

Understanding African American Vernacular English and Reading Achievement

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5 Things Practitioners Should Know



1

AAVE Is A Dialect

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a distinct dialect which differs from mainstream English (the dialect used in schools and workplaces) in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and accent. Approximately 80% of African Americans have used AAVE at some point in their lifetime.

2

AAVE Is A Difference, Not A Deficit

AAVE is a legitimate form of English which should not be viewed as an inherent risk factor for low achievement in language or reading. Rather, spoken language variation should be seen as a strength, especially when speakers are able to code switch.

3

Code Switching Is An Asset

“Code switching” describes a person’s ability to flexibly use two or more dialects or languages across different settings. AAVE users’ ability to code switch is associated with benefits in literacy skills including narrative writing and reading comprehension.

4

Traditional Assessments May Inflate Risk

AAVE is often not considered when discussing best practices for literacy and language assessment. Most standardized tests are not designed to differentiate dialects from language impairments, and many tests of literacy involve spoken language, creating potential for inflation of risk for AAVE speakers.

5

New Tests Like The DELV Are Needed

Some assessments, such as the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation (DELV), take AAVE into account. While the DELV is a reliable test and useful tool to identify language variations, more assessments are needed which take dialectal differences into consideration.