dana, et. al., 2013).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Unlike the traditional methods of both structured and unstructured interviews, the semi-structured interviews consist of questions that help define the processes to be explored, but it also allows the interviewer and interviewee to develop and create a response that will benefit the research in detail. Semi-structured interviews also provide participants with guidance on what is being talked about and discussed. These kinds of interviews are flexible and allow the participants to provide information to the interviewer that will prove very helpful (Pathak, 2012). In this research approach, I used the semi-structured interview process to guide the process of data collection.

Selecting the Interview Questions

The questions asked during an interview are of high importance when it comes to conducting qualitative research and a valid case study (Merriam, 1985). The questions selected must be unbiased and critical to the formation of the data collection process (Anderson 2010). I sought help from my graduate advisor to help guide me in determining the best questions to ask.
during the interviews. These questions were time-consuming and required thought and guided the research process. A copy of the interview questions can be seen in Appendix B.

An interview guide was created with the interview questions surrounding the concepts of the research questions. The interview questions were categorized by the following headings:

- Introductions
- What are African-American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school in their ELA classrooms?
- How do African-American AAVE speaking students navigate SE language policies that deprive AAVE in high school?
- How do African-American AAVE speakers understand the differences between AAVE and SE?

By combining both the interview questions and the guiding principles for answering the research question a chart was produced below to indicate which interview question fits the guide correctly. Appendix D will describe in detail the interview guide.

**Positionality**

Positionality is where the researcher takes a stand on their belief or position. Research ethics and positionality are gained first through the experiences of the researcher (Shaw, et. al., 2019). Their experiences inspire them to connect and research so as to share these experiences with others (van Manen, 1990). This connection allows researchers to share the same perspectives to influence policy and give awareness of the situation to society at hand.

Positionality describes how our identity influences and potentially biases our perspective and understanding of the word (Merriam 2009). The power of positionality influences the researcher
and the participants. It is critical that the researcher does not tip the balance with biased thoughts and the selection of research participants, for there to be a credible element of research.

As a researcher, my position is clear. I believe that African-American students across West Tennessee are being marginalized and overlooked by teachers and school leaders for speaking AAVE in their schools. Although the state blames low assessments in ELA among African-American students on poverty and mismanagement of their schools, I believe it is also the lack of the State and school districts in West Tennessee to incorporate culturally relevant instruction techniques and code-switching strategies that would enhance the promotion of AAVE in the classrooms. My position did not come overnight, but it developed over an extensive career of being an educator and witnessing what AAVE speaking students face everyday simply because of the way they speak.

I also believe that the strain of not recognizing nor teaching AAVE alongside SE in the schools is one of the major causes of an opportunity gap between the SE and AAVE speaking students. The state ELA assessments given every year to both SE and AAVE speaking students in West Tennessee benefit SE speaking students more because it is written in their language. This gives African-American AAVE speakers a disadvantage.

Trustworthiness

Dependability is also implemented in the research. I reviewed the consent forms before and after the interview was conducted, with the participants to ensure confidentiality. Participants were given a number to indicate who they were in the research. They did not know who the other participants were as well. Following the interview, an email was sent to the individual participants. The email contained quotes that they said in their interviews that helped the researcher gain knowledge. A transcript of the interview was sent to each participant. The
participants had access to their personal interview transcripts. Merriam (2009) states that feedback from participants is also critical after the interviews.

The readers were informed that my research was unbiased. That is why there are varying degrees of participants in this research. The participants and their experiences were analyzed in the research; however, their names and the schools they attended were not listed. The readers were informed about how the interview questions were chosen and the way the interviews were conducted.

**Ethics**

Throughout research the potential for ethical issues may arise. I address each of these ethical issues. First, it is of great importance that the privacy and confidentiality of each participant is preserved. Christians (2011) states that the protection of the participants is key to provide safe and ethical research. The participants were not identified in terms of what high school they attended. The demographics represented the community. The genders were indicated in the research. To enhance participant anonymity, pseudonyms, such as “Participant 2” were used in lieu of actual names.

It is also important that the rights of every participant are protected and respected (Christians 2011). Each participant was advised of their rights during the research process. Every participant was given a chance to opt out of the interview process at any time and be ensured that no negative consequences will result due to opting out of the interviews. If participants feel uncomfortable, or if their rights have been violated during the process, then a contact number of the advisor and dean will be listed on the bottom of the consent form.

Finally, before the interview, I went over the consent form one on one with the participants to ensure that privacy is maintained, and no stipend or reward will be given during
the interview or research process. I also indicated to the participants that the interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and all words mentioned during the interview will be left authentic.

**Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis is the process of searching and arranging the interview transcripts, observation notes, or other data collection methods that the researcher has accumulated to increase the understanding of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). This method is important to research because it gives evidence as well as draws a simple understanding of what the collective participants during the interviews are expressing.

During the interview process, the participants were recorded, and their interviews were transcribed. Dedoose was used as the transcription computer software. Overall, the process of transcribing was important during the data collection process and served as a bridge between data collection and data. Before a data analysis occurred, a transcription of the interviews took place. According to Ochs (1979), transcribing interviews is a selective process reflecting theoretical goals and definitions. Transcribing interviews is a necessity in research (Stuckey, 2014). The transcripts of the participants during the interview were read individually. It included the exact language of the participants, with no altercations. This allowed the language of the participants to further support the use of AAVE in public schools and serves as evidence of what the participants were saying in the interview which gives credibility to the research (Saldana, 2016).

The method of horizontalization was used as my data analysis technique. This method was used to analyze the transcripts from the interviews of the seven participants. By using this method of horizontalization, I was able to read through each interview transcripts and highlight statements that showed a similarity of experiences among the AAVE speaking students.
Structured coding was also used to label important parts of the interview process (Saldana, 2016). These important parts formed codes that were associated based on the similar experiences that AAVE speakers faced while attending a public high school (Creswell, 2013). After the collection of the groups’ experiences, I was able to develop final themes. These themes were identified and used as a basis of the overall experiences in which the participants faced.

Create a data repository

Dedoose was used in the research to analyze the interview data. I used the database to arrange and code each participant. This software is engineered for case study data analysis and its applications. Dedoose breaks down data which eventually gives a final proposition and pattern to the interview answers.

Initial Codes

Coding is the most important element in data analysis (Williams and Moser, 2019). It assigns a summative attribute for a portion of qualitative data. It is a procedure that explains why things happen (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The process begins with the subdivision of massive amounts of information and assigns them into categories. Once the data repository was created, the data collected was organized into labels. The transcripts were used to identify words or phrases from the participants that may impact the research. By using the transcripts, I found repeated themes from each participant in their answers during the interviews. Using Dedoose, the patterns were correlated into codes that represent what the participants were indicating altogether. Through the process of coding, I discovered the meaning of various phrases. Dedoose analyzed this data and made it accessible to me to create themes from the participants’ answers.
Analyze the Coded Data

The data was analyzed to code the patterns of the answers from the participants. The answers to each of the interview questions were carefully analyzed and recorded to indicate the participants’ expressions toward their use of AAVE in West Tennessee schools. A red “x” was used to indicate a negative expression toward the participants' use of AAVE in school. A blue “x” indicated a positive expression towards the participants’ expressions of AAVE when used in schools.

Give a Final Proposition

The analysis of the case study was centered around the final proposition. The job of the final proposition was to interpret data and to answer the research questions. The data collected and the series of coding helped determine the final proposition. The coding from Dedoose helped to indicate that there was a negative approach toward AAVE speakers in schools in West Tennessee. The participants’ views on how they were treated and marginalized while at school demonstrated that AAVE is not accepted as a language that is part of an individual’s culture in West Tennessee school systems used in this research.

Summary

Throughout Chapter three my methodology detailed investigation into how a researcher seeks information. The objective of my research was to seek and discover if African-American AAVE speakers in West Tennessee High Schools are being marginalized for speaking AAVE. Chapter three offers the methods of investigation in which my research was conducted. I have concluded that a case study was the proper methodology to use for my research as well as using semi-structured interviews for the data collection process. The procedures of how I conducted my research has also been indicated in Chapter three. The methods discussed in chapter three
were used to achieve the objectives to answer my research questions and solve the problem as stated by Madsen (1997).
Chapter 4: Findings

This study explored whether African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) speakers were being penalized for speaking and using AAVE in the high schools in which they graduated. The research explored whether Tennessee’s English-only policies in public schools have resulted in a social and academic gap between AAVE speakers and Standard English (SE) only speaking students. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework approach, this study sought to understand how SE-only policies in Tennessee’s public schools have affected AAVE speakers academically and socially throughout West Tennessee’s public schools. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are African American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school ELA classrooms in West Tennessee?
2. How do African American AAVE-speaking students navigate SE language policies that deprive AAVE in high school?
3. How do African-American AAVE speaking students understand the differences between AAVE and SE?

After analyzing the transcriptions from seven participants using the methods that are described in Chapter three, I have identified five themes that best interpret the high school experiences of participants as they spoke AAVE in their high school.

Roadmap of Chapter IV

Chapter four discusses the major themes of this study. These themes will give an outlook on how these participants felt when using AAVE at their school, and within their community. These themes provided answers to the research questions and provided directions for future research that was all laid out in Chapter five. Chapter four also gave an in-depth experience of
participants that recently graduated from a public high school in West Tennessee. This chapter used the elements of Critical Race Theory to support the testimonies of the participants and their fellow AAVE-speaking classmates. The elements of CRT helped me determine what steps were needed to address diverse cultures in school systems in West Tennessee.

The Participants

In this research design, seven AAVE speakers participated in the study. The participants were recent graduates at a public school in West Tennessee. Of the seven participants, three identified as female, and four identified as male. All participants attended and graduated from a public high school in West Tennessee. They also live within two regions of West Tennessee. Four participants live in an African-American urban community, and three live in a rural African-American community. All of the participants are eighteen years old, and all of them graduated and received diplomas from West Tennessee high schools. The participants were characterized and named as participants one, two, three, four, five, six, and seven. Any personal information, such as their names, the school they attended, or the names of teachers that had them in their classroom have been omitted in this research.

Description of the participants

Although the names, the schools they attended, and the teachers they had during their high school career have been omitted in the research, other descriptors of the participants were significant. A description of the following participants is indicated below:

1. Participant 1: Is a female AAVE speaker. She was raised in a traditional family (father and mother) in an African-American community in West Tennessee. She is employed at a full-time job near her home. In high school, she was very involved in organizations in the school. She was a member of the student
government association. While in honors classes, participant 1 dreamt of becoming an attorney.

2. Participant 2: Is a male AAVE speaker. He was raised in an African-American urban community in West Tennessee. He was an A student in high school, yet he proudly classifies himself as a member of a gang known as Gangster Disciple. After being released from a juvenile detention center, Participant 2 was accepted into a local Historically Black College and University (HBCU). He is currently studying Business Administration.

3. Participant 3: Is an African-American male that was raised in an African-American rural community in West Tennessee. At the time of the interview, he is currently unemployed and is seeking employment. While in high school, Participant 3 was involved in rapping and stepping. When he was a freshman, the participant attended a private school for three months, but he later returned to public school because of being regarded by some as “trouble.”

4. Participant 4: is an African-American female that was raised in an African-American urban community. At the time of the interview, the participant was studying Political Science in another out-of-state HBCU. While in high school, Participant 4 was an honor student and was also the captain of the cheerleading team. Upon graduation, Participant 4 graduated ninth in her class.

5. Participant 5: is an African-American male raised in an African-American rural community in West Tennessee. He is a rapper that travels throughout Tennessee to perform. Participant 5 was an entertainer at events while in high school.
Participant 5 informed me that he was a member of a gang known as Vice Lords in which he is currently a member at the time of interview.

6. Participant 6: is an African-American male who spent his life in various African-American urban communities throughout West Tennessee due to situations in his home. Participant 6 loves tattoos. He has tattoos on many parts of his body. Upon completion of high school, Participant 6 has been a constant resident of the criminal justice system. Participant 6 participated in the interview knowing that he would attend court to receive sentencing for a crime within the upcoming days.

7. Participant 7 is an African-American female raised in an African-American urban community. Participant 7 loves to sing. She is currently singing at many church events, including weddings and funerals. Upon completion of high school, Participant 7 got involved in local gospel choir organizations.

**Major Themes**

After completing the analysis as well as identifying major components of the interview transcriptions, five themes were created. These themes resulted from the overall experiences of the participants who speak AAVE:

The themes include:

1. Pre-knowledge of AAVE
2. Social interactions at school
3. Inside the ELA Classroom
4. State Standardized Tests
5. Code-Switching
The participants gave an accurate description to address the related social and opportunity gaps in West Tennessee’s public schools that they attended.

The order of the themes is in sequence with the participants’ experiences during the interviews:

**Theme 1:** This theme is the acknowledgment of AAVE and how it has become a part of the culture for African American AAVE speakers in both rural and urban communities.

**Theme 2:** This theme deals with the social interactions that AAVE speakers have within the high school among their peers and teachers, as well as their perceptions toward AAVE. These interactions served as an important mechanism to address the opportunity gap between the AAVE speakers and the non-AAVE speakers.

**Theme 3:** This theme looks inside the ELA classroom. It focuses on how the classes are taught, how teachers actually regarded AAVE speakers and the grading policies in the classroom.

**Theme 4:** This theme focuses on the standardized test that all AAVE speakers take at the end of the course (EOC) exam. Their participation provided knowledge as to how they coped with the ELA section of the EOC.

**Theme 5:** This theme describes how AAVE speakers have developed a sense of code-switching in and out of their communities. It focuses on how AAVE speakers can code-switch from SE to AAVE. It will also provide alternative programs that address code-switching within public schools, such as those in California. Each theme will include subcategories which are within the themes.
Pre-Knowledge of AAVE:

To understand the experiences of using AAVE from the participants, I felt that it was important to configure the participant’s level of understanding of the AAVE language by using the components and rules that were composed and illustrated in chapter two. I created an array of AAVE phrases for the participants to interpret. So, the interviews began with phrases that the participants interpreted. Here are the phrases:

1. “Dude, been trippin all day”
2. “Dude, crazy as a mug”
4. “De, been gone”
5. “You good?”

When asked to interpret the following phrases, each participant was willing to give their interpretations of the phrases. The participants’ interpretations were identical:

1. “Dude, been trippin 'all day”’: It means that a person is in a bad mood and is responding in an aggressive nature.
2. “Dude, crazy as a mug”: This is interpreted in two ways, depending on the situation or the nature of the phrase. When using this phrase, many AAVE speakers can interpret it as someone who is comical or funny. However, it can also mean as someone who is drunk, high on drugs, or mentally incapacitated. As the participants suggest, this phrase is used depending on the current situation.
3. “Dey, finna jack”: All participants interpreted this phrase as a possible altercation among two opposing people or groups.
4. “Dey been gone”: The participants interpreted this phrase as a group of people who had left a present location. It also describes the length of time in which they departed. Using the phrase “been gone”, the participants suggested that the group of people left a long time ago instead of the phrase “just gone” which describes a shorter amount of time.

5. “You good”: The participants interpreted this phrase as someone asking if they were okay or feeling well. It can also respond as an interpretation of “that’s okay: ” or “that’s fine.”

The phrase used is determined by the tone of the person’s voice and dictation.

The interpretations of these phrases led me to probe the participants’ pre-knowledge of the phrases. The first theme is divided into three sub-categories to explain

1) Knowledge and mastery of these AAVE phrases.
2) Acknowledgment as to where these AAVE phrases are accepted,
3) Acknowledgement as to where these AAVE phrases are not accepted.

Knowledge and mastery of AAVE

The knowledge as to how the participants could interpret the AAVE phrases varied. They revealed that their understanding of AAVE came at an early age and that they were introduced to AAVE before SE (White English). As a result, many of the participants had already identified AAVE as a way of communication years before they were introduced to other languages and cultures. All of the participants stated that speaking AAVE or Black English was normal. After carefully analyzing my data, I discovered that AAVE speakers from rural African-American communities believed that speaking AAVE was normal because it was, as they believed, a southerner's way of life.
Participant 1 explained:

I speak it (AAVE) around a lot of my friends and family because we’re all from the south. So, when we are using the language we’re just kinda chill mode. Like it is down to earth. It’s country. We’re comfortable with each other. So if you say things wrong it's not like we’re going to be judged.

However, in urban African-American communities, the participants believe that speaking AAVE is a sense of one’s identity. Participant 5 explained:

I use them around my family and folks around my neighborhood. Cuz that’s just the way it was. We knew who lived in our neighborhood when they used it. So, they were cool, but we knew who was not part of our block cuz of the way they did not speak like us.

Overall, the participants stated that they learned how to use those phrases, as well as others, through means of communication with parents and those that lived within their community.

Participant 7 also explained:

That’s the way we all talked. My family used it and my brothers and sisters, my neighbors, we all used it. It was just a normal thing for us.

**An acknowledgment as to where AAVE is accepted**

Although the participants were well versed and knowledgeable in the AAVE phrases, they were also aware that AAVE was not accepted in various places. The participants were able to identify when AAVE was accepted outside of their community. They were aware of how and when to use AAVE.

Participant 2 explained:

Yeah, when I use it (Black English) outside my community, it is normally around other black folks or people like Hispanics or Arabs. Oh yeah, there are some white people that
are cool for the way I talk. To be honest, I talk like that everywhere I feel like I can be myself.

Other participants reiterated the same statement of Participant 2. However, when I asked Participant 6 when he felt most comfortable, he stated, “Any place where white people aren’t there”. He said that because of his tattoos all over his body and his speaking Black English he would automatically label him—“a threat”. Participant 5 stated that he uses AAVE best when he writes and uses it in his raps. He is the most comfortable when he is also at the studio and around both Black and White friends around the school. I probed Participant 5 more by asking him why he felt more comfortable writing Black English instead of speaking it. He stated in his interview by saying, “Black English in music like rap is like writing poetry for me. Yeah, it's like a work of art, know what I’m saying?” Overall, the participants all agreed that they felt that if they could be themselves, they felt most comfortable speaking Black English.

An acknowledgement of places where AAVE is NOT accepted

According to the experiences of the participants, AAVE is accepted in numerous places; however, it is also not accepted in others. When I asked the participants where AAVE is not accepted, the participants immediately responded that some of the classrooms at their high schools were places where Black English was forbidden. It seemed that AAVE speakers knew that what they were speaking was inferior to SE. They regarded Black English as slang or incorrect English, so, being corrected daily by their teachers seemed justifiable to them. Participant 3 stated that he immediately “turned off” his Black English whenever he came into the classroom. He continued to state, “I knew that they did not like it. I mean it was the rule in the classroom.” When I asked Participant 7 where she felt Black English was not accepted, she replied by saying, “People at school would make fun of me when I say ‘are you’ or ‘ion know’.”
They would even impersonate me using a ghetto accent.” When I probed her and asked how she felt when they impersonated her, she said, “It kinda made me feel like I wasn’t smart enough, but I got over it cuz I thought they were right to talk about the way I talked because they were the adults”.

Participant 1, a student government officer at her high school, felt that it was expected of her to speak more SE in the school rather than AAVE as a student representative of her class. She stated:

If I ever became myself and jumped out of character and then spoke Black English, people would look at me like I’m crazy. Ya see, I was the one that teachers would use to speak at events and show my face in front of everything at the school. It was cool when I was in the 9th and 10th grade, but as I got older I realized that Black English was never accepted at my school. It’s like the more I sounded like a White girl, the more I was portrayed as smart, and good. But whenever I spoke Black English I was known as ghetto.

There were also other places where participants felt and acknowledged when AAVE was not accepted. Participant 2 stated that getting a job was very difficult for him. He said in his interview that whenever he applied for a job, he would call the place to see if they had considered his employment application. He always felt that when he was talking to the employer they would try very hard to get him off the phone. Participant 5 reiterated what Participant 2 stated about getting a job. He said he felt uncomfortable when he called an employer concerning his job application. He stated:

I always hated getting on the phone when I was talking to someone about a job.

Every time I was placed on hold, I would hope that a black person would talk to
me, know what I’m saying? Cuz I knew that if a White dude talked to me, I knew that I wasn’t getting the job.

Participant 6 stated during the interview that he believed people that spoke Black English to the police were mistreated harshly. He stated concerning the judicial system that people who also speak Black English in the courtroom were charged with harsher punishments. In his interview, he continued to state something that really made an impression on me:

Some judges at court don’t like it when you come in speaking like you from the hood. Cuz, if you talk like that you can get more time in jail. To be honest, I’ve been in court before and when I began to speak, the judge all of the sudden told everyone to ‘watch out for him.’ I didn’t do anything, know what I’m saying? I hadn’t done nothing. I just started talking and they already thought I was trouble. That is why when I go to court and other places I never talk. I’m always quiet. That way I can't get into no trouble.

When I heard what Participant 6 was saying and how he was treated in the judicial system, I began to think about Rachel Jeantel, and how she too was treated during her testimony in the Trayvon Martin case in 2012. George Zimmerman, who was accused of murdering Trayvon Martin, claimed that he acted in self-defense. Yet, Trayvon's friend Rachel Jeantel, who was on the phone with Trayvon, stated that it was Zimmerman who was the agitator and not Trayvon. The trial in 2013 made Jeantel a key witness to the prosecution.

Jeantel testified in court for six hours. Her testimony; however, was overshadowed by her use of AAVE in court. Her use of AAVE phrases such as, “I was been paying attention, sir” or “He by the area where his daddy fiancée house is”, made headlines in the social media and news organizations (Hodges, 2015). In fact, one of the six jurors (B37) said in an interview on CNN, that she found Jeantel both hard to understand and not credible. In a sense, Jeantel’s use of
AAVE was found guilty in the court of public opinion and may have also resulted in Zimmerman’s acquittal (Rickford & King, 2016). When Participant 6 stated that the judicial system is harsh toward AAVE speakers, I began to wonder how many more AAVE speakers besides Rachel Jeantel and Participant 6 have become a victim of language deprivation in the judicial system (Jones, et. al., 2019).

The statement made by Juror B37 in the CNN interview made it possible to suggest that there may be a negative bias toward those that speak AAVE in the courtroom as well (Kurinec & Weaver, 2019). The misunderstanding and misinterpretations of AAVE speakers from outside the African-American community would also suggest that a more diverse teaching strategy which includes AAVE being taught alongside SE is needed to alleviate the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of AAVE speakers. Culturally Relevant Instruction is critical in bridging this gap.

Social Interactions Among Peers and Teachers at School:

This theme describes the social interactions that the participants had among their peers and teachers in their high school. Routman (2005) suggests that students learn more at school when they can talk and interact. He further suggests that a teacher should not spend most of the class time teaching the lesson but establish good interactions with all the students to the levels that they are aware of how they live and where they live. Social interactions can improve a child’s learning and involvement in school when they feel that they are accepted within the school community. Social interactions began with an acknowledgment of each peer’s culture, social class, and language (Routman, 2005). If there is no social interaction among peers and teachers, then separation and an eventual social gap may be established within a high school. In this section, I categorized social interactions into three subcategories 1) interactions among high
Interactions with peers at high school

This sub-category was considered based on how the participants spoke about their interactions with their peers while in high school. For the most part, the participants were actively involved with their peers, both African-Americans and non-African-Americans. Participant 1 interacted with her peers in the student government, while Participant 2 interacted as a high school basketball player. Both Participants 3 and 5 interact with their peers in dance, rap, and stepping, and Participant 4 interacted with her peers as a high school cheerleader. Participant 7 interacted with her peers through singing while enrolling in the high school chorus.

Collectively, the participants expressed positive views when they interacted with those that were non-AAVE speakers. They expressed eagerness and acceptance among their peers, while at the same time their peers expressed eagerness and acceptance of them. Participant 3 said during the interview, “I had so many White, Hispanic, and Arabic friends. They were really cool. We would do a lot together at school.” Participant 7, the high school singer, stated:

I couldn’t believe that there were actually White and Hispanic people in the gospel choir. To be honest, I thought that the office or some counselor had just put them in there because they couldn’t place them anywhere else at the school. But when they started singing with us them Black songs with Black words, I said to myself ‘that’s wassup. Participant 4 was a cheerleader when she was in high school. She expressed how she and her non-AAVE-speaking peers eventually became friends. She told me in her interview that when she was in the 9th and 10th grades, there were two cheerleading squads. One squad was for the
football team, which mainly consisted of all Caucasian cheerleaders. The other squad was the basketball team, which mainly consisted of all African-American cheerleaders. Both squads had two coaches. The football cheerleaders had a Caucasian coach, and the basketball cheerleaders had an African-American coach. When she was in the 11th grade the Caucasian coach resigned leaving the football cheerleaders without a coach. So, instead of hiring a new coach, the school decided to forge both teams together under the direction of the African-American cheerleading coach. The African-American coach placed Participant 4 as the captain and the captain of the football cheerleaders as the co-captain of both teams.

At first, Participant 4 stated that she was very nervous because she knew what the Caucasian cheerleaders were thinking of the situation. But when both squads began to interact and cheer alongside each other, she began to see a difference in opinions and moods with both squads. In her interview, Participant 4 stated that her 11th and 12th-grade experiences on the cheerleading squad were remarkably her best years. She stated that their respect and acceptance for one another were outstanding. She also remembered the day when both squads officially became one team.

She stated during the interview:

During halftime, the all-White cheerleaders from the other team began to talk a lot of stuff to me and the other Black girls. But when it was time to jack, I saw next and behind me them White cheerleaders on our squad. They were ready to throw hands with us. I knew it was bad at that time, but at the same time, to be honest, it made us (Black girls) feel good. We were in their city and far away from home and it felt good that they stood with us.
The peer interactions between the participants and their peers in high school were positive. Throughout the interviews, none of the participants could say their peers looked at them a certain way that was negative or offensive. Overall, there was respect among all the peers from various backgrounds. However, it was the opposite when the participants interacted with teachers.

**Teacher Interactions**

Whenever there was a conversation about their interactions with teachers, the participants believed that the repeated corrections of how they spoke separated them from interacting with their teachers. The participants did not have frustrations with the repeated corrections from their teachers. They viewed it as preparing them for the real world. It also demonstrated that they were from separate cultures and communities from their teachers. Many participants during the interviews believed that there was little interaction between their teachers and them outside the classroom. It was as Participant 6 said, “all cool in class, not cool outside class”.

The participants believed their teachers were always on schedule. Most of the participants believed the teachers were busy with the job of teaching, yet they forgot who they were teaching and how to interact with them. According to the participants, the teachers would enter the class, teach, ask questions, and give little homework. There was little interaction between the teachers and the participants even during that time.

There was a difference according to the participants when it came to teacher interactions. Participants stated that their teachers had little knowledge about their students’ lives outside the classroom. Participant 2 stated that teachers would rarely come to his basketball games. It was so rocky between Participant 2 and his teachers that his teachers could not believe that he was an A student while also speaking what they called “bad English”.
Participant 5 described in his interview how he was assigned to write a letter of thanks to his favorite teacher during Teacher Appreciation Day when he was in the ninth grade. He wrote a letter in Rap. When the teacher got the letter, the teacher asked Participant 5 if he could translate what he meant in the letter. Participant 5 knew that even his favorite teacher did not know anything about him, the community he lived in, or the type of words he used to express gratitude and appreciation.

Participant 6 was blunt when describing his interactions with his teachers. He believed that teachers were aware of the students that they taught, but they had no idea what it was like to live in his community. Participant 6 stated:

Mane, I’d give anything to see one of my teachers drive up in my hood. To be honest, I don’t even think they know where my hood is. They would be just like me when I am in their class. They would be all confused. They wouldn’t even know what to say to folks in my hood, know what I’m saying? To be honest, I think my teachers believe we all live in nice houses like them. They think we all live the same way and speak the same way. Cuz, if they even knew that we were different from them I think they would teach us in a different way, know what I’m saying?

Participant 7 reiterated Participant 6 during her interview when she stated:

What they (the teachers) don’t know is that where I’m from, it’s all survival. If you try to talk like what they teach us at school, then there would be no peace. You would be known as someone that thinks that they are better than the rest of the people in the community.

Many of the participants expressed that they were misunderstood because of the way they spoke and interacted with their teachers in the classroom. Participants 2 and 5 stated that they were
fond of school, and they made good grades. They were both eligible to receive memberships in honor clubs. Both participants believed that it was because the way they spoke gave the teachers the impression that they were not qualified for membership. When I probed both the participants why they did not go further with a complaint about that situation, both stated that it would have, in their opinion, caused more harm than help. As Participant 2 stated:

I played basketball for 4 years at that school. The coach would tell me that the teachers were telling him that I was really smart, but I was also leading others on the wrong path. I didn’t know what the coach was saying. All I knew was that the teachers did not like me for some reason. I’m going to keep it real with you. I felt so bad when my coach told me that. After all the games I played. I never told nobody this, but that’s when GD (Gangster Disciple) came into my life.

Social interactions among the participants and teachers were of great importance to many of the participants. The participants expressed the need to interact with their teachers outside of the school setting. For the participants, the amount of trust and interaction with their teachers could have benefited the participants, if only, the interactions between the two had been greater outside the classroom.

**The English Language Arts (ELA) Classroom and Grading Policy**

In 2011, The Tennessee State Legislator revised and amended a Standard English only policy that was once adopted in 1984. The policy is known as the English and Legal Language Code. Its mission was to do what the federal government could not accomplish- recognizing Standard English as the official language. The Code was passed, adopted, and implemented throughout public school districts in West Tennessee. The Code states:
(Standard) English is hereby established as the official and legal language of Tennessee. All communications and publications, including ballots, produced by government entities in Tennessee shall be in English, and instructions in public schools and colleges of Tennessee shall be conducted in English unless the course would require otherwise (Tennessee English and Legal Language Code Section 4-1-404. 1984 rev. 2011).

The Code that was made policy throughout West Tennessee’s school districts ultimately made Standard English the undisputed legal language throughout the region. Public school districts in the state currently recognize and teach only in SE, and other languages, including AAVE in public schools, are not recognized or taught alongside SE. As a result, school districts have implemented curriculums that are based on the use of SE only in the classroom. This strategy has established grading policies in public ELA classrooms that are non-negotiable. The standards and curriculum grade students based on their understanding and mastery of SE in the classroom.

This section will address the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom and how AAVE speakers navigate within the ELA classrooms in West Tennessee. The participants’ experiences shed light on the grading policies that AAVE speakers encounter within an ELA classroom. The testimonies of the participants may also interpret a possible achievement gap between AAVE and SE speakers in the ELA classroom. This section is divided into two sub-categories. The first sub-category illustrates the participants' descriptions of their ELA classrooms throughout their high school tenure. It will describe their teachers and how they viewed them within the classroom. The second subsection describes the participant’s thoughts on the grading policies in their ELA classrooms.
A description of an ELA classroom for an AAVE speaker

Findings from this study indicates that participants’ experiences varied in their description of their ELA classrooms. Some participants viewed their ELA classroom as just as normal as other classrooms, while others viewed ELA as their worst class. Overall, the participants agreed that the teachers had grading policies that they believed were fair for everyone. Participant 3 said during his interview that his ELA teachers graded on a point system. If any student made an error, the teacher would give the same grade as other students.

There were other views from the participants regarding African-American ELA teachers. For the most part, the participants respected African-American ELA teachers more when it comes to speaking AAVE in class. They understood that African-American ELA teachers, although adhering to the rules and standards of ELA, were a part of their community. When the African-American ELA teachers corrected them when they spoke: “bad English” they respected them for it. Participant 5 stated in his interview that he only had one African-American ELA teacher during the four years he was in high school. He regarded him as a good and honest teacher.

My teacher knew that we all spoke Black English, and dude knew that we didn’t speak White English. But he let us speak it a lot in his class. I remembered when he allowed us to write poetry in his class. When I turned mines in, I got a good grade. He told me that he liked it.

Participant 1 had two African-American ELA teachers during her time in high school. She stated that both of her African-American ELA teachers were understanding but somewhat harsh in using AAVE. She too regarded the teachers’ treatment as a way to prepare her for the “real world”. In her interview, she stated:
When I was in the 10th and 11th grade I had Black English teachers. I liked the class.

Both of the teachers were really smart but they did not like how we spoke to each other in the classroom. I mean I was in honors. They did not like it and it showed. All of us in the class knew why they were treating us like that. They were preparing us for the real world. They knew that we could not speak Black English when we were trying to get a job. We all knew what they were doing.

It was rare for AAVE speakers to have AAVE-speaking teachers in an ELA classroom.

However, there is, according to many AAVE speakers, a token of appreciation when they have African-American ELA teachers. Two participants in the research shared their experiences with Caucasian ELA teachers in the classroom. Both of them had different opinions about their Caucasian ELA teachers. Participant 6 stated:

I didn’t like my English teachers. I knew that they talked about me a lot. They did not like the way I spoke at all, know what I’m saying? When I talked in the class, them teachers would already describe me as trouble. To be honest, I did not want to be there because I knew they didn’t want me in the class.

When I probed Participant 6 as to why he felt that way, he stated:

When you grow up in the hood it's all good. I was taught a long time ago to respect my elders, but when you feel like you are not welcomed you began to see that it's all cool. At least their feelings are honest with you.

Participant 6 continued to state that because of his experiences with Caucasian ELA teachers in his 9th and 10th grades, it was hard for him to think otherwise with ELA teachers.

Participant 2 never had an African-American ELA teacher while in high school. In the tenth grade, he had both English II and Spanish I. He stated that his tenth-grade year was one of
the worst years in high school because he was taught to learn two different languages apart from his own. He shared his experiences in the ELA classroom as being boring, useless, and a waste of time. He dreaded his English classes because he felt that there was nothing to gain from it. He stated during his interview:

I hated going to my English classes. I tried every day to skip that class. Me and my teacher never saw eye to eye. Every time I did something in his class, I would be sent to the office. I finally got tired of it and wanted to fight ole dude. I guess he didn’t like the way I talked in his class. So, he and I had a situation when he accused me of cheating on a test when I studied for it and made an A on it. From the time I came to the dude's classroom, he made me realize that I wasn’t invited.

Although the participants had various opinions of their ELA classrooms, all were in agreement with their ELA’s grading policy. Testimonies about the grading policies in their ELA classrooms from the participants were deemed as unfair, harsh, and messed up. As we see in the next sub-category, the participants had a very hard time coping with the grading policies in their ELA classroom.

**Grading policies in the ELA classroom**

During the time interviewing the participants in my research study, there was one theme that united the participants' thinking and it was the grading policies in an ELA classroom. The participants had various opinions of their grades in their ELA classrooms. They all agreed that the grading policies were unfair for those who did not grow up speaking SE. All participants shared with me during the interviews how they felt when they received grades from assignments that they submitted to the ELA teacher. They all stated their dislike towards the red pen.
When I asked the participants to describe their experiences and feelings when they received a grade from an essay they submitted to an ELA teacher, most participants expressed frustrations and low self-efficacy. As a result, they stated that they wrote essays and short answers using grammar rules and dictations from their first language-Black English. The participants expressed that when they got their essay back from the teacher it was normally filled with red marks.

Participant 5 described how he felt about the grading policies and standards in his ELA classrooms. He realized that ELA was just another class and had no real significance to his future. He went on to state that when he worked on an essay, he wrote what he thought was the most proper form of English that he could think of. He stated during the interview:

I would turn in an essay thinking that I was going to get a good grade. But when I got the paper back, I had a lot of red marks on my paper with a low grade. I couldn’t believe it when I got it back. When I saw all the red marks, know what I’m saying, on my paper it was like I got shot and my blood poured all over my paper.

Participant 5 did not fully understand the grading policies in an ELA classroom. In fact, he was unaware of the state ELA standards. From his perspective, he believed that the grading policies in his ELA classrooms were made up by the teacher. During the interview, I asked Participant 5 of his perspective of the state standards (state rules) regarding ELA. He replied, “What’s that?” He further stated that he had no idea that state standards resulting in local grading policies existed.

Participant 4 stated that her parents had to hire tutors that were versed in ELA to teach her how to write and speak SE. She informed me during the interview that she felt as if they were teaching her to speak “White”. As a result, she cooperated with her tutor and wrote good essays.
She resented the red pen. She jokingly compared the red pen to “getting a whooping” by her ELA teacher. In the interview, she informed me that she scored better than many of the AAVE speakers in the classroom, but she often wondered why there was no program or solution to helping other AAVE speakers who were struggling in the class. She stated during the interview: 

I didn’t want my friends to know that I made good grades on my essays because they would think that I was better than they were. I was really happy about my grades but I was also mad that I was the only Black person in the classroom making good grades. I mean, this was a Black school. Where was the help for Black folks in the school? I mean couldn’t they at least provide help for Black people in the class?

Participant 4 expressed how happy she was to receive good grades in her ELA classroom. Yet, she was hesitant in informing other AAVE speakers of her accomplishments because of the negative response she may have received if she did. Participant 4 felt somewhat bad for making progress in her academics while many of her fellow AAVE speakers were still struggling to maintain a decent grade in the class.

When I asked the participants what they thought would have been a better way to improve scores in their ELA classrooms, Participant 7:

The school should have had more programs and clubs that would have helped many Black folks in the class. We grew up where you couldn’t speak White. There should have been something at the school that made us see the difference between White and Black English instead of saying that we spoke ‘bad English. If they had more programs that cared enough about us then we would have made better grades in the class.

Many of the participants echoed the views of Participant 7. If only the schools had provided them with a way to differentiate between SE and AAVE.
Standardized Tests

This study has demonstrated that there is an academic gap between AAVE and SE speakers when it comes to standardized tests. It has shed light on how AAVE speakers regard themselves as students who are not receiving the benefits needed to accomplish the same missions as those that write SE during state assessments. The participants have been up-front in their experiences in high school as AAVE speakers. Many of the participants regard AAVE as “slang” and “broken English”. None of the participants regarded AAVE as a separate language to SE. Research has indicated that students who regard AAVE as slang or broken English was due to what they were taught (Lemoine, 2017). The interviews show that all of the participants believed that how they spoke was wrong; and in order to be successful, they had to change their language and embrace SE. This was evident when they spoke in detail about taking the Tennessee standardized tests, known to the participants as the End of Course (EOC) tests.

In the state of Tennessee, public schools are required to take and submit standardized state assessments in ELA, Math, Science, and American History. In this study, I interviewed participants regarding the ELA state assessment. The scores are ranked each year from the schools that scored the highest to the lowest. In 2020, the ELA state assessment scores in West Tennessee mirrored that of the entire state. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2020), urban African-American schools in West Tennessee scored the lowest. These schools have a considerate student population of urban AAVE-speaking communities. However, these schools are not ranked the lowest because the student population is mostly African-American, but rather because of several factors. One of these factors could be a language deficiency in SE that contributes to the low scores.
The participants in this research recalled vividly their experiences in taking the EOC. During the interviews, the participants revealed how they felt when they took the ELA portion of the test. The participants described EOC as hard, difficult, like reading Chinese, and messed up. Participant 3 stated that had he known the EOC was going to be that difficult, he would have stayed in a private school. Participant 1 stated that she was always ready but was not fully prepared for the ELA section of the EOC.

Participant 6 was blunt in his description of the EOC. In his interview, he stated how he gave up the moment he saw the ELA section of the EOC. In his bluntness, he said, “Mane, when I saw all those long words, I just marked B and C on my answers. When I finished doing that I just put my head down and went to sleep.”

When I probed him and asked why he did this, he replied:

No one reads things like that at my school, know what I’m saying? I mean when you look at those words and the amount you have to read, you just say &^%# this. To be honest, that test was just a test for White folks, know what I’m saying? For me, I just needed to take it so I could pass. I was finna go off on my English teacher cuz he wanted to make the EOC grade to be my final, know what I’m saying? I said, dude, can’t do that, we ain't learned none of this in his class.

Participant 7 described the ELA portion of the EOC as too difficult. It made her feel that she was not smart when she took the test. “I can remember taking the EOC for the first time,” she stated, “I saw all them hard questions and words. I thought to myself, damn there is someone out there that actually knows this stuff.” When I asked Participant 7 on who she thinks “knows this stuff”, she replied, “I don’t know, probably someone White that lives in one of them big houses that go to one of them fancy private schools.” I again probed her and asked her why the person couldn’t
be Black? She laughed and said, “yeah, that’s a possibility but I doubt it. I mean, if he was Black, he probably goes to a White school.”

Participant 5 blamed himself when he took the EOC. Upon taking the EOC, he stated that in his class they would practice the EOC every week, but he did not pay attention to them. He regretted not listening to the teacher. He continued to state that he had little interest in the EOC because he had no idea what the test was for. When he described the EOC he stated during his interview:

I remember taking the EOC in English, know what I’m saying? I remember seeing all them things we had to read, but as soon as I got to the middle of the test the teacher would say I had five more minutes left. I was like damn fa real? So, I just went and just guessed the rest of them, know what I’m saying?

In 1974, Dr. Karen Hess, an expert on AAVE and standardized testing, stated in The Elementary School Journal, that, “two individuals who speak completely different dialects of the same language may think that they are communicating clearly when they are not” (p.281). This is also true when it comes to communication between SE and AAVE-speaking people. Although both languages share similar dialects, both can at times find it difficult to communicate with each other. Instead of acknowledging the differences between the two languages, the Tennessee public education system has accepted the use of SE while restricting AAVE from being taught in the classroom by creating SE-only curriculums and instruction. This has also created situations between the two languages when it comes to standardized tests

The Tennessee Comprehensive Program (TCAP) has been the state’s testing program since 1988 (Tn. Department of Education, 2020). The Tennessee public education system relies heavily on TCAP to monitor every student’s academic ability and future potential in the public
school classrooms. The testimonies from the participants are a clear indication that Tennessee public school systems have failed to modernize the materials for non-SE speaking students needed to relate to those that are taking the assessment.

There are only eight states that allow a student to opt out of standardized tests. Tennessee is not one of those states. However, there are currently no laws in the state that require a child to take state assessments (Hall, 2006). There is a growing debate as to the purposes of state assessments in Tennessee (Rooks, 2013). For the past four years, schools that have predominantly African-American AAVE speaking students, have still fallen behind Caucasian suburban schools (Tn. Department of Education, 2021). This gap between the two has created academic stereotypes among AAVE speakers who believe that no matter how hard they do on standardized testing they will always feel that they are behind (McKown & Weinstein, 2003). This is somewhat evident in what Participant 7 was stating in her view on which group of people does well on standardized tests. However, according to Rickford (2003), the issue is not whether African-Americans are falling behind other races academically, but that AAVE speakers take state assessments in SE before they have even mastered the language.

Testimony from the participants would suggest that there is some level of bias toward AAVE speakers when it comes to taking the state standardized tests. They present a bias that makes them culturally and educationally inappropriate for AAVE speakers and it works to advance the promotion of Standard English. I believe that through my findings that standardized tests do little to motivate an AAVE speaker to perform well. However, it does the exact opposite. It deters a long-term credible education. Based on the findings, I believe that the achievement gap regarding standardized testing can only begin to close when the tests are reformed to a non-biased approach that includes various languages, such as AAVE. Until that time comes, a ban on
state standardized testing is necessary for the African-American AAVE community in Tennessee to alleviate their academic stereotypes.

Code-Switching

In his 2008 interview on “Inside the Actors Studio”, the comedian Dave Chapelle said, “Every Black American is bilingual. All of us (Black people) speak two languages-Black and job interviews (Johnson, 2018). It is a phrase that has meaning to the African-American community. For many AAVE speakers, their language use is necessary and normal, but at times prohibited. The practice of code-switching is vital in the African-American community. Code-switching is the practice of alternating between two or more languages depending on the conversation. For AAVE speakers, code-switching is a way of communication both in and out of their community. The word code-switching is not a word that is frequently used. However, the participants understand it as switching from Black to White English.

Dr. Norma Lemoine is an expert and advocate for the implementation of AAVE in public classrooms through the usage of code-switching. Her thirty-five-year career in education has allowed her to use culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy. Her method of using code-switching has successfully closed the achievement gap in ELA and literacy scores in school districts throughout the state of California. Dr. Lemoine suggests that schools can only close the achievement in literacy by accepting AAVE alongside SE in the classroom, instead of degrading and prohibiting it. She suggests that students should be taught that AAVE and SE are two different languages and that both languages should be appreciated equally (Lemoine, 2016). Dr. Lemoine further states that school districts should not devalue the home languages of their students. She believes that if one devalues the language of the students, then the students will live with the impression that who they are and where they come from do not count. If that
happens, AAVE speakers will automatically be turned off from mastering another language in education. She was one of the main authors to foster an experimental program known as the Academic English Mastery Program (AEMP) in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Today several schools in California have adopted and implemented AEMP. The mission of the program is to ensure that students who do not speak the language of instruction, Standard English, have equal access to their state’s academic standards-based content curriculum and post-secondary career opportunities. Schools in the state of Nevada such as Nevada Avenue Elementary School have used the AEMP curriculum which establishes the strategy of code-switching. Teachers are trained to use the curriculum instructional strategies of AEMP. These strategies also meet the state standards of the ELA classroom while, at the same time validating, valuing, and building up the language and culture of the students.

The program begins at the elementary level for AAVE speakers with mastery of responsive vocabulary, which creates definitions of vocabulary words in both SE and AAVE. In middle school, the program focuses on the mastery of responsive academic literacy, which bridges the instruction on literacy to the student's home language. Finally, in high school, the program promotes responsive language which applies an understanding of both languages to help the AAVE speaking students make better choices when taking state assessments. To close the achievement gap between the AAVE and SE students in West Tennessee, programs such as AEMP can be considered to help AAVE speakers learn SE while still keeping the value of their cultural language and heritage.

The participants believed that if one does not know the ways of both worlds then they would ultimately end in disappointment. Participant 4 stated during her interview:
It’s normal to switch from Black English to White English. It all depends on where you are and which one to speak to. In the honors class, you had to speak White English, but when I was with my girlfriends at a party, I had to speak Black English. It was how we kept friends on both sides.

Participant 1, who was also in the honors program said during her interview that it was normal in switching from AAVE to SE:

It was only the right thing to do to switch back and forth. I mean I had to know how to speak to people. I have to speak in two worlds. One world was at school that wanted you to speak like them and the other was at home where they wanted you to speak like them.

The participants spoke of the switch as a way of life for them. Although the participants did not like speaking SE. They did state that they had to switch in many situations. Participant 5 stated that he hated switching over from AAVE to SE because it made him look bad:

All my life I was raised to respect everyone, know what I’m saying? My momma taught me to respect everyone. She always told me that I had to be careful how I spoke to others, know what I’m saying? I was taught how to speak to people depending on the situation. I hated that. I hated not being myself, know what I’m saying?

Participant 2, said during the interview that he had to be careful how he spoke. He stated that where he lived it was not a good idea to speak White in his community. However, he mentioned during the interview that he was a smart student, but he refused to speak SE because he did not want to diminish his language and culture. He stated in his interview:

The lowest grade I ever had at school was an 85. I was really smart in school. I knew that if I had spoken like them White folks, I would have been treated differently in my hood. So, I had to be careful how and when I spoke. I remember turning in my work and the
teachers would always accuse me of cheating. I felt like they had already given up on me even when I tried. What ya see is what you get with me. If you consider me a thug because of the way I talk, then that’s what’s up.

When it came to teaching AAVE in the classroom, many of the participants objected to the notion. Participant 3 viewed it as a “waste of time” and he stated that introducing AAVE as a subject in the classroom might be offensive to both Black and White people. However, it was the testament of Participant 7 that got my attention. She realized that AAVE may be another language, but she felt that it would have been helpful if the teacher taught the differences between the grammar rules and words while in ELA. She stated:

It should have been done a long time ago. I’m going to keep it real. Whatever they are doing now in the English class is not working for us. It’s bad when you teach us how to speak White English, but you got to remember that we don’t want to be in that class. It would have been good if they taught us how to speak both Black and White English. It’s all messed up. Black lives matter.

After reviewing and analyzing the interviews from the participants, I found that code-switching could be a way of life for AAVE speakers in West Tennessee. Many of the participants expressed their experiences in switching from African-American to Caucasian English. For some of the participants, it was a normal way of life. For some, it was an insult. Overall, there seems to be a need to fuse AAVE and SE into a curriculum so that it does not appear that one language is dominant over the other. Some programs such as the EAMP may promote language diversity and code-switching within the schools in West Tennessee. If used correctly, programs such as EAMP can be promoted in West Tennessee schools to close the academic gap between AAVE and SE speakers.
Applying the Tenets of Critical Race Theory to the Findings.

This qualitative research study used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework. It is a theory that describes an opening of reality when it comes to inequalities based on race within an organization. For the purposes of this study, the organization that was mentioned in the research were public school systems in West Tennessee. Critical Race Theory has an objective, according to Stovall (2005). The objective of CRT is to analyze possible racism in the public schools in West Tennessee that are important for the development of society. The Tennessee English Only Code, which has prohibited the use of other languages in public schools besides Standard English, has discouraged ethnic minorities and their communities within the school systems of West Tennessee.

There are five major tenets of CRT. The tenets were used to determine if there is a biased agenda within an organization. The five tenets are:

a. The notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational
b. The idea of an interest convergence
c. The social construction of race
d. The idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling
e. The notion that Caucasians have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation.

When analyzing the data from the interviews from the participants, the tenets of CRT were applied into the information that was collected during the interviews. The following were found:
### The Tenets of CRT and Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Tenets of CRT</th>
<th>The Tenets of CRT and Data Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational</td>
<td>During the interviews with the participants, I found that Tennessee’s English and Legal Language Code Section 4-1-404 permits only SE as the official language in public institutions in West Tennessee. This code is intended to promote SE which is used by a majority of non-AAVE speakers. However, this code eliminates the languages of other communities of color such as AAVE. The code is also an indication that a promotion of privilege in other races may be discovered in order for SE speakers (mainly Caucasian) to maintain power yet feeling irresponsible for the hardships AAVE speakers face daily while understanding a language (SE) that was not taught to them at their homes or their communities.</td>
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<td>2. The idea of interest convergence</td>
<td>Because of the revision of Tennessee’s English and Legal Language Code Section 4-1-404 has established state standards that implement the code through school standards. The ELA standards in the public schools in West Tennessee are unfair because it forgets those students that are unable to speak SE as efficiently as those that were born into the language. The data collected during the testimonies of the interviews indicate that SE is not the language of their birth, but instead was taught to them years after those that used SE the moment they were born. The EOC is also a way to implement SE only standards and policies among non-speaking SE students. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2020), schools that score the lowest on ELA tests are from schools where many of the students speak AAVE.</td>
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3. The social construction of race

Because of Tennessee’s English and Legal Language Code Section 4-1-404, AAVE speakers are being discouraged through the grading policies that have been implemented by standards created based on the revised Tennessee Code. The data analysis indicates numerous times the correction of the red pen. Data concludes that participants' perception of the red pen in an ELA classroom is that of being “shot”. The language of AAVE has also discouraged students seeking employment. Many of the participants believe that because of the way they speak, employers automatically think that they are “unintelligent” “hood”, and African-American. The code allows ordinary ELA teachers to use the red pen to continuously discourage students whenever they submit written work or essays in their home language. Since the code does not allow schools to create a curriculum that distinguishes between the language of home and the language of instruction, many AAVE students are subject to correction of the red pen. Social non-interaction outside the classroom has also created a gap between AAVE speakers and their teachers. The use of AAVE in urban and rural African-American communities is used as a form of identity but is commonly ignored by those that do not speak AAVE. AAVE speakers believe that because of this, a social gap between them and the teachers is recognized and noticeable.

4. The idea of storytelling and counter storytelling

There is a perception that the low ELA scores of the EOC are an indication that AAVE speakers in West Tennessee cannot read or that they are as intelligent as those that speak SE. Schools that score high on the EOC are given special recognition and praise from school districts and the state. They are labeled as “a good school”. However, after analyzing the data, I found that many AAVE speakers are very intelligent. Some have never made a
| 5. The notion that Whites have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation | Brown v. The Board of Education is a civil rights court case that created social changes in public schools. The order gave schools the right to desegregate, but it did not give them the right to desegregate policies and codes such as Tennessee’s English and Legal Language Code Section 4-1-404. The influx of immigrants and the increase of non-SE-speaking communities in West Tennessee have allowed the state legislators to create a code that would ultimately benefit the school systems. The code has discouraged any other language in public schools in West Tennessee. The public schools and their ELA standards have stalemated AAVE speakers from accomplishing the same number of achievements as SE speakers. The Brown court ruling allowed desegregation among the various communities, but it has also opened the door to passing and implementing laws and codes that hinder AAVE speakers from progressing at the same pace as SE speakers. AAVE speakers, as a result, are having to work harder to achieve like SE speakers. |

| grade lower than a C. Many of them is enrolled in Honors Programs and other good extracurricular activities. The EOC has not been geared toward those that speak AAVE, many do not take the state assessment seriously. According to the participants, the EOC is so entwined with SE that many see it as a language such as Chinese. Data also indicates that teachers do not see AAVE speakers as serious workers even when they perform well among their classmates. Instead, they are accused of cheating which often deters an AAVE speaker’s self-esteem. |
Summary

This chapter discussed the five themes identified during data analysis. In theme one Preknowledge of AAVE, the participants were well versed in “Black English”. They took pride in speaking it because they expressed being themselves whenever they spoke it. Black English was taught at an early age, and they learned it while listening to their family members and friends in their communities. The grammar rules of AAVE were not taught in a classroom but through a series of communication within their homes and community. The grammar rules, such as the invariant Be and copula deletion rule, were not taught in a classroom. It was taught through generations of listening and communication.

The participants classify Black English as a sense of identity. Unlike Standard English, AAVE can be used depending on the situation, community, and circumstances. The interviews suggest that many AAVE speakers feel comfortable and accepted when speaking AAVE around classmates and in places of the same culture around the school. Some of the participants felt accepted by writing Black English in songs and rap. The participants also felt that AAVE was most accepted around other African-American people in various communities.

The participants spoke of their experiences when their language was rejected by some during the interviews. Many of the classrooms did not accept AAVE in their classroom. When the teachers or school staff corrected them for speaking AAVE, they thought it was a way of preparing them to be better students and citizens in the community. Other places where AAVE was rejected were within the judicial system in West Tennessee. Many of the participants expressed that people who are confronted by the police are often met with harsh resistance. Some courtrooms expressed discontent for those that speak AAVE.
The interactions of both the teachers and peers played a critical role in the social gap that is present in their school today. I also found that the participants participated more with people who appreciated and accepted their culture and language. Participant 7 stated that she was happy to see peers from other races speak and sing music alongside Black singers. She did not feel that she was looked upon differently from any other group of students.

Teacher interactions were somewhat different. Most of the participants believed that teachers are unaware of their communities nor are well versed in how their community talks among each other. The participants did express frustrations with teachers who were not concerned about interacting with them. They believed that the teachers only interacted with them inside the classroom.

The grading policy in ELA has also become a distraction for many AAVE students. The participants expressed their dislike toward the red pen. The participants stated how the red pen would often deter them from progressing in an ELA classroom. Participant 5 expressed the red pen as if he had gotten shot and his blood spilled on the paper. Some of the participants saw no need in learning SE. They saw their English classes as being their worst class. One possible reason would be that some of the participants did not have ELA teachers of color.

Within the classroom, the grading policy serves as a dark shadow among AAVE speakers. Although many of the participants expressed different opinions regarding their experiences in an ELA classroom, they all shared their resentment against the grading policies within the classroom. When participants submitted their work to the teacher, whether African-American or non-African-American, they were given back work that had a lot of red marks which seemed punitive to the participants. The red marks discouraged the AAVE speaking students. It appeared that it lowered discouraged them to the point of not trying.
The low EOC scores in ELA among AAVE speakers are similar to that of schools throughout the state of Tennessee. The scores showed that schools, where there was a high population of AAVE speakers, scored the lowest in the ELA section of the EOC. However, they expressed an interest to achieve acceptable scores on the EOC but found the test too overwhelming. Many of the participants believed that the words on the EOC were not taught nor explained properly to them. One participant stated during the interview that it was like “reading Chinese”. This might suggest that there is a language deficiency between AAVE and SE in standardized tests.

The scores on the EOC are far from dictating who can read and who cannot. These scores may be a result of an academic gap between the AAVE speaking schools and the non-AAVE speaking schools. According to the participants, the scores do not reflect their reading skills entirely. They stated that they cannot understand SE as other students. Code-switching also seemed to be of great interest to the participants. Most of the participants asked if there were any programs to help AAVE speakers when it came to schoolwork and state assessments. They expressed an interest and hope that such programs may promote code-switching and can ultimately be beneficial to many who speak AAVE. Overall, the need to improve the public schools’ interactions among teachers, grading policies, and code-switching may be a suggestion one should pay close attention to widen academic and social gaps between AAVE speakers and non-AAVE speakers in public schools in West Tennessee.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how the implementation and recognition of AAVE in public high schools in West Tennessee could impact AAVE speakers in their schools both socially and academically. Framed by the tenets of Critical Race Theory, this study also examined the policies and laws of Tennessee’s English-only laws that prohibit the use of languages, such as AAVE, to be taught and recognized alongside SE in public school.

Throughout the research the following research questions were addressed:

1) What are African American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school ELA classrooms in West Tennessee?

2) How do African American AAVE-speaking students navigate SE language policies that deprive AAVE in high school?

3) How do African American AAVE speaking students understand the differences between AAVE and SE?

Using Critical Race Theory in qualitative research, data was gathered from semi-structured interviews with seven participants that recently graduated from a public high school in West Tennessee. Following the analysis of interview information, five themes were present to best describe the experiences of the participants. The themes are:

1. Pre-knowledge of AAVE
2. Social interactions at school
3. The English Language Arts Classroom
4. Standardized Tests
5. Code-Switching
Chapter five will use these themes to construct and answer the questions mentioned. It will also provide implications for AAVE in the public schools in West Tennessee and provide directions for future research and policy for a positive use of AAVE in public schools.

**Research Question 1**

What are African American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school ELA classrooms in West Tennessee?

Tennessee’s English and legal language codes were first established and passed by the legislators in 1984 and were recently amended in 2011. The code protected Standard English (SE)-only policies and learning facilities such as public schools, colleges, and universities. It had a deeper impact on those who were not well versed in SE as their official language. The code indicates that all subjects must be written and graded using the standards of SE.

Such actions from the Tennessee lawmakers have made it difficult for AAVE speakers in West Tennessee to learn and master SE while at the same time preserving their culture and identity which includes the preservation of AAVE. In most cases, according to Baskin and Butts (1975), AAVE speakers will preserve their heritage in any circumstance before replacing it by mastering what they view as a difficult language- SE. Participant 2, for example, reiterated this concept of how SE impacts his community. He stated that in his community, those that speak SE as their first language are often referred to as a “square”. This is evident that AAVE speakers resist the use of SE outside of the ELA classroom so that they are not rejected by those that live in the community where AAVE is the official language.

The findings indicate that there were two experiences that AAVE speakers have while attending an ELA classroom. These experiences include the following: 1) experiencing
difficulties in deciphering the differences between the grammatical rules of AAVE and SE, and 2) experiencing constant correction when using AAVE in the classroom.

**Experiencing the difficulties in deciphering the differences between the grammar rules of AAVE and SE**

As stated in Chapter 2, AAVE is a language that has been created by generations of African Americans living in the United States. The language of AAVE has evolved over generations of African-Americans that spans 402 years. The evolution of AAVE can be described in the model below:

![Figure 1: Evolution of AAVE](image)

As in every language, AAVE has its own grammatical rules. The long span of AAVE use in African-American communities has become one of the pillars of African-American culture. The grammar rules stated in Chapter 2 have made it difficult for AAVE speakers to adopt another language over the language of their culture (Bakker, 2014). This concept applies to AAVE
speakers who are in an ELA classroom throughout West Tennessee. Before an AAVE speaker was introduced to the concepts and grammar rules of SE, AAVE and its grammar rules were already present in the minds of AAVE speakers and used as a way of communication among themselves. Therefore, the experiences that AAVE speakers have in an ELA classroom is difficult because for many, AAVE speakers must differentiate between AAVE and SE.

Through this research study it has been determined that ELA classrooms do not teach the grammar rules of SE and AAVE. Instead, the ELA classroom focuses on the grammar rules of only SE and its use. In fact, under Tennessee’s English Only Codes many ELA classrooms do not have a legal obligation to develop strategies to teach AAVE speakers the grammatical differences between the two languages. Since there is no such legal obligation, ELA classrooms in West Tennessee teach and abide by the standards that promote, teach and use SE. This serves as a disadvantage for AAVE speakers in the ELA classroom. Grammar rules such as the copula deletion rule, usage of the double negative, and the invariant “Be” rule in AAVE are not permitted or taught in ELA classrooms which favors the grammar rules of SE.

Without distinguishing between the grammatical rules of SE and AAVE, many AAVE speakers are left having to decipher the differences for themselves. As a result, they turn to the verbal behaviors they were taught at an early age as a guide. However, this conflicts with the standards that are taught in the ELA classroom. Experts such as Guy Bailey (2001), believe that this action leaves AAVE speakers at a disadvantage in the ELA classroom when determining their knowledge compared to students whose official language is SE.

**Experiencing constant correctness when using AAVE in the classroom.**

Throughout this research, many participants experience consistent corrections from ELA teachers whenever they speak AAVE in the ELA classroom. The corrections occur when a
speaker uses the grammar rules of AAVE instead of those from SE. The standards of ELA alongside Tennessee’s English-only codes create an atmosphere of constant correction for many AAVE speakers.

During their interviews, Participants 1, 3, and 7 stated that their constant correction from their ELA teachers was normal for them. This hindered the AAVE speaking students from asking questions due to incorrect use of SE. They thought of it as a way to prepare them for what they described as “the real world”. However, other participants felt that when ELA teachers corrected them, it was a method to make them, in what Participant 2 said “to become more like White people.” Most of the participants have stated throughout their interviews that they would rather remain silent than to be constantly corrected by their ELA teachers.

Despite being constantly corrected by their ELA teachers when they used AAVE there was little evidence in this analysis that discovered any personal hostility towards the ELA teachers. Many of them, such as Participant 5, wrote a letter of support and appreciation to one of his ELA teachers, and some of the participants regarded their ELA teachers as being “cool”. The AAVE speakers’ experience would suggest through these findings that there is somewhat of an acceptance from the ELA teachers that AAVE does exist and is used in the African-American community. From speaking to ELA teachers many have accepted AAVE’s existence in the classroom and as a source of communication among African-American AAVE speakers. However, it is rejected since the policy of SE is the acceptable form used in an ELA classroom.

Research Question #2

How do African-American AAVE-speaking students navigate SE language policies that deprive AAVE in high school?
To navigate, one must be able to know the direction in which they are headed. Through this research many of the participants were unaware of where they were heading rather than abiding by the rules and standards of ELA in order to pass the class. During the interviews, AAVE speakers informed me of the difficulties of navigating SE policies in high school. The Standard English-only codes in Tennessee have adopted and implemented ELA standards that circumvent the instruction of public schools throughout Tennessee in only Standard English. The English-only codes passed in 2011 allow standards in high schools in West Tennessee to abide by these standards. As stated previously, Tennessee’s Standard English-only codes do not obligate teachers to teach other languages alongside SE. Therefore, the SE language policies in high school for many of the AAVE speakers are difficult to maintain.

Most of the participants in this study were aware of the use of AAVE usage in their high school. Many expressed AAVE as a way of communication in their community, but none of them regarded it as a language. Instead, many of the participants regarded AAVE as slang or “bad English”. Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed a sense of comfort when speaking AAVE to fellow classmates. They were also aware of the degree of resistance to its use in their high school classrooms. All participants were aware of the language deficiency they had experienced in high school between SE and AAVE, but they were not taught to determine the differences between the languages. Instead, they were told that the language that they spoke was bad, slang and non-admissible. All of the participants were unaware of SE policies in Tennessee. However, when it came to what they believed resembled SE policies in Tennessee, all of them regarded being corrected in speech and written work as negative.

When interviewing the participants, many of them anticipated that whatever they submitted to their ELA teachers, the red pen would lead them in the direction of how to be more
versed in SE and less in AAVE. Participant 5 was blunt in his interpretation of the red pen when he received his grades from a recent essay. He compared the red pen to “as if I just got shot and my blood poured all over the paper”. The participants often regarded the red pen as a symbol that discouraged him from using his home language (AAVE) to the language of instruction (SE).

Participant 6 stated in his interview that silence was the best remedy to cope with the policies of SE in the classroom.

The policies enacted in high schools in West Tennessee have made AAVE speakers’ lives more difficult. These policies also affected AAVE speakers when it comes to state assessments such as TVASS. Tennessee’s SE-only policies have directed state assessments to be written and taught only in SE. This automatically creates an academic gap between those that were born in a SE-only community to those that were born in AAVE communities in West Tennessee. So, in response to question #2, it has been determined that AAVE speakers navigate SE policies through a series of hands-on learning to absolute silence.

Research Question #3:

How do African-American AAVE speaking students understand the difference between AAVE and SE?

African-American AAVE speakers see AAVE as a pillar of a Black way of life that provides a sense of unity, protection, and affection within their communities. Labov and Dillard (1975) believe that AAVE and SE are both spoken in English but have different dialects and grammar rules. Standard English originated from Germanic languages while AAVE originated from various West African languages. As a result, both AAVE and SE should be regarded as languages, and should be taught alongside one another in classes so that both can be compared
and differentiated. Due to Tennessee’s SE-only policies, teaching both of these languages are prohibited.

Haskins and Butts (1985), assume that the verbal behavior of African-American children proceed the learning of SE and its use when they attend public school. This research indicates that the participants did not learn AAVE in the classroom as they do with SE. Instead, they learned AAVE in their homes and in their communities. In fact, AAVE speakers appreciate their language and feel more comfortable in places where AAVE is spoken and accepted. During the interviews the participants reiterated this concept through their pre-knowledge of AAVE phrases that they learned in the community. It was used as a way of communication among other AAVE speakers. It has been determined by my findings that AAVE speakers are exceptional in AAVE’s grammar rules and dictations. However, despite their fluency in AAVE, they are also taught when and where to use AAVE in their homes and communities.

The participants in my studies stated that they were aware of the differences between SE and AAVE through their life experiences. Some indicated that finding jobs, speaking to judicial officials, and appearing in court encourages them to speak SE. Participants 2 and 6 stated that if one speaks AAVE in a place such as the courtroom, then harsher punishments could be imposed on an individual, but they also stated that SE could not be spoken in their community because they would be regarded as a “traitor” or “a square”.

Unlike other people of color, African-American AAVE speakers do not see SE as a language of “great opportunities”, but a language in which has deterred their ancestors for over four hundred years. This is evident in the findings during the interviews. Participants did not appreciate SE as the “norm”. In retrospect, the verbal behaviors have superseded their understanding of Standard English. Overall, it has been determined that African-American
AAVE speakers understand the differences between AAVE in SE through a balancing act. They are always having to distinguish the differences between the two languages, depending on the location where they are at.

**What do These Findings Mean?**

Forty years ago, a federal court case, Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary Students vs. Ann Arbor Michigan School District initiated a debate in AAVE use. The case focused on two questions: 1) Is AAVE a language? and 2) What is the relationship between AAVE and school achievement? It was a case that heard testimonies from those from both spectrums of the debate. However, the teachers’ testimonies delivered much thought and debate. The testimonies from the teachers begged the question as to why students who speak Black English (AAVE) fail to achieve academically the way their Caucasian SE-speaking classmates do?

The representatives for the students at Martin Luther King Elementary argued that students that speak AAVE face language and academic barriers which is the cause of their low academic achievement. As stated by the representatives, such actions constitute a denial of equal education for students. The representatives of the school district, on the other hand, argued that “Black English” (AAVE), should not be regarded as a language but as some form of slang or dialect of English, and therefore was not legally responsible for the achievement gap between AAVE and SE students.

Judge Charles Joiner, the court’s presiding judge, heard both arguments carefully. After the deliberations from both parties, Judge Joiner ruled that AAVE is a language and that those who speak AAVE are entitled to an equal education just as SE speakers are. He stated that those that speak AAVE would need extra help learning and distinguishing the differences between AAVE and SE. In addition, the court ruled that the school district should allow their teachers to
attend special training sessions in language awareness. The federal court ruling was not heard in the United States Supreme Court; however, the ruling proved that AAVE was a language and that students that spoke AAVE were affected academically and socially neglected in SE speaking communities. The findings of this study would suggest that the decision in the Ann Arbor case has proven to be factual and undone within school districts across the country, particularly in West Tennessee.

My study has discovered a similarity between the students at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary to those that attend public high schools in West Tennessee. The findings of this study indicate that most participants experience difficulties in high school where AAVE is not taught or accepted. Tennessee’s English-only codes do not recognize AAVE as a language. They do not obligate schools or school districts to teach or harbor any other language in public schools besides SE. As a result, many non-SE speaking students, such as AAVE speakers, are left with the reality of mastering SE while at the same time preserving their cultural language of AAVE.

Additionally, all participants acknowledge that their AAVE can be an obstacle in their education. They feel a sense of resentment towards them both at school and in the public because of their use of AAVE in schools. Participants experienced conflicts in the judicial and school systems simply because of how they spoke. This research has determined that Tennessee’s English-only codes have deterred AAVE speakers from receiving equal educational opportunities from those that speak only SE. My findings also mean that the lack of teacher training regarding language awareness and deciphering the differences between SE and AAVE has left many AAVE speakers with low academic and grammar skills.
Limitations

The sample for this study is not representative of all the AAVE-speaking high school populations throughout West Tennessee. All seven participants graduated from a high school in a southwestern region in Tennessee. The representation of the participants is limited and therefore does not provide an adequate and detailed representation of AAVE communities throughout the State of Tennessee. The study does not include participants from cities throughout West Tennessee with a high population of AAVE-speaking students, notably Memphis, Nashville, and Chattanooga. However, data suggests a similar trend with an academic gap in these various AAVE-speaking populated schools, according to the Tennessee Department of Education (2018). Therefore, the participants in this study reflect the AAVE speaking population in high schools in West Tennessee.

Implications for AAVE Usage in High School

The implications from this research apply to the participants and all high schools with a high population of AAVE speakers in West Tennessee. First, from the research there is a lack of interaction with teachers outside the classroom. The participants from the study believe that teachers are unaware of their verbal behaviors and do not understand the importance of AAVE in their community. Participants also agreed that ELA teachers were unaware of the grammatical rules of AAVE. Therefore, teachers and school leaders must be versed and trained in the opportunities of exploring the communities of AAVE speakers. Teachers must know the verbal behaviors and history of AAVE so that a standard form of communication between AAVE speakers and they are established. Examples of these interactions include visits to their homes, churches, and community events. This would allow teachers to escape their comfort zone and see the importance of AAVE, and how it plays a significant role in AAVE speaking communities.
Creating a curriculum that includes Culturally Relevant Instruction would help AAVE students to identify the grammar differences between the two languages. Teachers can incorporate strategies that allow students to use both grammar rules during instruction in the classroom. The participants welcomed this strategy during the interviews, and they indicated that their academic level would have improved, especially during standardized tests, if they were taught the differences between AAVE and SE. This research implies that if students know that AAVE has different dialects and grammar rules than SE, then tolerance and understanding would be applied.

Third, my research implies that AAVE should be regarded as a language and not slang or dialect of Standard English. As stated earlier, AAVE speakers regard AAVE as a language and a sense of identity. It is a language created by and for African Americans over time and successfully established in communities, culture, and communication networks. The communication network established with the combination of West African languages and SE evolved into a language known as AAVE (Smitherman, 2004). The use of Copula (linking) verbs in both AAVE and SE, for example, would suggest that both languages and their usage constitutes separate languages. The use of Copula in SE is a significant pillar toward its existence (Leech and Suartvik, 2002). It is a word that links two groups- the subject (a noun or pronoun) and its complements (usually adjectives) (Glencoe, 2001). The verb ‘be’ is the major linking verb in SE. It is considered the most used word in Standard English (Glencoe, 2001, p. 456). The copula verb ‘be’ can be used as am, is, or are (Crystal, 2003). As a result, a significant part of the existence of SE is the adoption and dependency of the copula verb. When it comes to AAVE, the deletion of the copula verb is relevant and understood.

On the other hand, languages, such as AAVE, consider the Copula in a different form.
The copula verb can be deleted from AAVE while establishing written and verbal communications (Labov, 1969). Although the Copula links the subjects with their complements in SE, the subject does not need a link to its complements in AAVE (Holm, 2001). Instead, AAVE uses the understood mechanism in place of the Copula verb (Baugh, 2000). The non-usage of the Copula in AAVE can distinguish it as a different language from Standard English. This could imply that AAVE’s non-usage of the Copula can categorize it as a second language and not a dialect of English. Therefore, schools should be able to teach this grammar rule (as well as other grammar rules) to all students.

**Directions for Future Research**

There are still major aspects of AAVE speaking experiences that need to be established and examined. First, the study found that discouragement and non-use of AAVE in public schools is a major cause in the academic and social gaps throughout West Tennessee. It indicates that incorporating Culturally Relevant Instruction (CRI) in the classroom will have significant impacts in closing the academic gap among AAVE speaking students.

However, future research is needed for AAVE-speakers who are yet enrolled in high school. Research is needed to indicate the impact of the discouragement of AAVE in both elementary and middle schools. Therefore, an explanation of the academic gaps between AAVE and SE in elementary and middle schools is needed to establish a firm foundation as to how SE-only policies affect students who are in elementary and middle schools.

Future research is also needed to discover AAVE students and their perception of state ELA mandated tests. Many participants regard ELA state assessments as tests that benefit only Caucasian middle-class students. They also describe the ELA state assessments as reading Chinese. Future research is needed to study a more in-depth interpretation of state assessments
among AAVE-speakers as well as how CRI can be used to help AAVE-speakers acknowledge the importance of the state assessments and how it benefits AAVE speaking communities.

Future research is also needed for those that speak languages besides SE and AAVE. If CRI is implemented in the school districts, then the concept of how to instruct those that speak other languages could be discussed. Dual language will also need to be carefully researched in order to ensure that students of all nationalities are given an equal education. Since AAVE should be considered a language, then a certain curriculum should also be implemented to include other languages such as AAVE (Labov, 1999).

As stated earlier, Dr. Norma Lemoine has spent thirty years trying to close the gap in achievement between AAVE and SE students. One of the key elements toward closing the gap was to initiate Culturally Relevant Instruction (CRI) in the classroom. Culturally Relevant Instruction is allowing students to code-switch. It involves encouraging AAVE students to express themselves by speaking AAVE before requiring them to master SE through a process known as contrastive analysis (Baker, 2002). Contrastive analysis is a method in which students are allowed to compare and differentiate between SE and AAVE. As they compare the different grammar rules, dictation, and phonics of both languages students can determine the difference between the audience, the intent of communication, and the grammar usage (Wheeler et al., 2012).

With Contrastive Analysis, students should begin the process at the elementary school (Wheeler et al., 2012). During this period, students should be able to metacognitively recognize situations and places that require either the SE or AAVE language. The students will be able to use AAVE in the classroom while also learning the grammar rules of SE. Teachers will also use the process of modeling. The teacher models his/her thinking by reading phrases in
both SE and AAVE. Afterward, the students will be allowed to make a determination as to whether or not the phrase was written in SE and AAVE.

Toward the middle school, Dr. Lemoine suggests that students should use both the contrastive analysis with modeling in order to get the students to differentiate between AAVE and SE. During this time students should be able to understand why SE is useful while at the same time respecting the use of AAVE as an important part of a culture and heritage. The middle school period is when AAVE students should be able to know the grammar rules of SE and how they are different from the grammar rules of AAVE. Upon mastery, the students can then compare and begin switching from one language to another. Dr. Lemoine also suggests that the usage of sentence frames is key to teaching dual languages in the classroom. The teacher can provide students with an AAVE sentence and the students, who have already been versed in the grammar rules of both languages, will be able to switch the sentence into SE (Kleeck, 2014).

By the time the AAVE speaking student reaches high school, he/she should already be well established in knowing the differences between when and how to use SE and AAVE. By using the concepts of contrastive analysis, modeling, and sentence frames, AAVE students will gain a more intentional focus on SE. The ability to code-switch words and sentences from one language to another in the classroom will help students appreciate both AAVE and SE.

Conclusion

This study explores the academic and achievement gaps of high school students that spoke AAVE in West Tennessee. Framed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and using the concepts of qualitative research, this study examines how AAVE-speaking students in high school are subjugated to public schools that only recognize SE. Tennessee’s English and Legal Language Code Section 4-1-404 indicates that all public institutions including public schools in West
Tennessee prevent the understanding and comprehension of AAVE and other languages in Tennessee.

Following my analysis of interviews from seven participants, five themes evolved during my data analysis from my studies: 1) Pre-knowledge of AAVE, 2) Social interactions at school, 3) Inside the ELA classroom, 4) State standardized tests, and 5) Code-Switching. This research indicates that most participants are aware of their use of AAVE and how and when to use it. This research indicates that AAVE-speakers learned AAVE at home and within their communities. The mastery of their language was taught to them before they were introduced to SE. However, after seeing the realities and grammar rules of SE, it has become a difficult challenge for them. Participants explain the hardships they experienced when they had to choose; rather they should surrender their cultural language of AAVE to be subjugated to a language that they accept as the language of challenge rather than an opportunity.

While teachers in high school are aware of the use of AAVE and its importance in the African-American community, there is no legal obligation for them to teach the different grammar rules between the two languages. However, Lapp and Fisher (2014) suggest that using contrastive analysis with modeling and sentence frames has proven to increase Standardized tests. Teachers, according to Dr. Lemoine (2013) must be trained in code-switching. They should also differentiate between the use of SE and AAVE. This will help teachers decipher between reading grammar mistakes and language influences (Wheeler et.al., 2012).

Despite all that has occurred in public schools in West Tennessee, this research also indicates a sense of hope. Daniel Fader, a renowned author regarding AAVE, stated in his book *Hooked on Books*, stated that “Language is like clothing. When you take it away from the child you leave them naked” (Green, 1979 pg 52). There are strategies within reach that can
implement CRI in schools while at the same time adhering to Tennessee’s English-only codes. Careful training and an acknowledgment of AAVE are the key to opening opportunities for students who speak AAVE instead of SE. AAVE is a language and should be treated as such. If further actions are not taken to acknowledge this concept, AAVE speakers will continue to be penalized and miss the opportunities that should be given to them in ELA classrooms in West Tennessee. Just as culture and ethnic groups have different languages so do AAVE speakers from their culture. Since these cultures are different, we need to make accommodations in high school so that they can be successful in the future.
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Appendix A

Memo written to recently graduated AAVE speakers.

“Hello, graduates! Congratulations on your previous accomplishments in graduating from such a great high school. Your experiences while at high school are greatly needed now. I would like to officially announce that I will be conducting an extensive research review that will help guide me during the research process. I would like to make you a participant in my dissertation section of data collection. In October, I would like to interview a group of high school black graduates such as yourself on the issue of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) being used in public schools. As an AAVE speaker, I believe that you have in-depth knowledge of AAVE usage in your schools and how to communicate in the classroom. I feel that you can provide a welcoming and experienced knowledge toward helping me to further research the concepts of AAVE being used in the classroom. So, can you help me?”

Appendix B

Interview Script

Introduction

I am going to give you some phrases, and I want to see if you can tell me what they mean [paused between phrases]

  a. Dey been gone.
  b. Dey finna jack.
  c. Dude crazy as a mug.
  d. Ya know what I’m sayin?
  e. Real talk bra.
  f. Dude lit.
  g. Why you playin wit me?
  h. We aint got nutin.
i. He/she ratchet
j. Ya good bra?
k. Dude, been trippin all day.
l. Let me holla atcha.

Probe:
1. In what places do you feel the most comfortable speaking these phrases?
2. In what places do you feel the most uncomfortable speaking these phrases?
3. How did you learn the meanings of these phrases?

Let's talk about the school that you attended. In your school there is a diverse group of multiple students from different backgrounds. So, tell me, how would you describe the atmosphere of your school?

Probe
1. What kind of student were you to your teachers and friends?
2. Describe your friends. How did you treat them and how did they treat you?
3. If you could look at the gym at your pep rally where all the students are present what do you see? What were you doing during that time?

Describe any instances where you felt out of place for speaking Black English at school?

What have been your experiences with teachers when you engaged in Black English at your school?

What are African-American AAVE speakers’ experiences in high school ELA classrooms?

So, regarding your English teachers, how have they responded to your usage of Black English in the classroom?

Follow-up question: How have your African-American English teachers responded to your usage of Black English in the classroom

Probe
1. Describe the teacher that wanted you to speak the most proper English.
2. Of the English teachers, which ones did you see appreciated the way you talked in class?
3. How did the English teachers grade your work when you submitted it?

Describe a time when you had to switch from speaking English you learned at your home to the English you were taught at school?
   Follow-up: How did you switch, and how did it make you feel?

**How do African-American AAVE speaking students navigate SE language policies in high school?**

After turning in a paper or essay to your English teacher, how did they respond to your usage of Black English?

**How do African-American AAVE speakers see the difference between AAVE and SE?**

At home, if you discuss Black English use in your school when you engage in SE, what are the reactions from your friends and family?

If you ever discussed how Black English is used in your school with your parents, what was their advice on how to deal with English teachers?
   Follow-up: How did you use that advice in your school?

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**Appendix C**

**IRB Approval**

**IRB #: PRO-FY 2021-70**

**Title:** Penalties and Missed Opportunities The Anglo-Saxon King’s English vs. The African Kings’ English in West Tennessee: Toward Acknowledging the Usage of AAVE in Public Schools in West Tennessee and its Attempt to Closing the Opportunity Gap

**Creation Date:** 8-30-2020

**End Date:**

**Status:** Approved

**Principal Investigator:** Jamie Elliott

**Review Board:** University of Memphis