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SUBURBAN AFRICAN-AMERICAN BASIC WRITING: A TEXT ANALYSIS[1]

ABSTRACT: Six secondary teachers inquire why African-American writers were scoring below White classmates on a districtwide holistic assessment. This paper reports on a comparative text analysis of low-scoring papers, examining an array of rhetorical and mechanical features. The texts show that White basic writers differ little from Black basic writers. African-Americans tend to use a stronger personal voice and drop standard word endings, but most use no more than one such feature per page of writing. The researchers conclude that dialect is not the key issue.

African-American students have consistently scored below their White classmates in holistic assessments of writing. The Webster Groves School District is confronting this problem in collaboration

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The action research team also included the following secondary teachers who collaborated on the assessment: Nancy Cason, Minnie Phillips, Theresa Simon, Sandra Tabscott, and Gail Taylor.

with the Gateway Writing Project (GWP) at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Our study deals with writers in grades 7 to 12, but the patterns described may be found at any level of schooling. Low-achievers in junior and senior high often graduate to become basic writers in college.

Looking for answers, six secondary teachers and a university consultant embarked on three years of action research. Action research is based on a paradigm that contrasts with experimental research. It is conducted by people with a stake in the issues they investigate, not by detached evaluators. The roles of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers are fluid. Hypotheses are flexible rather than predetermined, emerging from guiding questions in the process of inquiry (Elliott, "Action"; Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography;* Smith, "Evolving Logic").

We began research in 1987 by examining the writing samples of Black and White students who placed below the mean on Webster Groves' annual assessment. Three questions guided our analysis:

> (1) "Do the characteristics of papers by low-scoring black writers differ systematically from those of low-scoring white writers?" (2) "How prevalent is black nonstandard dialect among low-scoring black writers in this suburban district?" (3) "Do the scorers in our writing assessment view dialect forms more negatively than other departures from standard usage?"

Answers to these questions would shape the way teachers planned to work with African-American writers. If our students had idiosyncratic patterns of errors, they might require special linguistic programs of remediation. But if they were generally weak in rhetorical as well as mechanical skills, the solution might lie in carefully tailored writing process instruction.

We were concerned that weaknesses in rhetoric and composition might, in the case of African-Americans, too quickly be labeled "Black English," causing teachers to focus mainly on surface errors. In a time of areawide desegregation, some teachers have returned to the language attitudes of the past—an obsession with the differentness of Black oral style, and an assumption that if Black students slip into this style on paper we must "fix" their speech habits before teaching them to write. Our experience with African-American writers in Webster Groves made us doubt that dialect was the key to their writing problems.

Suburban African-American Basic Writers

Our project examines a population neglected in most of the

literature: middle and lower-middle income suburban students of African ancestry. Their writing problems—and solutions—cannot automatically be inferred from research on language in the inner city. Therefore, we must define our population clearly.

The School District of Webster Groves, a St. Louis suburb, educates 3,751 students representing the full range of socio-economic levels, with parents on welfare as well as in the professions. Over 70% of the high school students expect to attend college. African-Americans comprise 25% of the school population: among them, 20% are Webster Groves residents, while 5% come from St. Louis City through a voluntary interdistrict desegregation program. (The proportion of transfer students is similar among Black students who scored below the mean.)

Since 1983, Webster Groves has conducted a districtwide assessment of writing each Fall. To simulate some of the conditions for the writing process, students are given two hours to write, with the second class hour for revision. Explanatory, expressive, and persuasive prompts are assigned to different classes in alternate years.[2] Papers are read following procedures recommended for holistic scoring (Myers, *Procedure;* White, *Teaching*).

Year after year, most Black writers have scored low. Table I reports the performance of Webster Groves students in grades 7 to 12[3] on two annual assessments. Scores are based on an 8-point rubric with two readings, yielding a range for each paper of 2 to 16. The data show cause for our concern. Not only do African-American writers score significantly below their White peers, but they do not close the gap as they move through secondary school.[4]

This pattern fits the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress: "Black . . . students perform at substantially lower levels than do White and Asian-American students," and the difference "remains essentially the same at grades 4, 8, and 11" (45–46). Like our assessment, NAEP tests actual samples of writing in expressive, persuasive, and explanatory modes.[5]

Our action research would first investigate the causes of low achievement among African-American writers in our particular setting, and then plan an intervention to help them succeed.

What the Literature Shows

During the three-year study, the research team has been closely involved with the literature. Each teacher received Farr and Daniels' *Language Diversity and Writing Instruction,* Charlotte Brooks' *Tapping Potential: English and Language Arts for the Black Learner,* and a thick stack of articles. These readings helped us understand

our students' composing processes, rhetorical problems, and mechanical errors; they also suggested some promising classroom strategies.

First we surveyed the linguistic research and saw that we could not rely on most descriptions of Black writers. Studies of Dillard, Labov, and Smitherman published in the seventies were based on speech samples from ghetto youth. Some Black Webster Groves students had, in fact, transferred from St. Louis City, but most had grown up in a stable suburban neighborhood where African-American families had lived for generations.

We next examined writings on dialect and schooling, starting with the *Students' Rights to their Own Language.* We could affirm the major theses of the 1974 statement: that Black nonstandard English is a rule-governed system, not a sloppy form of standard, and that language, culture, and selfhood are intimately linked. Yet we had to put these affirmations into practice for today. Our suburban students, and their parents, did not question the need to learn standard edited English, to make it their "own" for communicating with a public audience—especially in writing. Instead, they asked how to master the standard forms efficiently.

Similarly, we did not question the value of community speech patterns for an appropriate audience and purpose. Instead, we wanted to learn more about the language and culture African-American teenagers brought to school. The Ann Arbor vs. King School decision of 1979 stated that teachers must understand their Black students' linguistic resources to help them become literate. We studied Brooks' collection, which stresses oral language strengths, meaningful literature and composition, and teaching written standard English while editing.

This advice sent us to Shaughnessy and her followers. Studies of texts and their authors (Laurence; Hull; Tricomi; Connors and Lunsford) show that basic writers are not so much deficient as inexperienced, new to academic discourse. Teachers can examine the linguistic patterns of individual writers to discover which rules they intuitively use and which rules of standard English they must acquire. Students learn correctness through guided editing, not through survey-style grammar lessons.

Empirical research suggests that low-achieving Black writers fit the category of basic writers. When Sternglass analyzed community college papers, she found no patterns of exclusively "Black" dialect. Most errors of Black and White basic writers were identical in kind; Black students more often made certain errors typical of basic writers at large. Farr-Whiteman has confirmed these findings based on papers written for the National Assessment of Educational

Progress by 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old writers. An ongoing study by Smitherman (personal communication, 1989) using NAEP data also shows only occasional signs of African-American oral dialect features in writing.

So we looked beyond dialect and error to the whole process of composing. Although most of our teacher-researchers had studied in the writing project, we took a critical stance toward process pedagogy. Many success stories by process advocates have described affluent White high achievers: Moffett's *Active Voice* grew out of assignments developed at Exeter Academy.

We searched for process approaches that were effective with African-American basic writers. Fowler, reporting that dialect speakers need more time to write fewer words, uses freewriting to build fluency. Griffith found that a positive use of oral language helped underprepared college writers. Even Farrell, who fears that "oral" culture limits cognitive growth, recommends peer response, putting "orality at the service of literacy" (43). Farr and Daniels offer a comprehensive process pedagogy, tailored and structured for speakers of nonstandard English.

Analyzing the Texts

Based on these insights from the literature and from the classroom, we reexamined our assessment data. We considered both rhetorical issues and error patterns, comparing Black and White student papers grouped by holistic score. Later, we would use this inventory to plan instruction in the writing process.

For a week in August 1987, the scoring team met: ten Webster Groves teachers and a university consultant from the Gateway Writing Project. We based our analysis on the district's annual report which listed specific features of writing, with descriptors for these features characteristic of papers at each performance level and each grade level. We developed descriptors for low-scoring Black and White students based on the same features.

First, the team prepared for the analysis by freewriting our predictions of what we would find. Reading these aloud made our expectations public. Some of us were looking for error patterns, others thought fluency or confidence would be key issues—but all expressed uncertainty, a willingness to learn from the data.

Next, the scorers tested these predictions on ten papers paired by grade level and score, each pair with a White and a Black writer. The group correctly classified three pairs of papers, but missed two. We asked readers their cues, in usage as well as style and content. The exercise showed that these cues were misleading; it helped us

question all assumptions about "Black English" and focus on the texts at hand. (See Appendix B.)

Finally, the team examined the data. In the tradition of action research, we did not try to eliminate "observer bias" but to revise it. The holistic scoring had been blind (scorers did not know race or age), but for this analysis we had to see our variables. At each grade level we compared equal-scoring papers by Black and by White writers: sensing styles, checking patterns, counting certain linguistic features. We did not use the sociolinguists' method of calculating a ratio between nonstandard forms and total forms of a given feature; we simply counted "errors" as we built an overall impression of each set of papers.

Scoring Categories

For each paper, we made notes on two record sheets, one for rhetorical skills, the other for editing skills. We analyzed rhetoric and the writing process with an inventory like those used by Diederich to guide general impression marking.

Rhetorical Features

Writing process (signs of planning and revision from drafts)
Fluency (approx. length)
Development (use of specifics)
Organization (paragraphing, introductions)
Style (sentence maturity, word choice, tone)
Audience and *purpose* (signs of the writer's awareness)

We approached editing skills from an analysis of specific linguistic features. In deciding which items to count, we drew on published descriptions of "Black English," as well as on teachers' experience of common errors. These categories were expected to appear mainly among African-American writers:

Black Nonstandard Features

Special verbs (3rd person singular -s, past -ed, to be forms)
Noun/pronoun/adjective endings (final consonants, possessives, number markers)
"Self" pronouns (such forms as "hisself"/"theirselves")
Repeated subjects (the man, he).

The following categories were expected to include errors common to basic writers, both Black and White:

Spelling
Paragraphing (omitted or inappropriate indentation)
Miscellaneous verb usage
Fragments or run-ons
Capitalization errors
Miscellaneous (punctuation, apostrophes, etc.)
Double negatives
Homophones and Words Confused (to/too/two, also such
    often-muddled pairs as fill/feel).

Linguists do not call the last two items "Black English." But from classroom experience, we expected errors with homophones and double negatives to be more common among Black writers.

Scoring Procedures

To examine rhetorical characteristics, we divided into three subgroups which read and discussed papers from grades 7–8, 9–10, and 11–12 respectively. Groups first filled out record sheets with three sample papers to establish consistency. Then they read all Black student papers from the grade level folders, and an equal number of White student papers with the same scores. Team leaders led discussions and recorded each group's views of the key features. Since the Black students scoring below the mean varied from grade to grade (a low of 33, a high of 44), the sample size also varied. A total of 475 Black and White student papers from the 1986 assessment were read for rhetorical skills.

To examine editing skills, two scorers were trained on the error analysis record sheets. All items were counted twice for reliability— once by a scorer, then independently by the university consultant. Since this task was lengthy, we restricted our analysis to a sample. Papers from half the Black students and the same number of Whites were chosen nonsystematically for each below-average rubric point. We checked mechanics on 238 papers, 119 each from Black and White writers. To validate, we repeated the analysis a year later on a slightly larger sample of 1987 papers.

Finally, we synthesized the data assembled for each grade level of each score point. The team leaders wrote descriptors for the rhetorical features and the university consultant prepared descriptors and statistics on the mechanical features. Both were recorded on master charts for each grade level.

Interpreting the Data

The results told a consistent story. When the writing of Black

and White students was matched by grade and score, few differences appeared. That is, White ninth grade papers scored "6" and Black ninth grade papers scored "6" were similar in length, style, control of usage, and overall skill. But this statement does not change the fact that the lower rubric points had greater proportions of African-Americans. Black writers were more likely than Whites to score low, and therefore to be weak in fluency, correctness, organization, etc. But within each low-scoring category, the work of Black and White writers differed little. We did not find otherwise-competent papers scored low because of dialect or culture. This finding reassured us that scorer bias was not causing Black students to fail.

Rhetorical Categories

We compared papers at the same grade level and rubric point:

Rhetorical Categories—Results

1. *Process, fluency, development, awareness of audience and purpose:* No consistent Black/White differences were noted.
2. *Organization:* Black writers in grades 7 and 9 showed a slightly greater tendency to omit introductions or endings.
3. *Style and voice:* This is the only rhetorical category that clearly distinguished between Black and White writers:

    Black students tended to use a more informal voice and to get personally involved with their subjects. Yet they often lacked control of voice, so their style wavered from inappropriately casual to inappropriately formal. Younger Black students wrote very personally, informally, conversationally, while older ones usually retained a note of sincerity even when attempting a too-formal style. At all ages, Black writers used "I" more, gave more personal examples, and more often wrote in the long, compound sentences characteristic of speech.

    White writers tended to be less personal, more formal. For example, in a letter-writing task, younger Whites addressed the principal by position rather than as a person; older Whites often become more detached until in the later grades their writing was stilted, artificial, and stuffy.

In general, when matched by score and grade level, papers by Black basic writers seemed slightly stronger rhetorically than those by their White peers. The frequent sound of a convincing personal voice—though not always controlled—was an asset.

Mechanics and Usage Categories

Students improved from grade to grade in editing skills. But our findings challenged some assumptions about Black usage:[6]

Mechanics and Usage Categories—Results

Features Which Do Not Distinguish Black and White Basic Writers

1. *Spelling; Capitalization; Punctuation; Paragraphing:* Both Black and White students made many errors, especially in the younger grades. No consistent differences appeared.
2. *Repeated Subjects; Self Pronouns; Double Negatives:* Though identified with Black dialect, these forms almost never appeared either in Black or in White student papers.

Features Which Distinguish Black and White Basic Writers:

"Black Nonstandard" Features:

1. *Special Verbs:* Almost three times as many Black writers omitted some third-person singular -s or past -ed endings or used nonstandard "to be" forms. The frequency declined from grade to grade among Black writers, but the pattern among Whites is erratic. Overall, 35% of the Black students and 13% of the Whites used at least one such form.
2. *Noun/Pronoun/Adjective Endings:* More than twice as many Black writers (47%) as White (19%) omitted noun plural -s, possessive -'s, and other consonant endings. The trend from grade to grade is erratic among both groups.

"General Nonstandard" Features:

1. *Homophones/words confused:* (Substituting any real word for a word that sounds alike to the speaker: fell/feel, mine/mind). Although homophone errors were common among basic writers in general, more Black writers (over 60%) than White (40%) confused at

least one such pair. These errors may reflect Black oral language patterns.

2. *Fragments/run-ons:* Although common among most basic writers, more Black students (61%) than Whites (46%) made at least one sentence error.

3. *Miscellaneous Verb Usage:* Other nonstandard verbs were fairly common. They appeared erratically from grade to grade, sometimes more among Black writers, sometimes more among Whites. Overall, 17% of the Black writers and 8% of White writers used at least one such form. On the 1987 data, we counted only irregular past participles and invariant 'don't,' but found a similar, erratic pattern.

For this population of suburban basic writers, therefore, only two features known as "Black dialect" appeared frequently and predominantly among Black students: *special verbs,* and *noun/pronoun/adjective endings.* Three other features common to basic writers in general were somewhat more common among Black writers.

It is no surprise that African-Americans drop some endings when writing in the style of informal speech. What is striking is that the two dialect features were so rare even on low-scoring papers. Since our sample excludes papers at or above the mean, dialect is clearly not the main problem facing these writers.

Most Black basic writers (55%) used no more than one dialect feature per page (*special verbs* or *noun/pronoun/adjective endings*). And "Black dialect" was not limited to Blacks; low-scoring Whites also wrote such forms, though less often. Results from grades 7–12 thus confirm the Sternglass data from college.

Tables 2 through 5 show the four categories which clearly distinguish African-American writers in our sample: *special verbs, noun/other endings, homophones/words confused, fragments/run-ons.* Each table shows the number and percentage of papers with at least one error, the changes from grade 7 through 12, and the comparisons between the 1986 and 1987 data.

It is also revealing to show how frequently a feature is used. To measure the frequency of Black nonstandard usage, Table 6 combines the two dialect forms common in our setting: *special verbs,* and *noun/pronoun/adjective endings.* More than three such forms per page of text are listed as "**high**" dialect, two or three as "**some**" dialect, and one or zero as "**(nearly) none.**" (With shorter papers the items are multiplied; two forms on a half-page text equal four forms on a full page, or "**high.**")

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The two key dialect features combined have a weak impact on our texts. Just 12 of 119 Black students (10%) in grades 7 to 12 (1986 data) show **high** usage of Black nonstandard forms. (Two of 119 White students also score **high** on these forms.) By contrast, 66 Black students (55%) show **nearly none** of these forms (as do 103 of the White students—87%). These patterns recur among 1987 writers: 28 Black (15%) and 11 White (7%) show **high** dialect usage, but 112 Black (61%) and 144 White (85%) show **nearly none.**

African-American students make steady progress in editing nonstandard features in formal writing.[7] Table 6 shows that 25% of Black 7th graders and 85% of Black 11th graders used no more than one such form per page (1986). This pattern is repeated in 1987: 40% of Black 7th graders and 79% of Black 11th graders used no more than one of these dialect forms.

What Do African-American Basic Writers Need to Learn?

For most suburban students, problems with standard written English are moderate, not high. Even in our sample, nonstandard usage stands out on relatively few papers. "Black dialect" is clearly not the key issue for African-American writers in this suburban community. Dialect simply is not a problem for most; for others, it is part of the problem, but not the main problem.

Why, then, do so many Black writers perform poorly? They seem to be weak in overall writing abilities: process, content, and organization, as well as standard usage. For some low-scoring Black students, slightly stronger rhetorical skills may be overshadowed by slightly more frequent errors, especially in highly stigmatized forms. Yet since most Black students rarely use such forms in writing, we cannot attribute their low scores to a bias against dialect in the holistic scoring. A more likely scenario is that in the classroom, nonstandard usage may consign some students to workbook exercises with little writing. By focusing on error rather than on communication, such students may fall farther behind with each year of "remediation."

So what can we recommend to improve the performance of our Black basic writers? We conclude, first of all, that premature or primary stress on dialect and error is counterproductive.

Instead, our teachers drafted a broad, learner-centered program, with a structured approach to writing processes and to matching voice with audience. Based on their own experience and on the literature, they chose a set of strategies (originally six, later eight) to emphasize and investigate in the classroom.

Emphasize writing processes
Individualize and personalize
Encourage cooperative learning
Build bridges to more challenging tasks
Use the computer
Build on strengths
Increase involvement with writing
Increase control of language

Each teacher then selected two to four target students from her own English classes—Black writers who scored well below the mean. During three years of action research, teachers are observing these target students and their responses to the eight strategies. They conference with target students, keep writing samples, and write fieldnotes.[8] The 41 target students are observed in normal classroom life. They are not singled out as an experimental group. Each month, teachers meet to discuss and interpret what they are learning. Our goal is to identify effective teaching strategies to support the eight principles.

We share Patricia Bizzell's hope that writers may "become comfortable with two different cultural literacies if these are acquired in social situations where both are highly valued" (135). Through this project, we expect to understand better the learning processes of African-American basic students and the journey through which they can become successful writers.

Appendix A: Tables

TABLE 1: MEAN WRITING SCORES OF BLACK AND WHITE STUDENTS

Grade	Mean	1986 Data White	Black	Difference
7	7.0	7.4	6.1	1.3
8	8.8	8.7	6.5	2.2
9	8.2	8.7	6.9	1.8
10	9.6	10.1	7.7	2.4
11	10.2	10.7	7.9	2.8
12	11.0	12.1	8.2	3.9

Grade	Mean	1987 Data White	Black	Difference
7	6.69	7.0	5.2	1.8
8	8.36	8.8	6.9	2.0
9	7.67	8.1	6.4	1.8
10	9.37	9.7	8.1	2.6
11	10.69	11.1	9.3	2.8
12	11.04	11.0	8.7	2.4

Note: Scale = 2 - 16

TABLE 2: SPECIAL VERBS
(omitted 3rd person singular -s or past -ed, "to be" forms)

	N	Below Mean Black Writers N min. 1 form	% min. 1 form	N	Below Mean White Writers N min. 1 form	% min. 1 form
1986 Data						
Grade						
7	20	12	60%	20	3	15%
8	17	7	41%	17	0	0%
9	22	8	36%	22	2	9%
10	21	6	29%	21	3	14%
11	20	4	20%	20	4	20%
12	19	5	27%	19	4	21%
Total:	119	42	35%	119	16	13%
1987 Data						
Grade						
7	30	13	43%	29	7	24%
8	33	12	36%	30	1	3%
9	32	6	19%	28	6	21%
10	27	9	33%	22	2	9%
11	33	5	15%	33	1	3%
12	30	6	20%	27	2	7%
Total:	185	51	28%	169	19	11%

Examples

Black Writers	White Writers
It occur[s]	She get[s]
The teacher be calm	What['s] happening?
Webster have	There be a guardsman

Note. N min. 1 = number of papers with at least 1 nonstandard form per page of writing. % min. 1 = percent of papers with at least 1 such form per page of writing.

TABLE 3: NOUN / PRONOUN/ ADJECTIVE ENDINGS
(omitted noun plural -s, possessive -'s, other consonant endings)

	Below Mean Black Writers			Below Mean White Writers		
	N	N min. 1 form	% min. 1 form	N	N min. 1 form	% min. 1 form
1986 Data						
Grade						
7	20	12	60%	20	5	25%
8	17	6	35%	17	5	29%
9	22	13	59%	22	2	9%
10	21	6	29%	21	4	19%
11	20	6	30%	20	3	15%
12	19	13	68%	19	4	21%
Total:	119	56	47%	119	23	19%
1987 Data						
Grade						
7	30	10	33%	29	7	24%
8	33	12	36%	30	1	3%
9	32	11	34%	28	5	18%
10	27	9	33%	22	6	27%
11	33	13	39%	33	4	12%
12	30	13	43%	27	1	4%
Total:	185	68	37%	169	24	14%

Examples

Black Writers	White Writers
thing[s]	time[s]
qualification[s]	qualification[s]
prejudice[d]	sandwich[es]

Note. N min. 1 = number of papers with at least 1 nonstandard form per page of writing. % min. 1 = percent of papers with at least 1 such form per page of writing.

TABLE 4: HOMOPHONES AND WORDS CONFUSED

| | Below Mean Black Writers | | | | Below Mean White Writers | | |
	N	% min. 1 error	% min. 4 errors		N	% min. 1 error	% min. 4 errors
1986 Data							
Grade							
7	20	70%			20	50%	
8	17	70%			17	41%	
9	22	68%			22	32%	
10	21	66%			21	43%	
11	22	55%			20	35%	
12	19	47%			19	42%	
Total:	119	63%			119	40%	
1987 Data							
Grade							
7	30	73%	40%		29	28%	3%
8	33	64%	24%		30	30%	7%
9	32	59%	9%		28	54%	14%
10	27	48%	4%		22	32%	5%
11	33	70%	6%		33	55%	6%
12	30	67%	17%		27	44%	4%
Total:	185	64%	17%		169	41%	7%

Note. % min. 1 = percent of papers with at least 1 error per page of writing. % min. 4 = percent of papers with 4 or more errors per page of writing. This measure was obtained only on the 1987 data.

TABLE 5: FRAGMENTS AND RUN-ONS

Grade	Below Mean Black Writers				Below Mean White Writers		
	N	N min. 1 error	% min. 1 error		N	N min. 1 error	% min. 1 error
			1986 Data				
7	20	15	75%		20	13	65%
8	17	8	47%		17	5	29%
9	22	15	68%		22	10	45%
10	21	13	62%		21	11	52%
11	20	13	65%		20	8	40%
12	19	8	42%		19	8	42%
Total:	119	72	61%		119	55	46%
			1987 Data				
7	30	28	98%		29	20	69%
8	33	23	70%		30	10	33%
9	32	17	53%		28	17	61%
10	27	12	44%		22	8	36%
11	33	21	64%		33	18	55%
12	30	10	33%		27	11	41%
Total:	185	111	60%		169	84	50%

Note. N min. 1 = number of papers with at least 1 error per page of writing. % min. 1 = percent of papers with at least 1 error per page of writing.

TABLE 6: STRENGTH OF TWO DIALECT FEATURES
SPECIAL VERBS AND WORD ENDINGS

	HIGH (min. 4 per page) Black/White		SOME (2-3 per page) Black/White		(nearly) NONE (0-1 per page) Black/White	
1986 Data						
Grade						
7	20%	5%	55%	20%	25%	75%
8	0%	0%	59%	24%	41%	76%
9	14%	0%	36%	5%	50%	95%
10	0%	0%	29%	10%	71%	90%
11	5%	0%	10%	10%	85%	90%
12	21%	5%	21%	5%	59%	89%
Mean %:	10%	2%	34%	10%	55%	87%
Total N:	12	2	41	14	66	103
1987 Data						
Grade						
7	33%	17%	27%	21%	40%	62%
8	15%	3%	30%	0%	55%	97%
9	13%	14%	28%	11%	59%	79%
10	7%	0%	4%	3%	63%	77%
11	9%	0%	12%	0%	79%	100%
12	13%	4%	20%	0%	67%	96%
Mean %:	15%	7%	24%	8%	61%	85
Total N:	28	11	45	14	112	144

10 - 3 - 1 *

Dear ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆ _____

I know you are trying you best
with the lunch conditions. But I
think that the lunch should be longer
because some kids don't want to eat
cafeteria food. Then they rush trying to
get to ▆▆ their destiny and in their hastiness
they may cause an accident. Then there
are the kids that can't drive yet and they
don't like the cafeteria food either, and they
can't make it to Mcdonalds in a ½ an hr.
I hope you will agree with me on this
if not we can sit down an talk about it.

Sincerely,

▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆

*Grade 10   Score 3   Black writer

33

10-3-2*

Dear ███████

I would like to comment on the problem of the lunch periods being to short. For one thing having second lunch means, the food isn't as hot you get a lot of leftovers, and there is not as much. of the more popular food s. But on top of that you have to wait in line for about ten minutes, then you have to scarf your food down so the bell does not ring while you are eating, and you cant eat after the bell because of the tardy/cut policy. So I'd rather starve then serve one of those saturday detentions But I do think action should be taoken before these matter get out of hand.

███████

9-4-1*

dear ~~███████~~

There will be a time,
when none are more of
our teachers have to leave
school, and never come
back; we need hents on
what kind of teacher we
should get with all these
qualification: patience, students
need a teacher with patience
in order to know something.
(ask with out being yold at)
enjoyable learning student would
love to have a fun class;
they would learn more in a fun
class; an have a teacher giving
more than one chance of
doing something. techniques
showing them long or short
ways to solveing a problem and
Politness; teacher should be polite
to children who are polite to
them.

You Student ~~███████~~

9-4-2[*]

Dear ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓   10/3/86

I think that the new teacher that you are hiring should have a good sense of humer. And make learning enjoyable. Some one how takes time to explain the assignment. Some one how will spend extra time before or after school. A teach how used a variety of methods of learning. They don't tell you one method every time. And wont git made every time you do it a notter way then what they told you. He/she should have discipline but shouldent over do it. They shouldent git made at every little thing that hapends. He/she should do—some think at the big things. If they dont the class would git away with everything.

Sincerely

▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓

*Grade 9 Score 4   White writer

Notes

A report on two years of research based on this text analysis earned Joan Thomas the first place in the junior high/middle school category in the

annual Classroom Action Research Awards of the Institute for Educational Research, Glen Echo, IL.

[2] Two different prompts were used:

Explanatory—grades 7, 9, 11

Imagine (name of school) is hiring a new teacher. Write a letter to (name of principal) explaining the qualities of a good teacher that you think (he/she) should look for when interviewing teachers.

Persuasive—grades 8, 10, 12

(Name of principal) has asked for suggestions about how to make things better at (name of school). Write a letter to your principal telling just ONE thing you think should be changed and how the school will be improved. Your job is to CONVINCE the principal to make the change.

[3] Students seemed to find the explanatory prompt more difficult, which would explain the uneven progression of scores from grade to grade.

[4] The data show an equally large gap between male and female writers. These means from the 1987 data are representative:

Grade	White		Black	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
7	8.2	6.2	6.0	4.6
12	11.8	10.4	10.5	7.4

At every age, White females had the highest mean scores. Next, matching their grade level means, came Black females and White males. Last, 2 or 3 points below the mean, came Black males. Based on these findings, we decided to focus the classroom research on our Black male students. Perhaps the problem is not so much the linguistic exclusion of Blacks from the world of literacy, but the social alienation of males, especially Black males, from the world of school.

[5] Note that while the Webster Groves assessment gives students two hours spread over two days, time enough for them to put into practice their instruction in writing processes, the NAEP assessment allows just 15 minutes per essay. In fact, students generally write to all three NAEP prompts, back-to-back, in a single 45-minute class period. It is easy to explain the poor performance of Black students on the NAEP assessment by the fact that they lack the time to plan, draft, and also frequently edit into standard English form. On the Webster Groves assessment, however, students at least had a reasonable chance of demonstrating what they know about writing. So the low achievement of Black writers was still more troubling.

[6] The summary is based on 1986 assessment data. The 1987 assessment confirms the same patterns of errors. For details, see Tables 2 through 6, which present both 1986 and 1987 data.

[7] The 12th graders' performance was slightly weaker in both years. This may reflect the special nature of the senior year—the omission of students who have completed their English requirements, and the inclusion of those who must take one last course after repeated failures. The performance of 11th graders seems more representative of high school completion.

[8] Results from two years of work are encouraging. Among 18 target students, the first year's data show a 15% gain in holistic scores; among 23 target students, the second year's data show an 18% gain in holistic scores

along with distinctly more positive attitudes. Students were observed through classroom interaction, did the same work as their peers, and were not singled out or identified as targets.

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