LUCIA FLAHERTY

RESEARCH QUESTION –

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF PEDAGOGIES THAT PURPOSELY ACCOUNT FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY? WITHIN WHS IT IS COMMON TO TALK ABOUT DIVERSE WRITERS BUT WHAT ABOUT THE LANGUAGE OF THE EVERYDAY DIVERSE SPEAKER?

Dr Baker Bell's research suggests that pedagogies unconsciously devalue AAV and would rather 'correct' it than explore its richness. To tackle this, the study of English Language needs to provide students with the tools to explore AAV as they would do poetry, prose, drama or 'Standard English' in non-fiction.

1. FOCUS GROUP

My focus group were two Year 9 classes of approx. 22 students in each. I chose this group because they have developed analytical skills to an almost GCSE standard by the end of the year and this research project matched the skills they were learning in their current non-fiction SOW.

The data gathered from WHS' 2020 Engage survey indicated that diversity at WHS is not representative of the London demographic. This caused me to question whether the lack of diversity in the school and the language used in exam boards, caused pedagogies to not be as inclusive as they could be. This includes the use of terminology like 'Standard' and 'Non-Standard', which brings with it implications of worth, when talking about language. The types of texts used to explore diversity in English have also come under scrutiny at a national level. Texts like 'Of Mice and Men' or 'To Kill a Mockingbird' that are often taught to explore diversity in the English classroom, including at WHS, have been raised as problematic due to the White perspective of the author. The aim of my project, therefore, was to bring authentic diverse voices into the classroom and place them at the same worth as voices in the traditional literary canon.

Glossary

AAV = African American Vernacular
Although Dr Baker-Bell's research referred to the language as Black Language, I used AAV due to students' surprising lack of awareness of American dialects and languages.

2. WIDER RESEARCH

The Runnymede Secondary Schools report (June 2020)1 calls for 'an increase in the racial literacy of teachers'. This involves having the 'language, skills and confidence to utilise that knowledge in teacher practice' (Guinier, 2004). This research foregrounded the need for teachers to be given the correct terminology for talking about AAV.

Linguistic Justice by Dr Baker-Bell and an EMC conference with the author. Chapter 6 provided a range of activities that could be used in the classroom to help improve pedagogies. Dr Baker-Bell's research was conducted in poorly-funded school in Detroit and I was interested to see what similarities and differences could be found in an independent school in Wimbledon.

Dr Baker-Bell's research acknowledged three different types of pedagogies: eradicationist, respectability and anti-racist. The eradicationist approach corrects and removes 'Non-Standard' languages and has not been seen within WHS. Respectability celebrates the language but only within acceptable circumstances (e.g. Black History Month) but study of AAV is not embedded within schemes

of work. This can be seen in WHS as it is a slow transition to strengthen and improve pedagogies. Furthermore, the expectation of using and studying 'Standard' English by exam boards encourages the use of a respectability pedagogy rather than the anti-racist approach, which is the goal. This approach treats AAV as its own language with its own grammar and richness that can be used in formal settings as well as social.

3. MY RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A colleague and I taught two Year 9 classes that used anti-racist pedagogy to analyse the richness of meaning in AAV. The first lesson introduced students to the language and gauged their initial impressions. Students were then taught about the history of how AAV was created and linguistic terminology they could use to analyse the text. As a class, the texts were analysed and annotated in a similar manner to analysis of formal speeches. The next lesson then explored how language relates to power. This lesson explored linguistic profiling and linguistic prejudice that can affect speakers of AAV in their everyday lives. Students used this information to link their analysis of AAV to context.

During the lessons, I collected evidence via Microsoft Forms given to students, discussions with the teacher about the lesson and my own observations from my lesson. I wanted to compare students' initial impressions of AAV with their analysis after lessons on history, culture and linguistic profiling to see if it yielded similar results to Dr Baker-Bell's findings and analyse how students approach a study of AAV. A combination of verbal and written student feedback was needed to provide opportunities for students to express their views in different ways.

Before the lessons were delivered, considering the nature of the research, I sent a permission letter to parents in order for me to conduct my research ethically.

In order to interpret my data with rigour, I categorised it by type to find patterns in what students were saying. I then triangulated this with my own observations and discussions with the teacher to see a fuller picture of the students' understanding.

4. EVIDENCE OF IMPACT ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:

When students were given the same texts (one in AAV and the other in 'Standard English'), similar to Dr Baker-Bell's evidence, the majority of students commented on AAV being 'slang' and 'not proper' English whilst Standard English was described as 'professional', 'polite', 'posh' and even 'richer' with 'more meaning conveyed' despite the content being the same. Interestingly, a key difference was that WHS students believed AAV to not exist in the real world, rather it was how adults thought teenagers spoke.

After lessons on the history of the language, linguistic terminology that can be used to analyse AAV and

practising annotations of AAV, students' response were lengthier, more sophisticated and incorporated new terminology and contexts. Interestingly, more students used the word 'richer' to describe AAV. Most enjoyed and were surprised to learn about the history of the language and how 'correcting' language removes its culture and past. Some were able to apply the knowledge from the lesson to other languages such as the value of European Spanish over Central/South American Spanish by society.

From these observations, it was clear that students lacked a cultural capital of the everyday voice of diverse speakers and therefore needed a pedagogy that was more culturally inclusive. The key difference from Dr Baker-Bell's study was that her students related to AAV and were familiar with it as a language they lived with; this is not the case for WHS students. This highlighted a greater need to introduce spoken languages from a wider range of cultures into non-fiction schemes of work for current pedagogies to be more culturally inclusive. Students' ability to analyse the texts was greatly enhanced by having a knowledge of AAV's history and being given terminology that took their comments beyond ideas of 'slang'. The term 'slang' often reduced the quality of students' analysis by removing the value and worth of the words and dismissing the language as a product of poor class and status without exploring deeper meanings hidden within its grammar. Therefore, not only did these observations show that students' quality of writing improved by using anti-racist pedagogies but it introduced them to diverse worlds with languages they do not have the means to experience as part of their everyday life.

5. EVIDENCE OF IMPACT ON MY PRACTICE (AND THAT OF COLLEAGUES) AND WHAT I PLAN TO DO NEXT:

This is certainly something that I can add into my the The English department are considering different ways to bring diversity into the curriculum. Currently, we are mainly considering fiction written by diverse voices. This is an important step towards a pedagogy that accounts for cultural diversity but it also must come with the right tools to teach the richness of diverse languages. Rather than categorising languages that do not meet the expectation of 'Standard' English as slang, the teaching of diverse languages' history and culture is key. Similarly, providing teachers with the tools of modern linguistic terminology would empower then to analyse diverse voices in fiction and non-fiction in a more culturally inclusive and anti-racist way that goes beyond the limitations placed by exam boards. My plan is to focus on embedding the lessons used for my Action Research project that analysed AAV non-fiction speakers into the Year 9 Non-Fiction module and, from there, explore what other diverse voices could be included in addition to AAV.

There is also scope to bring this into the GROW pastoral programme as students wanted to know more about the social impact and could tie in with Civil Discourse.