Critical Inquiries into Language
in an Urban Classroom

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In this teacher research study I used interpretive methods to focus on my urban secondary classroom in which students and I developed a critical inquiry to raise questions about the impact that language and language learning had on our lives. In this study I argue that, as my students—all African and Caribbean Americans—deepened their awareness of themselves as inquirers into language, they simultaneously problematized and made complex their perspectives on language. By profiling three student inquirers, I trace the manner in which these students constructed investigations to meet their needs and became theorists about language and the ways home and power codes intersect. As a result, this study shows how these students’ particular relationships to those language codes both constrained and enabled them to consider and use language in diverse ways. Furthermore, their ability to conduct inquiry changed the way they saw themselves as learners and the way I both saw and conducted my practice.

During a yearlong inquiry into language, Kenya, a senior in my English class, gave a vivid presentation that her fellow students described in positive ways as being lively, natural, and engaging. The keyword here is natural. The class felt her talk had been particularly effective because she had sounded relaxed and unstilted and had spoken in a manner to which my students, all African and Caribbean Americans, could relate. The effect was a naturalness to her speech that made her sound authentic or real, so that the syntax, grammar, and vocabulary choices matched the expectations of that audience for that speaker. In this community of students, authentic self-representation rather than “frontin’” or putting up a facade was valued.

But there was also criticism of her talk. One student noted that Kenya had spoken in what he termed as Black English and that, when it came time for her to present for graded evaluation, she should have switched to standard usage. I noted his comments on the chart we were keeping and continued seeking other responses. However, I became increasingly aware of a buzz occurring
among a group of young women. When I asked the nature of their displeasure, Cria Henderson raised the question, “Why is Black English under the 'Needs Improvement' category?”

Almost simultaneously, a chorus of related questions rang out. Despite this rush of response, the original questioners, to their credit, were not to be denied. Seizing the moment, they continued their pointed discussion and were joined by others. As I noted in my audio journal:

Cria said, “If we saw how natural Kenya sounded and her audience is Black students, why shouldn’t she be allowed to speak Black English? Now she sees [her usage] listed as needing improvement. The idea is that’s something that she should change. And that’s a problem.”

Seemingly prodded by this query, the class discussion spiraled out from there. We engaged a variety of issues, among them the nature of the relationship between language and the mainstream power structure, what acceptance of mainstream codes meant for speakers whose language and culture differed from that of the mainstream, the roles of English teachers and students of language, and what it means to study the mainstream codes while celebrating the home codes. In our excitement, ideas were tumbling out one upon the other and we all were competing to hold the floor in order to make our collective points—so much so that when the bell rang signaling the end of the school day, nearly half the class remained at their own choosing to continue the conversation.

As is often the case in classrooms, much of significance was happening simultaneously. To start, teaching and learning roles were being shifted. For at least this moment, the traditional teacher role as the seat of authority and information giver and the traditional student role as passive receiver of knowledge had been put aside. In a like fashion our individual racial identities—Black students and White teacher—gave way somewhat to a common group identity. We, as opposed to them and me, were trying to make sense of the issues at hand. Who we were remained important, but what we were saying and how that contributed to a common understanding of these power issues became equally important. Yet we weren’t undiscerning dreamers sleepwalking toward some soft pillow of consensus. Opinions were being challenged; new questions and circumstances were being raised.

But perhaps most significantly for the purposes of this article, two realizations seemed to be dawning upon many of us there. The first of these is that what had been for too many students somewhat of an inquiry in name only was now becoming an intentional inquiry in both purpose and deed. No longer merely an assignment to be completed solely because I had requested it, the inquiry was coming to be viewed as a personal need to be filled through academic means. As we discussed issues generated by Kenya’s predicament, many students were showing their first overt awareness of themselves as inquirers into language.
Secondly, we were all experiencing an understanding that language was open to inquiry and a multiplicity of perspectives. By wondering what Kenya's use of home codes in the classroom meant in terms of our language use and that of others, we were freeing ourselves of the prescriptive notion of language often fostered by traditional grammar texts and equally traditional classroom instruction. Instead, we were developing a sense that language use and impact could be described, that we could be the describers, that the use and impact were open to a variety of descriptions, and that the description rested somewhat within the control of the describer. We were evolving a sense that language was given to socially constructed perspectives—if not in that exact terminology, then at least in that spirit.

That this vignette represents a pivotal teaching moment that we seized in our mutual investigation is enough to merit discussion. But for our purposes here, I believe that the events depicted above and the student inquiries I will profile below represent more than interesting snapshots into practice. Instead, I argue that the work represented here has much to say about language learning, about the ways students interact with the word and the world, and the impact all this has upon classrooms that aspire to enact a pedagogy that is critical. In particular, this study argues that as students gain an awareness of themselves as inquirers into language, they simultaneously problematize and make complex their perspectives on language and the ways language intersects with their lives.

Theoretical Frameworks
Calls in the theoretical and pedagogic literature for classrooms where some form of critical inquiry is enacted are frequent and insistent. These calls range from mainstream reformers (Beyer, 1996; Probst, 1988; Sizer, 1984, 1992) who see critical inquiry as a means to engage students both in the content of the classroom as well as into the workings of democracy, to advocates of feminist pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1992; Gore, 1993; hooks, 1994) who imagine critical inquiry as a means to interrupt the hegemony of the patriarchy and give rise to a multiplicity of voices, to social critics (Freire, 1970, 1998; Giroux, 1992) who place a pedagogy of critical classroom inquiry front and center in a larger agenda of social reform. Such classrooms are firmly seated in the tradition of American progressive and alternative education (Shannon, 1990; Teitelbaum, 1995), and deeply-rooted connections can be traced to such theories as the experiential education work of Dewey (Tanner, 1997) and transactional reader beliefs of Rosenblatt (Clifford, 1991; Pradl, 1996).

Perhaps less visible but equally vociferous have been concerns raised by educators who, although they acknowledge the basic premises of critical pedagogy as espoused by Freire (1970), worry that too often in practice the agenda of the agent of change takes on a primacy and frequently creates a cult of the individual. Ellsworth (1992) has
written that a pedagogy is less than liberating if the only views given cre-
dence are those that match the ideology of the facilitator. Gore (1993) more
directly gives voice to the good inten-
tions of critical pedagogy but argues that
it is possible that the concept of emanci-
patory authority, applied wherein the
teacher is an authority on oppression or lib-
eration, is dangerous to the extent to which
it primarily functions to emancipate both
the theorist and the teacher from worrying
about inconsistent effects of their pedagogy.
(p.102)

More recently, Cushman (1999) has
accused critical pedagogues of assum-
ing a naivete among the oppressed con-
cerning their own oppression. Such a stance, she argues, renders the peda-
gogues unable to acknowledge the
critiques and critical skills the op-
pressed bring with them. Looking across
these concerns, a generalization can be
made that enacting a critical pedagogy
represents a means for creating poten-
tially empowering opportunities but
that such pedagogy needs to be less
assumptive about the nature of the
oppressed, more intentionally self-re-
flexive, and more inclusive of a range of
perspectives.

Simultaneous to and equally insis-
tent as the calls for a critical pedagogy,
the calls in the literature for culturally
relevant pedagogy have fostered what
Ladson-Billings (1995) defines as “a
pedagogy of opposition not unlike
critical pedagogy but specifically com-
mitted to collective, not merely indi-
vidual empowerment” (p.160). In such
classrooms students are expected to
develop academic success, cultural com-
petence, and a critical eye aimed toward
interrupting the current mainstream
order. Similarly, Delpit (1991) has ar-
gued that we need to create school
environments that allow
students and parents to tell us what they feel
they need. We don’t have to follow their
ideas precisely, but we should enter into a
dialogue with them and show how our
teaching—whatever methodologies we are
using—addresses their concerns. (p.546)

In essence she is asking educators to
view their classrooms as sites where
inquiry into culture takes place, where
dialogue across cultural boundaries oc-
curs, and where the classroom commu-

nity engages in open negotiation around
the particulars of the curriculum. Within
these classrooms Delpit (1995) argues
that students must have access to the
power codes, must have opportunities
to critique and acquire those codes, and
must have equal opportunities to use
and celebrate their home codes.

Speaking to the same issues but
from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, Gee
(1989) argues that the acquisition of
mainstream Discourse, especially for
those whose words and lives separate
them from the mainstream culture, is
problematic due to the need to acquire
social mores and socially constructed
values as one gains fluency in the
grammar. Part of this argument has
casted Delpit (1992) to raise concerns
that a sensitive teacher reading Gee
might “view the acquisition of a new
Discourse in a classroom impossible to
achieve” and then believe that “even to
try to teach a dominant Discourse to

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students who are members of a non-dominant, oppressed group would be to oppress them further” (p. 298). Yet Delpit (1992) also acknowledges the dissonance Gee describes between primary (home-based) and secondary (institution-based) Discourses and agrees that “Discourses may embody conflicting values” (p. 298), although she argues that individuals can overcome these conflicts. At least in tacit if not acknowledged response to these concerns, Gee and Crawford (1998) urge that teachers take pains to find ways to listen to the language and stories of their students as they contend with these linguistic boundary crossings.

Teachers in general, myself among them, are then left trying to resolve in practice complex theories that speak to the conditions of the classroom in ways that resonate despite their diverse or, at best, complicated views. What, then, are the implications of enacting a critical inquiry into language or any topic in ways that acknowledge multiple perspectives and students’ capacity to critique? What happens when a literacy classroom attempts to celebrate the home codes and yet provide access to the power codes in ways that allow students to critique and not merely acquire those codes? What does it mean in practice to try to resolve tensions among primary and secondary Discourses and to do so in ways in which the latter doesn’t swallow the former whole? Consequently, if students make the language of their lives problematic, what do they reveal about themselves as inquirers and about their perspectives on language? The issue is not so much choosing among stances taken by Gee, Delpit, Freire, and Ladson-Billings as much as seeking those threads of cohesion that allow the various stances to weave together within a classroom in ways that have strength and positive implications for learning.

For myself, I was seeking to explore inquiry in ways that were central rather than peripheral to both my curriculum and pedagogy. I believed in my students’ capacities for raising critique, making meaning, and sustaining focus, even as I wondered how I might go about supporting such activities and what our efforts might yield. I also believed in the importance of accessing both mainstream and home codes in the classroom and, buoyed by the celebratory nature of researchers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Jordan, 1988; Labov, 1972; Smitherman, 1977), was convinced that my students would embrace discussions of language in general and the topic of AAVE in particular. I suspected from previous experiences that my students would show a range of opinion about the issues under discussion but had no clear sense what that range might encompass. Finally, I was sure that getting my students to be critical of mainstream institutions like standard English would not be difficult. I was less sure, however, about their willingness to connect that critique to their lives and to use their evolving agency as researchers as a means for making those connections.

As Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, and Hinson (1997) have noted in their work on trying to interrupt
gendered discursive practices,
it is one thing to know, in an abstract way, that gendered discursive practices are primarily about power relations and . . . how we learn to think, act, and speak in different social situations; it was quite another thing to recognize them as they operate in our everyday lives. (p. 96)

So, too, it is both difficult to enact critical inquiries and to understand the manner in which such enactment plays out within the context of the classroom and the context of our lives. In answer to this concern, my work suggests that not only do learners develop and conduct personal inquiries, but also that this work allows them to deepen and broaden their sense of their own identity and the emerging group identity as well. When, as it was in our classroom, the subject of the investigation is language and the investigators are from families who have a history of being socially, economically, and politically marginalized, the students additionally develop a range of perspectives on the role and impact of language in their lives and what this means for them as they consider their future negotiations with mainstream culture.

Given the import of these two ideas—the notion of students as inquirers into language and the perspectives on language gained and expressed by students as they conduct inquiries—I offer the experiences of three of my students who were provoked by our language investigation in general and Kenya’s incident in particular. Based upon this frame and provocation, these students evolved personal inquiries and in doing so complicated their perspec-
tives on language through critical inquiry. Specifically, this paper notes the way all three students used their literacy skills to consider the roles language played for them as learners and actors in the mainstream and to critique the way standard English and home codes interacted in their lives, all of which caused them to come to terms with ways mainstream access is both occluded and enabled via language options. By investigating the ways they used language in different communities, the ways language defined them in society, and the ways they both consciously and subconsciously switched among codes, my students were able to take stock of their own language awareness and what it meant for them to enact these shifts. In addition, this study accounts for the ways this ongoing inquiry into language transacted with my own beliefs about language as well as inquiry pedagogy. Finally, the data set is used as a basis to argue for classrooms where a pedagogy of inquiry is attempted so students can become more critically literate.

Teaching and Research Contexts
My research, completely conducted before I entered my current position at the university, took place in my English classroom within a small learning community (SLC) in a large urban high school in Philadelphia. It is a comprehensive high school, which means it largely serves students of the neighborhood who, for various reasons, have not elected to attend the district’s academic, motivational, magnet, vocational, and

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alternative high schools. According to School District of Philadelphia figures (1997), the student population is 99.5% African and Caribbean American with most families living below, at, or just above federal poverty levels, although most of my students would not have characterized themselves as poor and would instead have described themselves as being of the working class. In some ways the school conjures up traditional stereotypes of urban institutions—too large, too rowdy, too neglected by the mainstream community—but it also is a place from which students routinely win play-writing competitions, excel in sports like basketball and track, and enter and remain in college at increasing rates.

Together with two colleagues, I founded the SLC in 1990 in response to a district-wide reform effort in the much-ignored comprehensive high schools. The staff of 17 teachers and one counselor, united by commonly held beliefs about teaching and learning, work with approximately 350 students who remain within the SLC for their entire high school education. Loosely connected to the Coalition of Essential Schools, the SLC is a heterogeneous community of learners that fosters inquiry-based learning, performance assessment, and meaning making across the curriculum. In a typical English class students not only represent a range of perceived abilities and success histories with formal education, but also represent grades nine through twelve. In this diverse mix, students are expected to be both responsible for their own education and the education of others. Each year the curriculum is driven by an essential question that acts as a lens through which the content area teachers filter their instruction. All of the above tend to foster an education that supports the building of community, the taking of individual and group responsibility, and the making of meaning.

To varying degrees over the length of my twenty-four year secondary school teaching career, I took an inquiry stance within my classroom. My class was a place where students were expected to be active learners, to raise questions about content, to engage with their peers as well as adults, and to interpret and compose complex text. In my classroom, literacy was practiced both to increase student fluency in communication and to foster learning about issues beyond the scope of the traditional language classroom. My high school students were expected to learn about language through work that was deeply embedded in the context of authentic language use. Literature was studied, not as an end in itself, but as a means for understanding the past, current, and future lives we lead. In effect, we read, wrote, spoke, and listened in order to improve our facility to do more of the same throughout our lives, while also increasing our own understanding of those processes and those lives.

At the time of the study, our essential question for the year was this: How does learning connect you to your world? For the purposes of my literacy classroom, I adjusted that question to read as follows: How does learning about language connect you
to your world? Using various fictional works as lenses (e.g., August Wilson's (1986) *Fences*, William Gibson's (1957) *The Miracle Worker*, Jamaica Kincaid's (1993) "Girl") and assorted autobiographical writings (e.g., Richard Wright's (1945) *Black Boy*, Christy Brown's (1970) *My Left Foot*) as frames for our own compositions, we raised questions about language and began to relate those questions to our lives. Eventually, this work led to a three-month period when the students developed their own questions and via interviews, observation, and audio tapings developed personal inquiries into the impact of language in their lives and their community. In effect we were moving from the personal to the academic and from theory into practice. And because the whole process was recursive, we were reconnecting the academic to the personal and using our practice of language to raise new questions and develop new theory.

The preceding paragraph makes the process sound more orderly and deliberate than it was. As the work progressed over the year, I felt pushed by time to start that which was my intent all along: to have my students enact an inquiry into issues of language using qualitative methods of data gathering. Rather than only researching through texts, I sought to have my students research through interviews, notetaking, and audio taping. Yet having few models to adapt, I resisted launching them into the research until the approaching spring signaled that time was becoming precious. Somewhat desperate to get moving, I held brainstorming sessions that generated lists of "what happens when" questions (e.g., What happens when the language of rap is studied for what it says about Black America? What happens when an African American only speaks standard English?). At last, we had begun the work, but the next steps were unclear.

It was at this juncture that we had the discussion about Kenya and language choice. Spurred by the felt need rising in the room, I created a frame for taking their individual questions and enacting a course of inquiry. Using the brainstormed list either as a source or a guide, students were to find a question to call their own. Each would then conduct an initial interview with someone who could speak on issues related to her or his question. These interviews would be analyzed by groups in class, who would develop a strategy for gathering more data. Groups would then analyze the additional data and write a research report. Finally, students would pull their inquiry together—the readings they had done earlier in the year and the qualitative research that had come at the end—into an essay that was based upon their question and that argued for some action or stance to be taken concerning a language issue. Having that frame, we used the better part of eight weeks fleshing it out, as I filled in the pedagogic gaps by responding to the learning needs being generated by my students.

**Data Gathering and Analysis**

This study is a form of teacher research in which interpretive methods were used. What I report here is one subset of
a larger study conducted in systematic and intentional ways on my own classroom (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). That this study is a form of teacher research is perhaps its biggest asset and greatest liability. Speaking to the former, this study represents an *emic* view, one in which I was both a recorder of data and an actor in the events being recorded. In essence I was continually on site, was privy to the ongoing history of the site, and had wide potential for recording data. However, because I was the primary facilitor of the classroom, frequently my teaching and research responsibilities would clash, with my teaching duties usually taking priority. At times data collection fell by the wayside if the teacher in me was too consumed in the immediacy of the moment. Therefore, data collection was less periodic and more *ad hoc*, though no less intentional.

Even given this limitation, the data set gathered over one academic year represents a substantial collection of audio-recorded class notes, individual and focus group interviews, selected class transcripts, and catalogued student work. Interviews were conducted as a means to follow-up preliminary analysis of the student work and class notes and occurred intermittently through the school year as needed. As such the data set was analyzed and coded through traditional qualitative procedures in that the transcripts, notes, and work samples underwent multiple readings, recurrent themes were noted, and discrepant examples were placed in contrast to the recurrent themes. Specifically, using the class participants as the unit of analysis, I combed our work and written and oral responses in search of patterns that could be coded as prevalent themes or issues regarding language and its relationship to mainstream power access. In essence I sought to know what was being said about language, with what range, and with what frequency. Accordingly, I identified four major themes: the impacts of standard English, home codes, code-switching, and street language on our individual and collective lives.

Of import is that the data set, in both raw and refined forms, was shared with diverse groups of K-12 and university faculty who brought multiple perspectives and layers of meaning to the analysis. This method of analysis was created as a means of triangulation that allowed me to gain cross-cultural response to my cross-cultural data. Originally, whole transcripts of raw data were shared with teachers of the Philadelphia Writing Project who were part of the Urban Sites Network of the National Writing Project. As I began to refine and catalogue the data based on these data-sharing sessions, I discussed troubling excerpts—ones that left me ambivalent about my own analysis—with participants of the Philadelphia Writing Project summer institutes, as well as with students of English methods courses at the University of Pennsylvania, teachers involved in teaching and learning seminars for the School District of Philadelphia, and audiences of educators at national conferences. In all cases, excerpts of data were given to these diverse audiences along with a process for analysis. This process, adapted
from methods developed by Carini (see Kanevsky, 1993 for a fuller description), encourages participants to inquire systematically into data in ways more descriptive than evaluative. Thus, I was able to garner a broad range of perspective and still take primary responsibility for the analysis, an analysis that was greatly influenced by this multiplicity of views.

As the analysis evolved, I identified case-study students whose work and responses represented typical cases of the range of thought that existed in the classroom regarding the identified language and inquiry themes and their data were further scrutinized. As a whole, the larger study suggests that on issues such as the importance of standard English, home codes, code-switching, and street language in their lives, students had diverse range of opinions and that teaching language and usage were complicated by this range of opinion (see Fecho, 1995). The students profiled here—Nora, Robert, and Cria (pseudonyms)—are three of six case-study students whose work and language perspectives were examined in the larger study. In that study the six students were chosen because their views on the emerging language issues helped to establish the scope of perspectives on language and inquiry present in the classroom. I am focusing on Nora, Robert, and Cria in this article because their stories act somewhat like exclamation points; they raise issues about language that call attention to the range of thought prevalent in the classroom.

Although my data can be read through lenses that focus upon issues of social-economic class and gender, my continued emphasis has been issues of race because that was the primary way my students self-identified. Having said that, however, I need to also point out that I do not believe the themes discussed here are necessarily race specific. For example, as a child of the working class, I can relate to much of what my students said about language, particularly in terms of the nature of their resistance to some standard forms. Therefore, I hold it imperative to see the ideas discussed here as relevant to all speakers whose home codes differ from the mainstream and not just to working class African Americans. Although the focus of this work is race, the impact goes beyond that specification.

The Cases

Nora Jenks

In class Nora Jenks was a cooperative, soft-spoken young woman who frequently seemed out of place in the rough and tumble atmosphere of a modern urban classroom. Her ideas of classroom behavior frequently differed from that of her more urbanized peers. For example, on a student response card commenting on life in the SLC, Nora wrote that what bothered her “is that some kids don’t help each other as they need help. Why? Because if you say something, the kids laugh at you and that should not be’.” The concept of a classroom where students were more supportive of each other’s efforts was not as well realized as she would have
preferred. As I would see frequently over the course of the three years I taught her, Nora was in a different place in relation to her peers and frustrated by her solitary status. And though soft-spoken and polite, Nora was not a pushover. She held clear opinions about the ways life and learning should be conducted. However, she frequently kept those opinions to herself. But as the year progressed, she found response and reaction sheets to be an outlet for her frustrations and in this manner her beliefs became increasingly part of the class mix of ideas.

In addition, Nora represented a small but continually growing minority of students in the school who trace their roots to the various islands of the Caribbean. As speakers of dialect, these students cope with many of the same language challenges as their African American counterparts. However, their dialects also set them apart from their peers whose urban African American codes can be similar to yet markedly different from the islanders'. Therefore Nora brought perspectives to the classroom language issues that at times echoed what her peers said but that also introduced new issues to be considered, as this interview excerpt alludes:

I mean it’s hard to change from a different way you speak when you’re from another country. American way is hard. Most time when you try to speak you communicate with a person from a different country, they don’t understand. They keep askin’, ‘What did he say, what did he say?’ Gets me annoyed.

As the quote indicates, learning “American”—whether discussing customs, culture, and/or language—is not without trying circumstances. The nature of those circumstances and the ultimate effects upon the language learners was of interest to Nora because she had been down that road.

Despite attempts to fit in, Nora remained linguistically isolated and this isolation is a theme running through both her oral and written work during the year of the study. In this regard her research project at the end of the year is particularly telling in what it reveals about her sense of alienation. She was curious about how others adjusted to language change and what it meant for their lives. As she wrote:

My question is: What happens when someone tries to adjust to a different form of language? I chose this question because I wanted to get an idea of how others have adjusted to a different form of language. I personally chose to do this because I wanted others to see the change I have been through.

This theme of coping with language change and difference continues through her data analysis where she focused on how others dealt with the problem, specifically other members of her family. She noted:

Mostly everyone said it was hard to adjust to a different English form of language. One person said, “I think it is hard because people speaks fast and I have to try to adjust as time pass.” Another person said, “It is kind of awkward at first, but I’ve learned to adjust myself.” The third person said, “It’s very hard because having spoken one form of language before, it is awkward trying to speak another one.”

Eventually, Nora came to some understanding that dealing with language
difference is inevitable and compromise is perhaps necessary. As she wrote in her reaction to her research project:

I learned that having to adjust to a different English form of language takes time to adjust and if you want to fit in you have to be able to speak the way the people who are around you speak. By doing this project I learned that you should not have to change for good to please someone [but] it is good to switch at certain times when you are around certain people when you are speaking.

Whether Nora’s remarks are read as revealing ambivalence or acceptance about the need to shift among codes, what is evident is that she complicated her view of language. She now included responding to social factors such as audience and purpose as part of her repertoire of considerations prior to making an utterance.

This complexity, at least for the time being, left Nora in a linguistic limbo. As the passages above indicate, her speech was a combination of a Caribbean American dialect, African American urban codes, and of standard English, none of which was dominant. Not being linguistically comfortable with any one community, she seemed somewhat removed from all three. Her investigation made her aware that the ability to codeswitch could prove useful as she negotiated across communities. However, knowing this and doing this are not one and the same. Like Kenya, the students Nora represents are conflicted about choosing language that is comfortable and familiar and choosing language that is preferred by the mainstream but is less comfortable and familiar.

To seek some insight into this discomfort, Nora used our English class to inquire into that conflict. By conducting inquiry into language difference and the intolerance that accompanies such difference, she was able to vent her own frustrations and to become aware of some coping techniques. Also she was able to comprehend the complexities of the questions she was asking, learning that these issues created a range of nuanced responses which necessitated further investigation on her part. For example, in the following excerpt, Nora was awash in possibility as the advice, even from people of her community, took on a complexity that forced her to examine her own situation:

What stood out most in the interviews is that there is great support by each individual family on adjusting to a different form of language. The first person’s interview said, “It is difficult for my family to accept my learning of a new language form, but my family supports me.” Second person said, “My family told me that I shouldn’t try to be like others, but be proud of who I am.” Third person said, “My family is a big help and encouragement to my change of language form.”

The family support she uncovered took on a variety of shades. In one case the family acknowledged the loss associated with codeswitching but still advocated the need to do so. In another the family voice was more ambiguous, urging that the learner be proud of who she was and to reject conformity. However, it is unclear through Nora’s remarks if such advice means the learner should have retained the language of the home—be proud of who she or he
is—or if the advice is to shun paths of others and forge a unique and personal path of which to be proud. Whatever the implication, Nora was left to sift the responses for whatever continuity she could exact.

Rather than raising complex questions and arriving at simple answers, Nora instead came to realize that the range of possibilities concerning her situation was wide and that instead of gaining clear consensus, she instead had the responsibility of making sense of the conflicts. Noting the common thread of family support running through her own research provided Nora with insight into ways to encourage her own language learning efforts, but the insight was directional rather than definitive. Although still reluctant to see codeswitching as a goal to embrace, she came to accept it as a means to an end—furthering her mainstream education. Thus, by involving herself deeply in the class discussion of language, she was, as she wrote, aware that her “idea about language changed . . . when I listened to what other people had to say about language.” Through expression and investigation into her own concerns, she had left herself open to the concerns and ideas of others and had grown to understand both the power and frustration that is derived from such complex contact.

Robert Turner
At the time of his participation in my classroom, Robert Turner was designated a special education student who was being mainstreamed with resource room support. He acknowledged that his chief problem was an inability to maintain attention, particularly in an oral environment, for any length of time. In effect, if left unaddressed, Robert would disengage, fade out, and glass over. Through the support of resource room personnel and his family, Robert had gained a modicum of control over his wanderings and was capable of functioning in a mainstream classroom if the teacher were sensitive to the need for keeping him engaged. As Robert put it in an autobiographical piece, if he remembered the voice of his resource room teacher repeating “Focus, focus, focus,” he could retain the concentration needed to complete schoolwork.

In relation to many of my students, Robert Turner had less academic success in school, fewer opportunities to consider language options, and a history of school-based language study that too often had consisted of remedial, skill-based work aimed at “fixing” his language deficiencies. His immersion in these borderlands of language had left him feeling somewhat isolated in terms of his relationship to the mainstream codes, and he spoke of his emerging need for greater language flexibility:

Black English is in my neighborhood because Black folks accept it. But there is a whole world out there besides the inner city Black community and I should have a line of defense waiting for them.

These words, taken from a panel interview, reveal a speaker who is aware of language differences that exist, but who is only beginning to make sense of the ramifications presented by these differ-
ences. Seeking a “line of defense,” Robert saw language as an attack from the outside that requires some sort of battlement for his protection. By electing to leave himself open to language possibility, Robert sensed that he exposed a vulnerability and felt a need to protect himself against the domination of mainstream codes. Robert brought a sense of urgency to his considerations of language. But that urgency only separated him in degree, and not perspective, from a great many of his peers.

In his report based upon his own inquiry into these issues, Robert continued this investigation of language imposition from the outside by describing his own discomfort with standard English. He cited instances where he had made attempts to operate in the power codes before a mainstream audience and pointed out the paradox that if he would “try to speak as clear and correct as possible,” it would only result in his “speaking unclear and in the process, stuttering.” In essence, the harder he concentrated on how he was speaking, the more he was unable to render his thoughts with clarity or fluency. This predicament connects Robert to Kenya, whose presentation and subsequent discussion he had observed. In effect, they were both caught in a linguistic catch-22: They could opt for the home codes and appear natural (a sought-after attribute in this community of speakers) or they could opt for standard codes and be considered proper (a necessity for negotiating the mainstream culture). However, neither had much chance of being perceived as both natural and proper simultaneously, at least at this stage of their linguistic development.

In trying to clarify his feelings about this conundrum, Robert likened it to a White who is conversant in standard English and non-conversant in any forms of African American dialect and/or slang being placed into a language situation that involves having to cope with speaking and being corrected about the use of such language forms. The realities of current power relationships aside, Robert’s point was that such a White speaker, in trying to converse in African American codes, would appear less natural, more inarticulate, and less fluent. In addition, the speaker would show evidence of ambivalence about acquiring the codes. As Robert put it, a White speaker “would know—like I know—that there’s no way he’d fit in.” Once again, Robert spoke to the manner in which imposed codeswitching causes discomfort at the least and alienation in the extreme.

On the other hand, Robert was quite aware that facility with one’s home and/or neighborhood codes creates opportunities for expression that are intimately and perhaps irrevocably tied to identity, both personal and cultural, as he indicated in the following written excerpt:

If [Whites] knew Black English, then they would understand our music and how we use the sense of our ears to dance so well, and that it has nothing to do with our genes. They would understand rap music, that it is a pure mixture of Black English and slang, and the constant rumbling of beats which our sensitive ears follow. They would know that it is a constant use of emotional language, that when used well,
pumps a lot of Black English speakers up and results in violence.

This passage is significant for a number of reasons. First, this text makes evident that Robert understood the interrelations of language and race and power. On some level, he connected the use of what he called “emotional language” to the use of violence. Although it’s not clear if he was referring to the political provocation of someone like Malcolm X, the argument for leading the “gangsta” life in popular rap CDs, or the ability of one street tough to get a rise out of another, Robert believed that speakers of AAVE possess a capacity to move others to action. There is a fundamental belief in the capacity of language to affect people and of African American speakers to use that capacity to their advantage.

In addition, like Nora earlier, Robert was uncovering the complexity of these issues. As he discussed the ways language is connected to various aspects of African American culture, he was uncovering a deep structure for himself and his readership that associated knowing with multiple perspectives that he continued to investigate even as he attempted to shift these burgeoning theories into practice in his daily life. To this end, the data reveal Robert to be a student of language, and through his investigation he expressed concern for what he lost as he codeswitched. But it did not stop there. His connections grew even more complex. He acknowledged the rhythm of language as an influence upon African American art and music. He connected AAVE to African American slang and what he called “the constant rumbling of beats which our sensitive ears follow.” With deep emotion that transcends the flat transcript, he urged Whites to understand and accept African American codes in order to understand and accept African American culture better. Although he had not mastered code-switching, he was aware of its consequences on several levels and was seeking to understand and maneuver within that complexity of choice.

As Robert engaged more and more with the process of inquiry, he was simultaneously making his understanding of these concepts more complex while asking others to consider his arguments and beliefs. Those same arguments and beliefs he was sharing were undergoing refinement and re-examination through contact with the ideas of others. By examining White speakers coping with AAVE, Robert created room for discussion of his many diverse language threads. As his comments indicate, he was sorting out the intricacies of what it means to codeswitch from a form of African American dialect to standard English even as he struggled to function in and accept those codes.

To that end there is evidence that Robert, like many other students, was trying on different ideas as it were, testing them in public and then assessing their viability. At the same time he was becoming surer of his class voice and in a similar fashion was experimenting with opening up in class in order to gather peer critique. As he wrote on a reaction card, Robert enjoyed class because “We learn individu-
ally, then we speak out and comment orally, learning how to communicate and share, and to be proud of our work all at the same time.” There was a deliberate intent on his part to use the processes of the class to further both his inquiry into language and his ability to function in an academic situation. In this manner he reflected the actions of many students in my classes and only differed from them in the degree of urgency and metacognition he brought to the process.

**Cria Henderson**

Another example of the ways students identified and investigated personal inquiries is offered by Cria Henderson, a young woman who had attended parochial schools through the end of tenth grade but who was finishing out her secondary education in our public school. Although many of her family members were professionals, she was also very much part of the working-class neighborhood of the school and was popular among her peers. In this manner she was one of an ever-growing set of my students who were equally proud of how well they functioned in the classroom and how well they maintained popular status in the adolescent community. She brought a certain vibrancy to the classroom and a willingness to engage in discussions that, by crossing various boundaries such as those of race and gender, could be construed as risky. Yet she did so in a manner that was open and forthcoming.

She was also a caring learner, one who was quick to spot and scrutinize an injustice. As documented earlier, it was Cria and her friends who interceded on Kenya’s behalf. Among the first to make connections between our classroom inquiry and her own life, Cria sought ways to continue to personalize our work. In this manner our discussion of and inquiry into language struck a chord within her and she saw her research as an opportunity to examine her own language background in order to consider what this meant for her language future.

As a result of the class discussion of AAVE, Cria decided to investigate what happens when an African American speaks only standard English. By interviewing and observing African American users of standard English, Cria came to the following understanding, which she explained during a focus group interview:

Out of the project, I noticed that it’s important to learn standard English. There’s nothing really wrong with it. It can help out. But it’s also important to know Black English and speak the language in your community. And I have to agree with [Robert] that most Blacks think Black slang is Black English and that’s confusing. Black English is more than running around sayin’ “Yo, whazzup?” all day. So I think it is important to learn more about Black English.

She, like the two previous students profiled, was now using data that she had collected to help form her conclusion.

This use of data to inform her opinions became quite evident in our discussions subsequent to her inquiry. She peppered her argument with examples culled from her research. For example, despite the pragmatism of her
acceptance of standard English as a force to be reckoned with, Cria rejected its dominance and the way its users devalued and excluded variation. Although she could see the value of a universally accepted code of English, she doubted if the current standard acted as such. As the next interview excerpt indicates, Cria could draw upon her personal experience and make two arguments. The first allows room for a common version of English but the second suggests that the current standard was more exclusive than inclusive:

The school I went to before I came here was [a Catholic school] and I went there from the ninth to tenth grade. And there was more White people than there is Black. And you know, bein' around White people I found myself pickin' up, you know, how they spoke. They have their own words that are quirks. But when I came here, for the eleventh and twelfth grade, and I started this project, I noticed that standard is the base language. This supposed ta be the language where everybody is supposed ta understand. You can speak how you speak, around where you wanna speak. But say you're comin' to where somebody doesn't speak the way you speak, and you wanna get your point across, that's when you supposed to bring in the standard English. That's why I think standard English was all brought about. But see, the thing is, White people created standard English. They didn't say, "Oh let's have a Black person represented for the Black people. Let's have a Chinese person represented."

The last two lines above give a clear indication of Cria's question: If there is going to be a standard, she wonders, couldn't that standard be more representative of the rich diversity present in the country?

Cria's main position was that it was important for African American speakers to retain firm grip on the home codes among which they were raised. Taking on fluency in standard English was acceptable for maneuvering in the mainstream, but retaining home codes for communication particularly in the African American working class community was equally important. As was made clear by many of my students, one should never forget the language and the ways of those who were one's first nurturers. To illustrate this, Cria spoke about a family member—her aunt—who had strayed too far across a racial and, perhaps, class boundary and now saw standard English not as an option but as a preference:

My aunt on my dad's side, she speaks standard English all the time. And when I go over there, she corrects me all the time. "It's not you ain't, it's you're not. If I had a dime for every time you said you ain't, I could be the richest woman on this earth." And she even makes fun of how we speak (unclear) and laughs about it. I don't think it's really funny, for real for real. I think she's lost her whole background. It seems like when I see her, I don't see a Black aunt, I see a White aunt. That's what I see. A creation of learning back in her day. I think she was one of maybe four or five Blacks that graduated from [a Catholic school]. But learning that Black English is wrong and how you talk is wrong and this English is right, and you're learning from mostly White teachers, you come up to be like her, speaking standard English, speaking like White people or their language.

Of particular note here is how Cria examines the causes of what she construes as the aunt's defection and cen-
ters her concerns on the aunt's educational situation, as Cria puts it, “a creation of learning back in her day.” The use of this phrase gives a sense of the way Cria viewed the impact of education, that somewhere in her theory of how people learn, people are a product of their environments, of their peer and adult influences, and of the values taught or indoctrinated into them. According to Cria, the aunt was virtually powerless against the forces around her because the aunt had few options. By growing up in the 1950s and 1960s and encountering mostly White teachers and White peers, she would have had little choice but to accept standard English without critique.

Cria, however, seems braced not to allow the same to happen to her. Her comments indicate that she was unhappy with her aunt’s attitudes and was particularly concerned that her aunt used language difference as a point of contention and as a means for belittlement. That Cria then attached these actions to those of Whites can hardly be seen as a sought-for characteristic in her eyes. It may not be true that, as Cria indicated, the aunt had “lost her whole background,” and it is prudent to consider that what constitutes Blackness or Whiteness, although certainly connected to language, is in no way limited to language. But what Cria provides is a clear example of what Smitherman (1983) has identified as the way language issues divide the majority of members of the African American working class from the majority of African American professionals (with African American academics vacillating in the middle). The recent Ebonics debate sparked by the Oakland School District decisions revealed this division writ large. But in this microcosm caused by Cria’s investigation into language, she expressed a theory that students learn language from adults and peers in their sphere of influence, but that students, if informed of the possibilities, have some agency in terms of language acquisition and that acquisition should include a retained fluency in the home language as well as a learned fluency in the power code.

Cria, like so many of my students, was thus a theorizer, a role she supported through analysis of her experience. This theorizing took place regardless of what went on in the classroom; however, the classroom investigation gave her opportunity, tools, and a forum to systematize, intentionalize, and thereby deepen her role of theorizer. In Cria’s personal inquiry there is evidence of the young woman calling upon earlier discussion and work in the class, using that work to form a question for inquiry, and then using that inquiry to inform her stance on the issues. All this was sparked by the discussion of Kenya’s presentation, but the background for these issues came as a result of our yearlong foregrounding of language. In essence, she, like so many of her classmates, complicated her theories of language use by holding discussions with texts, with teachers, with students, and with her systematically gathered and reflected upon experience.
Discussion and Implications
The vignette and three profiles, taken as a whole, give some insight into what it means to conduct inquiry into language within a secondary classroom. These insights fall into two broad categories: what we came to know about our attitudes and perspectives regarding language and what we learned about ourselves as inquirers into language. In this section I will discuss what I construe to be the significance of those insights and, having done so, I will then consider what this might mean for other classrooms in other places.

Student Perspectives on Language
Perhaps what stands out most clearly in terms of my students’ views about language issues is that a range existed in the classroom. Although this might be a case of stating the obvious, it bears mentioning because too often observers of my classroom assumed homogeneity of opinion based solely on the homogeneity of the skin color of my student population. Yet multiple and even contradictory opinions existed. For example, Cria was far more willing to believe in the possibilities of codeswitching than Nora or even Robert. In another instance, Nora introduced a range of opinions into the body of her inquiry report about family support for language change. Additionally, although all three students acknowledged the pervasiveness of standard English, they each raised issues about its use that identify their singular perspectives in relation to the standard. What they came to know about language and how they positioned themselves to use language depended upon the way they brought a critical eye to bear upon their own circumstances.

Within that range, then, are students whose view of language was very much rooted in their political, social, and economic identities. Nora was a young woman with deeply embedded linguistic and other ties to the Caribbean American community. Robert, as he so poignantly stated, equated language with a deep and complex relationship to African American culture and felt that the language of the mainstream is something against which he must gather defenses. Cria lobbied for greater inclusion of African American language structure in standard English and also established membership in her community at least partially, if not wholly, on language choice. The choice between home and mainstream codes became, to an extent, one that held potential for great impact on identity.

For these students and others like them, it is not a matter of if they are able to speak and write in the mainstream codes—they could and did at various times in my classroom—but is more a matter of figuring out why they would feel disposed to do so. A key factor is motivation. The students were deepening their awareness of the role language played in their lives. In doing so they were confronting whatever reluctance and reservation they might have had for more consistent use of the mainstream codes of power. Nora, Robert, and Cria each expressed concerns that acquisition of mainstream codes in ways that did not equally support retention of home and cultural codes presented
them with moral and operational dilemmas. In addition, although they were each coming to some acceptance of the need to switch codes depending upon social contextual variances, putting that thought into action was difficult. This difficulty was evident for a number of reasons, but chiefly such codeswitching held potential to transact with their self-identity in ways that were less than desirable. This factor contributed to at least an unwillingness on their part to gain greater fluency in the power codes. To paraphrase Freire, before accepting the word, students must accept the world that goes with that word, an act that is not always easy, culturally-supported, or sought.

Ultimately, these students began to see language in complex and involved ways. The more we investigated the use of language in African American and White communities, the more able we became at not seeing language simply in black and white terms, pun fully intended. Despite some reticence, Nora came to realize that her Caribbean dialect and the power code could coexist within her, as could other codes she encountered in life. Her thinking was no longer either/or but was becoming more contingent on for whom, when, and with what purpose. In a similar vein, Robert not only grasped that many codes were within his reach, but also that these codes brought advantages and costs. He came to realize that it was difficult at best to operate and sound natural in a language code one had little practice using or had mixed feelings about acquiring. Cria, perhaps more than the other two, came into our discussions with a fairly complicated view of language based upon her experiences; however, she made these views even more complex. Language became a means for making sense of the world around her and deepening her views of race and its impact in society. She began to see ways in which language defines people as individuals and as groups and the way such definition can open possibilities and close doors.

Students as Inquirers into Language and Power

As inquirers into language and power, the students became aware of how the construction of meaning occurred through a blurring of the formal boundaries of the classroom creating an ethos in which students and the teacher could grow beyond traditional and self-constructed identities. This blurring of the edges of clear definitions and prescriptive models of language allowed these inquirers to imagine themselves as investigators into and describers of language. Inquiry became a means, then, through which students began to enlarge their locus of control. By raising questions about the role of language in their lives, Nora, David, and Cria moved in ways that could allow them to take greater control of that language. They were beginning to develop a sense of agency and an assumption of power. This agency meant different things and was evident in different degrees for each student. But it provided each with a sense of being able to come to personal terms with an influence in their lives that heretofore had largely
been regarded as being beyond their province.

For example, Cria took it upon herself to challenge the way in which the group had classified the criticism of Kenya's use of home codes in her talk. Rather than shutting down or resisting this challenge, I opened it up to the students, who responded by both deepening and broadening the issues central to the discussion. The invitation was for open-ended discussion rather than rushing either toward avoidance or conclusion. The students countered by electing not only to stay engaged in, but also to pursue pieces of this discussion to satisfy their own curiosities. Instead of expecting me to provide the definitive answer for these ideas, the students sought individual answers to these issues as evidenced in their inquiries. Codeswitching emerged as an option, but one in which issues of context required serious thought and personal choice.

Although the inquiry took on a distinctly personal spin, it also evolved from the common inquiry of the group and was both responsive to and interactive with that inquiry. By coming into contact with, considering, and responding to diverse opinion, my students were able to extend, deepen, and complicate their previously more simplistic perspectives on language. Yet because information wasn't being provided and learning wasn't being defined in a traditional manner, students needed to find ways to make meaning of and take something from the inquiry process. For the students profiled here, drawing connections between their personal needs and academic requirements was key to this process of meaning-making. Nora, Robert, and Cria began with a question offered by me, what Shor (1992) would call a *topical theme*: How does learning about language connect you to your world? But this question merely framed the general inquiry. Each student was able to explore some piece of that umbrella question as it related to her or his life.

Despite the very personal nature of these inquiries, each student was also able to enter what I would call those larger conversations that are taking place in the world of academics. Nora, by engaging members of her community in discussions that contrasted home and school language and the way acquisition of the latter threatens the retention of the former, brings to mind the work of Heath (1983) whose investigation into three Piedmont communities revealed the way school does and does not support home language. Robert, in sensing a need for both a shielding from and access to standard English, echoed Delpit (1995) and her belief that students whose home language differs from the mainstream language expectations of the school need to be able to access and critique those power codes. Finally, Cria, in a manner that I believe resonates with Gee's (1989) discussion of Discourse and Discourse communities, commented on the nature of codeswitching and mainstream code acquisition and how developing facility in either interferes with one's sense of identity and heritage.

It is important to comment here that I am not juxtaposing the work of
these students with the work of these educators simply to validate the work of the students, as if their thoughts would have no power unless already considered by the academic community. Nor do I imply that Cria was thinking of Gee (1989) when she was writing. Instead the juxtaposition indicates that these students have added to knowledge about these language issues and, for that alone, their ideas need to be seriously considered. The validation of these studies comes from the seriousness of their purpose, the systematic nature of their execution, and their important consequences.

Finally, by engaging in these inquiries, these students not only deepened their understanding of language, but also deepened their understanding of themselves as serious learners. Nora was able to find a means through which she could come to terms with language concerns and also to air her views to the class, thus getting beyond the role of silent observer. Robert, who admitted that he had trouble focusing on schoolwork for long periods of time, was able to harness his attention and pursue his inquiry into AAVE in ways that both affirmed and problematized his thinking. Cria, already fairly comfortable with academic critique and discussion, nonetheless came to realize how a systematic and intentional inquiry into her own experience could enhance the collective experience of the class and that her opinion backed by documented experience seemed to count for more in the world. By giving themselves the room to enlarge their visions, these students were able to act in ways that validated that vision. By opening themselves to consider the ways the power of language had been used against them, they opened themselves to generating ways that same power could be put to their use.

**Teacher as Inquirer**

This study served to deepen many of my own beliefs about ways that students learn by making sense of the world around them. Going into this formal study, I had a wealth of anecdotal data gathered from years of working in this community to suggest that certain evidence might be forthcoming. Therefore, I was not at all surprised that my students were able to raise questions about language and to investigate those questions with systematic intent. Nor did it seem odd to me that a range of opinion on these subjects permeated the group. Although I wasn’t certain what the specifics of that range would be, I was fairly certain prior to conducting the formal study that a varied and interesting range existed. As a result, making my research more systematic and intentional served to confirm those beliefs more securely.

Yet discussions and pedagogy that are intended to move students to re-evaluate their positions should move the teacher as well, and the inquiries done by Nora, Robert, Cria, and others caused at least two shifts in my own thinking, one playing into the other. First, I came to accept that terms like Black English or Ebonics—no matter how much they were intended to celebrate the home codes—tend to, as most of my students insisted, connect
all African Americans to a single code that is perceived by the power majority as inferior. Although in theory a term like Black English incorporates a range of codes and speakers under that larger umbrella, the general public too often in practice narrows that continuum to some perceived amalgam of rural and urban codes that no longer implies a range. Since such narrowing is also usually connected to some sense of devaluing, my students were adamant that labels that connected a system of language to a specific race were limiting and otherwise problematic, no matter what the good intentions. For myself, I still believe that the work of Jordan (1988), Labov (1972), Smitherman (1977), and others creates an ethos and opportunity for celebrating language diversity, but I have more and more been given to talking about the home or neighborhood codes in contrast to the power or mainstream codes rather than invoking terms such as Ebonics, Black English, or standard English.

Part and parcel of this discussion was my realization that sustaining multiple perspectives and not pushing for consensus should be the goal of an inquiry classroom. Diversity of opinion should not only be tolerated but encouraged, as long as those opinions are born of extensive attempts to gather a diversity of evidence upon which to base them. I had introduced the term Black English into the classroom along with the work and positive intentions of Labov (1972), Smitherman (1977), and Jordan (1988) and I was the one who felt sure that the majority of my students, most of whom were fluent in a range of Black vernaculars, would seize upon these beliefs and make them their own. As the paragraph above details, such was not the case. Still, I found myself arguing for these views, almost insisting that my students were not thinking logically, until I began to understand that the argument wasn’t mine to make or not make. Nor was it their job either to roll over and placidly accept or to dig in their heels. Instead, the purpose of our inquiry was to engage in substantive dialogue. Through close examination of the word and the world, my students came to a range of opinions, perhaps as many opinions as there were participants in the class. What was important was not that we all took the same thing away from the class but that we all struggled to find something worth taking.

Finally, this study reminded me of how difficult, yet how absolutely necessary it is to venture across cultural and personal boundaries in classrooms. It also helped to clarify for me that race was only one of many cultural boundaries being crossed on any given day. Through the course of the year, we discussed the politics of the racist slur nigger, the effects of verbal abuse, language used by teachers and students when confronting each other, the language of self-identification (e.g., colored people, people of color, Whites, Caucasians, etc.), the power of profanity, and other topics of language controversy. Each topic had its hidden minefield that could have exploded or imploded our discussions. Yet each also had rich pockets of unrefined ore waiting to be discovered and mined. Day to day and
class to class, I held my breath worrying what might be unearthed and how we might handle it. Most times, I worried in vain. Purposefully bringing a topic, no matter how initially worrisome it might seem, into the fluorescent glow of our inquiry classroom always seemed more worthwhile than allowing it to tacitly control our discussion hidden away just below the surface of our intent.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

This study suggests that teachers need to provide ample opportunity for students to inquire into, theorize about, and make meaning of the world around them. This approach is about trusting the process. This approach is about creating authentic means and circumstances for inquiry. If students are assumed to be capable of interrogating the texts of their lives, then they need the support and structures that facilitate such learning. Teachers need not only to view students as theorists and critics, but also to act in ways that give students the latitude to perform as such. Therefore, depth needs to be honored over breadth in considering curriculum, students and teachers need to establish long-term working relationships, connections within and among the disciplines must be more explicit, and considerations of scheduling and grouping need to be such that reasonable class loads, diverse participants, and adequate time for intensive work are the result. Perhaps most importantly, students need to be able to do more than discover what the teacher believes; their interrogation of beliefs should allow them to decide what meaning they draw from the process.

These changes in structures, policy, and educational principles cannot occur only in the classroom. It is not enough for teachers alone to understand that their curricula need to slow down and that it is better to engage students as critical thinkers than as consumers of endless facts. Principals, curriculum specialists, superintendents, and other such supervisory personnel need to come to these realizations also. If these paradigm shifts only occur in individual classrooms, then their ultimate impact will be limited. A powerful potential for teaching and learning existed in my SLC, but we were constricted by the lack of flexibility on the part of the school district as a whole. Like Alice in Wonderland, we had grown larger than our surroundings and found ourselves bumping up against structures that were unwilling to accommodate us. So it will be for any teacher who attempts to enact a critical inquiry into language or any topic of worth unless overall district policy is revamped to allow for multiple perspectives on what teaching and learning can look like and how such activity is best supported. Taking inquiry stances in secondary classrooms will only be pervasive when prescribed curricula, short periods, departmental exams based on content, and other such limiting structures are rethought at the district and not only the classroom level.

However, teachers can't always wait for their districts to lead the way. Given the limitations I've described, there is still much that they can do to bring a

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critical inquiry pedagogy to literacy practice. First and foremost, teachers should consider the many ways inquiry invites students to delve into language. By allowing students to systematize and intentionalize their own informal inquiries into language, teachers help students to see language codes less as a prescribed set of rules that somehow constrict and inaccurately define their lives and more as a system of possibility over which they have some control.

Also, those who teach in classrooms where the potential for crossing boundaries of culture is great need to take inquiry stances in order to understand better what occurs during these crossings. More specifically, teachers need to gain a greater sense of the transaction between primary and secondary Discourses. As Delpit (1995) and others argue, teachers should find ways for students to celebrate their home language while acquiring and critiquing the power codes, something uniquely suited for inquiry. However, my research suggests that because students may be ambivalent about both this celebration and acquisition, teachers need to encourage students to problematize and seek personal understanding of their thinking. I agree with educators who argue that not to teach the power codes is to risk further marginalization for already marginalized students. However, I also argue that to dismiss resistance to power code acquisition on the part of speakers whose home codes differ from that of the mainstream as mere reluctance or, worse yet, inability to learn, is to underestimate the depth to which this resistance runs. Furthermore, such dismissal sets up a cycle of circumstances that will continue to create further resentment and thus further avoidance of fluency in the power code.

Conclusion
In a class session that took place during spring of my final year of high school teaching, discussion centered on Rudolph Fisher’s (1925) “City of Refuge” and Jessie Fauset’s (1993) “Double Trouble.” Both were written during the Harlem Renaissance, but the former concerns working-class characters who speak a range of dialects and the latter speaks of upper-middle-class issues through characters whose English is standard and fairly formal. Critics have suggested that neither story adequately represents African American culture and I asked my students to give their opinions on the matter. As would be expected, the discussion was intense, but at one point a curious juxtaposition occurred. Two young women who saw themselves as friends took opposing viewpoints. One, whose family had migrated from the rural South and had its roots in working-class America, held up the Fisher piece and said that everybody she knew, including her grandmother, talked like the characters in that story. The other young woman, whose aunts and grandmother were teachers, held up the Fauset piece and said that the characters in that story sounded more like people she knew. As they sat there holding up their respective pieces of evidence, the recognition grew between them that there was probably more to their respective
arguments than they had first considered. Once more, the impact of language on our lives was front and center in my classroom and once more the potential for complicating our views of language was only an inquiry away.

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References


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You are invited to submit a manuscript for an edited collection on inquiry-based learning and large-group discussions of literature. The collection is tentatively titled Inquiry and the Literary Text: Constructing Discussions in the English Classroom and is to be considered as a potential NCTE publication in their Classroom Practices series. Submissions might address a variety of approaches: Socratic teaching, questioning techniques, critical and theoretical questions for discussing literary texts, collaborative and constructivist approaches to interpretation, the training and inclusion of students as peer discussion leaders, or a combination of these. Submissions should not exceed 20 pages. Send two copies by April 15 to James Holden, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN 55057. For additional information, contact either James Holden at holden@stolaf.edu or John Schmit at schmit@augsburg.edu.