

## Review

# 'Can I get an amen?' The Black gospel church as discourse community and pedagogical model

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Too often times, educators assume that Standard English is static, that it is prone to infection from non-school discursive practices, and subsequently take on the role of "language police" by banning non-standard English from the classroom. This narrow view of 'what counts' as academic discourse ignores the organic nature of language, alienates increasing numbers of linguistically diverse students, and ultimately affirms linguistic ethnocentrism. This paper, conversely, highlights the fact that there are ways of teaching Standard English that celebrate linguistic diversity and facilitate students' buy in. One of such examples is the Black gospel church. The most successful preachers from this tradition show that language can be at once culturally relevant and "standard". Their liturgical and pedagogical style makes use of both code switching and code meshing, a new take on code switching in which dyadic linguistic lines are blurred to create new hybrid discourses that both reify and strengthen the underlying tenets of each discursive form.

**Key words:** Discourse processes, academic English, black vernacular English, code meshing, code switching.

## INTRODUCTION

*...the school's environment, the environment in which teachers were taught and trained is sometimes alien to the participatory and dramatic nature of the black church, and this sometimes results in a disconnect. If they could be exposed to that, and see it, they will incorporate it. There are some teachers who would do anything that they could possibly do to excite their students and help them learn, but they are not exposed to this - African American "gospel" preacher (White, 2000).*

For decades, educators have called for a closer marriage between school culture and the myriad cultures of the students whom they are charged with serving. The resulting approach, commonly referred to as culturally relevant teaching, is predicated upon the belief that students learn best when teachers and curriculum developers match school content and pedagogy to students' cultural backgrounds. Advocates for culturally relevant teaching recognize that there is often a cultural chasm between students' respective culture(s) and the

culture of our K-12 schools that results in some students (minority students) finding themselves alienated from the classroom and from the curriculum.

Because American public schools were designed by wealthy white men (Thomas Jefferson was a major influence on the creation of public schools in the U.S.) and had as a primary goal to assimilate foreign cultures into "American" culture (Tyack, 1976; Tyack and Cuban, 1995), the culture of schools have long mirrored white, western culture. A resulting problem from this is that students not versed in these cultural norms are at a distinct disadvantage; success in school is tied to students' ability to know and use what educational researcher Delpit (1995) has labeled America's "codes of power."

No minority group has received more attention in regards to culturally relevant teaching than African Americans. Despite a half of a century of integrated schools and a number of federal programs aimed to improve the educational opportunities for African

Americans, the Black student remains at far greater risk of school failure and dropping out than do other student groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). While educational researchers have tried to match curriculum to many different aspects of African American culture (the home, popular culture, “street” culture, music, specific aspects, etc.), only scanty attention has been given to the role that the church plays in the identity formation and ways of knowing of African American students.

This oversight is significant. The black gospel church, long a cultural pillar of African American society, has helped to shape and to maintain black society for almost three centuries (Clark, 1971; Ellis, 1996; Fauset, 1971; Hamilton, 1972; Harris, 1993; Mays and Nicholson, 1969; Mitchell, 1970; Myrdal, 1971; Walker, 1991; Washington, 1964, 1978). It stands to reason that as such a strong influence, the black gospel church might also provide educators with effective models of culturally relevant teaching.

The black gospel church has excelled where schools have struggled in teaching important life lessons to African American youth. Educators may, in this study’s perspective, find better ways to engage not only African American youth but all students by examining the pedagogy of the gospel church. At the same time, the preacher/pastor in the black gospel church routinely employs the useful linguistic strategies of code switching and “code meshing” (Young and Martinez, 2011). For this reason, the gospel sermon might also serve as a powerful example of how educators can teach students to appropriate new discourses for different purposes. Strong black gospel preachers both celebrate the rich linguistic traditions of the African American community in their sermons while, at the same time, demonstrate ways of moving back and forth from that tradition into more “standard” forms of English. In short, they show language as being contextual and interchangeable rather than static and immalleable.

To examine the pedagogy of the gospel church, the conceptual lenses of socio-linguistics, discourse communities, code switching/code meshing, and culturally relevant teaching were used. Combined, these lenses show how language usage is itself crucial to understanding, to identity formation, and to acceptance within a given context or community. Language is both a marker of identity and inclusion in specific communities (or conversely exclusion from them) and the primary scaffold for cognition (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Ultimately, we define our selves and our respective cultures and communities in part by the kinds of communication styles we use within them. Again, identity is reinforced by those with whom we associate and conversely, in opposition to those who communicate differently from us. Not surprisingly, the language of one discourse community often does not “mesh” well with others (for example the language of the church, hip-hop culture, one’s home

culture, etc. and the academic or “official” (Apple, 2000) language of schools). The discursive traditions of the gospel church emphasize however, that a given discourse community can itself bridge such gaps. Its unique melding or “meshing” (Young and Martinez, 2011) of different discursive traditions highlights that cultures and communities can use and respect their linguistic traditions while actively borrowing those aspects of other traditions proves useful.

The gospel church represents both the organic nature of language in that, language in all discourse communities is constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances and contexts to the test the seminal views of such theorists as Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Ogbu and Wilson (1990), Lakoff (2008), White (2007), and many other sociolinguists and neurolinguists; who propose that by adopting new ways of speaking, we inevitably adopt new ways of thinking and that doing so is an additive process. The gospel church also shows, often in celebratory fashion, that we need not sacrifice important parts of our respective cultures or identities when we begin to adopt new ways of speaking. One need not “act white” (Ogbu, 2004) to learn the linguistic “codes of power” (Delpit, 1995) one needs to succeed in schools and beyond. In doing all of this, the black gospel church tradition also provides a possible model for educators of students of all backgrounds, a model for learning academic discourse, code switching, and code meshing.

The author believes from his own experiences that teaching English in public schools as an educational researcher in literacy, reading, and English education and from examining the increasing use of corporate scripted curricula (White, 2012); that the discourse most commonly accepted in and required by most K-12 public schools is unnecessarily rigid and ignores the fact that language is changing at a rapid pace. It is growing to reflect the influence of an increasingly diverse population. Educators should relish this fact rather than bemoan the supposed death of “proper” grammar, syntax and vocabulary (a claim that is itself both ages old and unsubstantiated in research) or play the role of the “language police” (White, 2010). Instead, we should be examining the unique ways that new forms of language are emerging and the ways that some institutions (the black gospel church) merges or “meshes” language; to create new discursive hybrids that are more linguistically and culturally inclusive and are more dynamic and thus engaging.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Discourse communities as cultural markers

As the focus of this journal makes clear, what counts as

literacy or being literate is not the same in all contexts; rather, there are within any given language, nation, region, or culture different kinds of literacies and different ways of communicating, which are sometimes referred to as registers or codes (Bernstein, 1996) associated with different domains of life. These different domains may to greater and lesser degrees depending upon the domain itself, be defined as discourse communities.

Discourse communities are the places in which “groups of people are held together by their characteristic ways of talking, acting, valuing, interpreting and using...language” (Barton and Hamilton, 2000, p. 14). Most simply stated, discourse communities are tied to cultures and subcultures and vice versa; they serve as communicative markers of cultures. Members of discourse communities are bonded together by both overt and tacit rules. Discourse communities require “distinctive ways of ‘being and doing’ that allow people to enact and/or recognize a specific and distinctive socially situated identity” (Gee, 2002, p. 160). To be fully functioning within and accepted as a member of a discourse community, one must first know the specific conventions of that linguistic style; as well as the rules for when and how to employ such conventions (Gilligan, 1993; Bernstein, 1996).

Learning the rules of discourse communities comes most frequently from observation. As we grow older and move into new discourse communities, we learn their respective rules through what Lave and Wenger (1991) call “legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 29). We begin learning and then appropriating the norms of a discourse community while at first on the peripheries of that community, moving increasingly toward becoming fully functioning participants, as we become more fluent in that discourse. More simply stated, as we are socialized into the discourse communities surrounding and influencing us as we grow or transit to new cultures (each with its own form of discourse), we begin to adopt the unique codes and patterns unique to that setting. We thus develop unique traits of both verbal and nonverbal communication including accents, colloquialisms, slang, gestures, and even eye contact (Au, 1980), that directly correspond to those cultures and communities to which we have the most exposure or into which we most desire to participate.

Understanding the ways in which discourse communities either promote inclusion in or exclusion from particular cultures and contexts is critical to understanding the connection of language to cognition and identity both collectively and individually. The discourse communities in which we are socialized directly affect the development of our respective identities. Vygotsky (1986) was one of the first linguists to show that language serves as the requisite, scaffolding for cognition and higher order thinking. Higher order conceptual thinking is dependent upon and influenced by uses of language. His theories have since been supplemented by

both case studies and empirical research. Numerous high profile case studies, especially those involving the critical period hypothesis (Penfield and Roberts, 1959) and the rare example of “feral” children, have added credence to the theory that language and cognition are intricately linked. More recent empirical research has shown that language and discourse have a direct physical effect on the development of brain structures. Tests using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) have shown how specific neural pathways in the brain develop in conjunction with the ways we use language (Lakoff, 2008; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Linguists, sociolinguists and researchers in the budding field of neurolinguistics have demonstrated times and again that language is not merely a device for intrapersonal communication, it is essential to the brain development and to the ability to engage in higher order thinking and metacognition.

As the tool for cognition, language directly influences the ways we individually and culturally identify ourselves; we think about our world and about ourselves through the lenses that language provides. Different uses of language and different vocabularies thus bring with them new possibilities as in how we perceive the world and ourselves. Just as learning a new language opens up both the ability to communicate to a new group of people and new ways of thinking (the fact that meaning can be “lost in translation” highlights the unique ties of language to concepts), so changes in discourse even within a language can do the same.

At the same time, language (and discourse communities) provides us with a tangible sense of belonging to specific groups; it signals out to us and to others that we are members or non-members of specific settings and contexts. In this way, discourse communities again affect identity; they help us define who we are and just as importantly, who we are not. We form identities in relationship to those around us or conversely, by distinguishing ourselves against those outside of our identity circle, what (Hegel, 1979) calls “the other.” Language thus has a profound affect on us psychologically, neurologically, individually, and culturally. Combined, these areas of cognition and identity work to create the “webs of significance” (Geertz, 1973) that form the individual and his or her culture. It is no coincidence that we begin to form distinct identity characteristics at the same time as we begin to learn to speak like those closest to us. Nor is it coincidence that even as adults our identities begin to change as we become more fluent in new languages and discourses.

### **Clashes and mismatches: School and non-school discourse communities**

Because language and discourse are so intertwined with identity, adapting to new discourse communities is

seldom a painless task. Rather, the meeting of different discourse communities often results in conflict, misunderstandings and even resistance to becoming a part of the other discourse community. This is especially true when discourses are inappropriately categorized in a hierarchical fashion (Chomsky, 1956) in which one form of discourse (or one discourse community) is valued or privileged over others. Possibly nowhere is this more evident than when students from one particular discourse community enter the K-12 school discourse community. Clashes between home and school culture and discourses have contributed greatly to misunderstandings and to student alienation from school.

Heath (1983) found for example, that poor and minority students were expected to use a specific (school) form of discourse that they had never been taught and that were never explicitly addressed in schools. As a result, teachers often misunderstood the behavior and communication of minority students who had different “ways with words” than those used in schools (and vice versa). Teachers tend to correct students’ speech and behavior based on the metric that many students do not know or understand, leading to classroom conflicts and the labeling of minority students as behavioral problems or challenged learners (Heath, 1983). Even today schools too often tend to ignore the need to teach what Delpit (1995) calls the “codes of power” that is the ways of speaking and acting (school discourse) that students need to survive and thrive therein. Students are quite expected to be a part of the school discourse community from the moment they enter the school doors.

Though there is not one universal or explicitly defined school language (schools in different regions and schools serving different demographics of students vary in specific uses of language and communication), most K-12 public schools in the U.S. nonetheless share specific discursive characteristics that mirror white middle and upper-class America from which the public K-12 system originated and by whom they have long been controlled (Rury, 2005; Tyack, 1976).

The “official discourse” used in American schools (Apple, 2000, 2003) has a number of important components that, though common to white home discourses, may or may not exist in other discourse communities. More specifically, the discourse community of the K-12 American schools is marked by being formal and explicit, linearly based, agonistic, objective, and reliant upon specialized jargon and vocabulary (White, 2011); the primary rule for communicating in this discourse community is silent listening followed by organized and teacher-driven turn-taking (Elbow, 1998; Kutz, 1998; Macken-Horarik, 1996; Rury, 2005; Spellmeyer, 1998).

Similarly, teachers are taught and learn through observation to speak using only specific registers. These discursive characteristics, though essential for success in

the school, are seldom overtly taught to students. Rather, school discourse is necessary but seldom acknowledged part of mainstream K-12 schooling’s “hidden curriculum” (Apple, 1971; Longstreet and Shane, 1993; Nieto, 2001). Enforcing the explicit and tacit rules of the school discourse community has been the teacher’s responsibility, which is, to act as “language police,” monitoring students’ uses of language and when nonstandard uses are noticed, forcing them to learn and adopt school English (White, 2011, p. 45). Intrusions of non-standard English into the school environment, no matter how culturally relevant or rich that discourse might be, is almost universally looked upon with disdain; for example, public reactions to Oakland’s attempt to help its minority students learn academic English by using Black Vernacular English (Ebonics) as a scaffold (Gayles and Dennerville, 2007). Official school discourse reigns supreme and perpetuates itself by being rigid and resistant to outside influences.

At the same time, students entering school are presented with what appears to them as a zero-sum game: change (and lose) their culturally imbued and identity-forming ways of speaking to be academically successful or maintain their natural communication styles and remain academic outsiders. For many, this is an impossible choice. The continued use of specific discourse norms corresponds for many with the survival of important cultural values (Corson, 2001). Forcing students to change their native discourse patterns is for many students tantamount to assimilation and eradication of their culturally imbued and value laden communication styles (Ogbu, 1993, 2004).

Willis (1977) found this to be the case while examining poor and working class youth in an industrial English city. The students he studied held tightly to the working class language and identity of their parents at a rate inversely proportional to pressure, from their schools to change how they communicated. The “lads” even developed a linguistic code largely antithetical to that expected in academic environments. The lads’ resistance to adopting the language and rules of the school were historical precedence.

The clash of discourse norms has historically led to the oppression or subordination of one discourse norm to another; subordinate or traditionally oppressed cultures are forced to adapt to those of the dominant (oppressive) culture(s) (Corson, 2001; Ogbu, 1993, 2004; O’Connor, 1989). When viewing discourse changes as a zero-sum assimilation process, it is observed that many students choose not to try to fit into the role that educators prescribe for them.

### **Culturally responsive teaching: From code switching to code meshing**

Increasingly, educators have put forward the notion that

older ways of teaching students to use academic language by correcting non-standard uses and/or by prohibiting them from being used in the classroom at all are ultimately harmful to students. The approach of Standard English only appeals to the teaching of academic discourse just like the approach of English only appeals to the teaching of non-native English speakers that are pedagogically unsound. Moreover, such approaches are predicated upon erroneous assumptions that Standard English is itself monolithic and static (Chomsky, 1956; Halliday, 1985; Hymes, 1971; Saussure, 1959) and that it needs protecting from outside influences. It is also an approach that ignores the culturally appropriate uses of nonstandard English in countless communities and cultures (Milroy and Milroy, 1999). Similarly, other researchers have suggested that the silencing of nonstandard uses of discourse in schools is ultimately self-defeating because, rather than promoting academic discourse usage, it promotes resistance to it. Research that have in many ways mirrors that of Willis (1977), Ogbu (2004) puts forward a plausible explanation of how and why some students (namely African American students) develop resistance to academic discourse is that they see its usage in their community (in schools or out) as selling out or "acting white." Students who have been told that their native ways of speaking are substandard; who have been forced into the discourse of the oppressor (white culture via school discourse) and who naturally feel a strong cultural connection to their discursive style understandably resist such approaches and the appropriation of new discourses.

More contemporary approaches to teaching academic discourse vary. What most research-based, progressive and social-justice approaches have in common however is an acknowledgement that students with nonstandard dialects are literate, that they bring to their schooling valuable discursive experiences and that discourse communities are fairly or unfairly hierarchical in nature. Delpit (1988, 1995) for example, cites the need for minority students to learn the "codes of power" that they will need to succeed in our society. Delpit calls for direct instruction on how to use these codes of power, in doing so however, she also advocates that educators acknowledge the existence of and value in different discourses in schools and the fact that academic discourse has been socially privileged above all other forms. In this sense, Delpit is both helping students learn how to use different discourses for different purposes while also exposing false discursive hierarchies.

The key to most research-based approaches to the teaching and learning of academic discourse (as contrasted to the Standard-English-only approach officially advocated in many K-12 districts) is the notion of style shifting (Kutz, 1998) or what other linguists have termed 'code switching'. Rather than negating or prohi-

biting students' various discursive styles, this approach highlights the fact that all people in complex western societies switch registers (code switch) when moving in and out of various discourse communities. Modern pedagogues and sociolinguists view this polydiscursiveness, a term that was appropriated to describe this phenomenon in this study, as an attribute to be celebrated rather than a weakness to be corrected. Code switching to academic discourse is an "additive" (Ogbu and Wilson, 1990; White, 2007) rather than an assimilative approach. Students are not required to permanently change their manner of discourse; rather they learn to code switch into and between discourses. Kutz (1998) explains "what we are really asking students to do as they enter...[the school] is not to replace one way of speaking or writing with another, but to add yet another style to their existing repertoire" (p. 85). In this approach, students' native 'ways with words' are building blocks from which they can learn to code switch and out of academic discourse.

In more recent research in the field, the idea of code switching has been taken one step further by the idea of code meshing (Young and Martinez, 2011). Code meshing is simply put as an approach to the learning of new discourses that requires members of different discourse communities, to find common discursive ground. It is a blending of different discourses and domains into a new form or whole rather than the strict adherence to one specific discourse at any given time. It is a system in which members of different discourse communities learn from each other and create hybrid discourses, thereby creating rich new discursive varieties while breaking down both linguistic barriers and power dynamics (Freire, 1970; Young and Martinez, 2011). It also encourages the different power brokers within discursive exchanges to find common ground, responsibility for creating a new "register" or code is negotiated between all partners in a discursive exchange. This is significant. Via code meshing, responsibility for learning a new code no longer falls solely at the feet of the disempowered; hierarchies of language themselves begin to break down as those with power begin to recognize the benefits of adding to their own linguistic repertoire (Graff, 2011; Kutz, 1998; Young and Martinez, 2011). Code meshing is at its core, both a tribute to the richness of language and an egalitarian means to learning new discourses.

The notion of code meshing also pays tribute to contemporary notions of language and literacy. Recognizing that language and literacy are inherently social activities (Gee, 2002; Street, 1995) and that there are always power dynamics in discursive interactions (Bennett, 1991; Eagleton, 1997; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1982); code meshing acknowledges that meaning making is never solely or individually determined but is instead negotiated in a two-fold or cooperative way (Heidegger,

1971). Code meshing helps to deconstruct the privileging of one form of discourse, the discourse of the dominant players within the greater socioeconomic system (Corson, 2001; O'Connor, 1989; Sohn, 2011) over all others; while doing so it also breaks down arbitrarily created linguistic hierarchies (Chomsky, 1956). Finally, code meshing pays homage to the complexity of language itself. While the processes of code switching tends to suggest that effective speakers only use one register at a time, code meshing celebrates the fact that effective speakers often use many codes or registers in any communication event (Auer, 1998; Gumperz, 1977; Poplack, 2000; Young and Martinez, 2011). Truly effective speakers, especially those speaking to diverse audiences, often borrow liberally from various discourse communities.

The idea behind code meshing opens up entirely new ways of engaging across and even within cultures.

Educationally, code meshing makes increasing pedagogical sense. To reach students, we must first communicate effectively with them (an approach well-accepted for teaching English language learning students but still ignored when discussing different discourses within English). Decades of research has shown that there are cultural disconnects between the culture of mainstream K-12 schooling and the lives of minority youth (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998). These disconnects have contributed significantly to a disproportionate level of minority academic failure and dropping out (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Too many minority students do not see themselves or their forefathers, their culture, their language, their values, etc. represented in schools.

Lack of representation of diverse cultures in schools is unfortunately not surprising. Though schools have changed in many important ways in the past half century, they are also remarkable for the many ways in which they have not changed and are resistant to change (Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Fullan, 2001; White and Lowenthal, 2009). As Rury (2005) puts it:

Schools are among the most familiar social institutions people encounter in today's complex modern society. They have become an integral element of American culture. Nearly every one has attended some form of school...and for the most part, people's experiences in school have been quite similar, at least as regards the institution itself (p. 15).

As the old adage holds, if time travelers from a century ago were to appear today, the only thing they would recognize would be our schools. Even though schools are microcosms of the greater society of which they are a part, they tend to lag behind that society when it comes to major reforms and change (Fullan, 2001; Rury, 2005). Similarly, the curricula that schools use which are them-

selves increasingly corporately produced and written for a huge and generally homogeneous audience are culturally biased toward the majority school population (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

For these reasons, researchers have in recent years espoused the importance of and potential for culturally relevant teaching (Banks, 1988; Jupp, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995). At its simplest, culturally relevant teaching is a concerted attempt to make the content of lessons and the pedagogy used to teach those lessons more meaningful to students' respective cultural backgrounds. It has at its core a social justice focus; it is intended to make schooling more relevant to students who are too often underserved by K-12 schools. Progressive educators see culturally relevant teaching as a way of putting into action the theory that Paulo Friere called "reading the world and reading the word" (Freire and Macedo, 1987). These educators hypothesize that children of different backgrounds come to know and understand their world in different ways thus; educators need to employ less rigid and monolithic means of instructing them. Rather than students having to adapt to a foreign style of instruction, teaching should in some ways adapt to the student's way of learning (Jupp, 2004). Culturally relevant approaches have therefore "looked at ways to develop a closer fit between students' home culture and the school" (Delpit, 1995, p. 159). If possible, lessons (and teaching methods) should not, as these theorists posit, be removed from students' actual experiences. Effective culturally relevant teaching requires both different pedagogies and different uses of language. Sociolinguists concerned with education have highlighted "the problem of discontinuity between what students experience at home and what they experience at schooling as the speech and language interactions of teachers and students" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159). These researchers have suggested "if students' home language is incorporated into the classroom, students are more likely to experience academic success" (Ibid). By language, sociolinguists refer not just to specific speech patterns but also to communication more generally; it is an anathema to sociolinguists to examine language in a vacuum. To examine culturally relevant teaching is to examine classroom communication, especially the ways that teachers attempt to communicate with their students. A culturally relevant teacher knows her students' respective cultures, she learns the discursive styles of her students, she knows her students' interests and beliefs and she then incorporates all of these into the classroom and into her teaching style.

### **THE BLACK GOSPEL STYLE AS A PEDAGOGICAL/DISCURSIVE MODEL**

It is to one powerful example of culturally relevant teaching

that one is seldom examined as a pedagogical model; that I now turn to the discourse and pedagogy of the black gospel church. The black church has historically played a major role in the construction of identity within the African-American community (Clark, 1971; Ellis, 1996; Fauset, 1971; Hamilton, 1972; Harris, 1993; Mitchell, 1970; Myrdal, 1971; Walker, 1991; Washington, 1964, 1978). Many researchers have pointed out how seminal the church has been in the lives of many African-Americans and others have explored the ways language is used within the traditional black church. Yet other researchers have examined the effectiveness of the black gospel preacher in delivering what are often difficult, complex, and even sometimes unwelcome messages (personal sacrifice, delayed gratification, personal and cultural responsibility, etc.). Yet few scholars have examined the role that the language and discourse of the gospel church can be compared to or possibly incorporated into a workable pedagogy in today's schools. Although, some scholars have recently attempted to demonstrate how some of the practices in the Black gospel church are relatable to specific learning goals (tithing to represent percentages, literacy learning in church after school programs, health information widely available through churches, etc.) but they have not examined how borrowing some of the gospel church's rich performance-based and interactive communication traditions might serve some of our nation's most "at risk" students. This is unfortunate, especially considering that African American youth are disproportionately over-represented in remedial-level and special education school classes (Blanchett, 2006; Gay, 1993). They get reprimanded for disciplinary issues at a higher rate than their peers (Costenbader and Markson, 1994; Polite, 1995) and they are at a far greater risk of disengaging from school curriculum and consequently dropping out of school (Deridder, 1991; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Educators need to look more closely at those models that have been shown to work. The gospel church is one such model.

### **Church as pedagogy: Caveats**

Before proceeding further, it is essential to address some caveats to my thesis and to clarify the focus and purpose of what is to follow. First, my thesis that educators should incorporate some of the discursive and pedagogical styles of the Black gospel church is not analogous to prosthetizing to in classrooms. The lessons we can take from the gospel church are far from solely theological in nature; the gospel church's rich tradition of engaging the audience in what are often complex issues that transcend the gospel itself, provide myriad suggestions for practical use in classrooms. Secondly, examining the black gospel approach to preaching/teaching is also not to suggest

that white teachers (or others) simply try to mimic or copy African American preachers in their rhetorical styles; doing so would be inauthentic, it would border on stereotype and it could serve to satirize a rich historical tradition of an oppressed group.

Thirdly, when referring to the black gospel church, readers should note that the terms "black church" and "black gospel church" are not all encompassing or easily defined; there are as many variations in style and message, both glaring and subtle, within the black gospel tradition as there are preachers and churches. There are vast differences in preaching style across different regions of the country, across different socioeconomic demographics, across different denominations and across individual church leaders' respective identities, personalities, and preferences. The homiletic styles of the black church range from the fiery Afro-centric political rhetoric of Jeremiah Wright of Chicago (made famous as President Obama's friend and preacher) to the more cerebral, measured, and often introspective tones of Emil Thomas of Washington, D.C.; from the alliterative parallelism and often song-based Tellis Chapman of Detroit, to the more youth oriented and hip-hop inspired Otis Moss III of Chicago; and from the measured hybridity of southern slang and Catholic liturgical tradition of Father R. Tony Ricard of New Orleans, to the more script-based and even-toned style of Vashti McKenzie, the first female Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (who also represents the growing numbers of black women preachers and the unique characteristics they bring to the pulpit). Though, remarkable for their rhetorical styles, even these celebrated preachers change their presentation to suit the occasion, audience, and event. Thus there is no one common black church, black theology, black epistemology or black preaching style. To suggest otherwise is a gross overgeneralization bordering on stereotyping. Analogous to jazz music, the style of preaching in the black gospel church is a melding of traditions, styles and improvisation, each performance of which brings about different results.

There are however, a number of attributes common to many and possibly most black gospel churches including the churches of the preachers mentioned above, that warrant merit and further examination. The biggest among these, for the purposes of comparison to and possible application as school pedagogy and thus the focus of this paper, are the exuberant and often dramatic delivery of message, the frequent use of code switching between disparate discourses/discourse communities and the use of the jargon/colloquial speech of said communities and an expectation of audience participation in the message itself. The gospel style is highly interactive and can in some ways be defined by the centrality of the pastor in using performance to engage the audience. As one black pastor told me, "A big part of my role is to entertain, to change things up and to keep

the audience with me...even when the message is not easy to hear.” Common to almost all successful black gospel church services is the centrality of a dynamic, charismatic, passionate, and engaging preacher who captures and keeps the attention of his audience with the delivery of his message (Holt, 1999).

### **The gospel pedagogy: Language, participation, power**

One of the unique talents of the black gospel preacher is his ability to keep the audience engaged in his message even when that message may be unwelcome. His task is in many ways akin to that of the teacher; he must try to convey complex issues to a sometimes less than responsive audience, all the while keeping them engaged in the message so that they might learn and benefit from it. Both the teacher and the pastor face audiences who come from relatively diverse backgrounds and cultures (though, the teacher’s audience tends to be far more heterogeneous culturally than that of the pastor). The pastor however faces an audience whose ages, maturity levels, and experiences span the spectrum from childhood to old age (thus, his job in crafting and delivering a message is often even more complex in this respect). Both the teacher and the preacher face audiences who are increasingly accustomed to a world of constant news, instant gratification, and media bombardment and thus tend to have relatively short attention spans. In short, the preacher and the teacher face many of the same obstacles in trying to preach and teach (those obstacles that differ for their respective contexts are, arguably, balanced out). Though they share many of the same hurdles, the gospel preacher and most of today’s teachers come to the task quite differently.

The successful gospel pastor must have a repertoire of engaging and entertaining styles, a discursive virtuosity in order to get “buy in” from those to whom he preaches: “The virtuosity of the preacher is called to task, for he must get his message across (for example, why one shouldn’t ‘sin’) without offending the members of the congregation whose sins are being talked about. The preacher supplicates without first alienating the ‘sinner’ (Holt, 1999, p. 344). Ultimately, the gospel preacher is successful because of his dynamic, dramatic and passionate presentation of his material. His presentation in turn, is highly reliant upon uses of movement, gestures and body language; audience participation via the pastor’s solicitation of (and often the unsolicited feedback from) the audience and the liberal use of code switching and code meshing.

### ***Movement, gestures and body language***

The classic classroom of the past is, unfortunately, often not that different than what one witnesses today in many

schools (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Tyack, 1976; Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Analogous to the delivery styles of many white church pastors in the Calvinist tradition (Watt, 2002), teachers today still generally assume and stay in a prominent place in front of the classroom (often behind a lectern, desk, overhead projector, etc.). From that place of power, they dictate both the course of action within that classroom and students’ reactions to that action. Originally tailored on the manner in which pastors addressed their congregation (the local church often served as the one room schoolhouse), classroom teachers used to be instructed that her/his place was at the front of the class, a place of prominence and respect (Cubberly, 2004). Movement from this spot was a distraction that might hinder student listening. In the course of Learning, people then believed required quiet and passive observation. Early schools in America “were first advocated on the grounds of formal discipline that they trained the reasoning, exercised the powers of observation, and strengthened the will. The ‘exercises’ true to such a conception, were quite formal and uniform for all” (Cubberly, 2004, p. 495). Unfortunately, this tradition has lasted through generations of teachers even in spite of a century of progressive pedagogies and educational research that decry such stiltedness.

Though, today’s teachers are taught in their pre-service teacher education courses to move about their classrooms (a pedagogical strategy first made popular by John Dewey), much of the impetus for classroom movement is not to engage or to entertain students but to manage their behavior. A major form of classroom management is called “proximity control” (Barbetta et al., 2005; Marzano and Marzano, 2002). Proximity to troublesome students helps teachers maintain an on-task classroom environment; by moving throughout the room, using looks, touch, and quiet reminders; teachers can continue a lesson (without disrupting the class as a whole) while also enforcing her/his rules and correcting problematic behaviors. Though effective for its purpose, the movement associated with proximity control differs in form and purpose from the movement common to the gospel preacher. As a form of behavioral control, proximity control (like many classroom management techniques) is inherently tied to issues of power, authority, and fear (Bagley, 1913; Carlson and Apple, 1999). Students remain on task because the teacher may be nearby. This classroom management technique is akin to Foucault’s notion of the “panopticon effect” (Foucault, 1995) in which behaviors change, simply due to the fact that an authority figure could conceivably be monitoring one’s actions. The desired effect relies upon intimidation.

The effective black gospel pastor, on the other hand, is rarely still and his location seldom confined to the pulpit. His sermons are defined by almost constant motion. Not content simply to read his sermon, he acts it out in body



language and movement. The pulpit for the black preacher is less a symbol of his status as it is a tool for holding his Bible, his notes, or a place that serves as his proverbial “mark” on the stage (Holt, 1999; Wharry, 2003). The gospel pastor uses movement not as a means of controlling his audience but rather as a form of engaging them; his goal is to enliven the atmosphere and to demonstrate a passion for the content (Holt, 1999). Unlike the staid stance common to the speakers in traditional white churches, Catholic churches, most K-12 classrooms, and in college-level academic lectures /speeches, the gospel pastor’s delivery may be characterized by movement. Stirred by the power of the message itself (“stirred by the spirit”), the gospel preacher finds the pulpit confining. Similarly, the black gospel preacher’s place is not limited to the dais or platform where the pulpit rests. Rather, it is common to see many black preachers leave the stage entirely in order to be closer to his audience. In some cases, such as that of New Orleans priest Tony Ricard, the minister will not only move throughout the audience, but he will dance (solo or with selected members of the congregation).

Though the gospel preacher certainly uses proximity as a means of maintaining his audience’s attention, the purpose and structure of movements differ radically from those of the teacher. The preacher’s primary goal is to make his message more dramatic and to connect his message to the audience (Holt, 1999), not to correct misbehavior or daydreaming. Seldom does the black gospel preacher preplan his movements as a tool; rather his movements tend to be spontaneous, based upon the situation and the power of the message. He certainly has power but his power derives from his esteemed position as preacher, his personal and often mentor-like, connection to his audience, and most importantly his message itself. His power comes largely from the fact that he is a conduit to “the word,” not from intimidation.

Combined with movement are voice and song (to be discussed below) and other dramatic flares, including the use of props. Gospel preachers often use props to emphasize their message. The Bible, for example, is not just the written “word of God,” it is a useful dramatic tool. It is not uncommon for the gospel preacher to hold out his Bible as a prop, waving it in the air or thumping it forcefully for effect on the altar. The significance of the words contained therein is emphasized by the heaviness of the book itself. The handkerchief is another common but effective presentation tool. For the gospel preacher, the handkerchief not only symbolizes his focus on being well dressed, its use during the sermon comes to symbolize how passionately he is working (he pulls it out to wipe the perspiration from his brow) and the Christian belief that man must surrender himself to God’s will (the preacher is, in effect, representing man as he raises the white flag) (Holt, 1999). For the effective gospel teacher,

movement is tantamount to meaning. In the gospel church, movement of either the pastor, the choir, or the congregation is synonymous with active and engaged learning.

Finally, a central tenet to the strong gospel sermon is the suggestion that the sermon itself is derived *not* through careful planning and a script (which suggests a lack of authenticity) but from the spirit itself (Wharry, 2003). Because the African American storytelling tradition evolved orally, there is a long history of privileging the person who can recite a detailed story without excessive notes or a script (Ong, 1982; Wharry, 2003).

Improvisation and divine guidance (“being moved by the spirit”) are crucial to the message and delivery of the gospel sermon (Wharry, 2003). The black gospel sermon, to be truly successful, requires that the message itself be crafted *in medias res*, from the heart of the pastor but mediated through inspiration from above and with the input and acceptance of his audience:

Although, preachers may choose to write their sermons first, if they wish their delivery of the sermon to be accepted within traditional black churches, the sermon must have at least the ‘appearance’ of not having been finished beforehand; the black preaching event should be constructed by both congregation and preacher and it should be open to the direction of the “Spirit” (Wharry, 2003, p. 204).

Preplanned or improvised drama is unfortunately an element largely missing from many public school classrooms or from research on teaching: “There has been surprisingly little analysis of teaching as performance” (Armstrong, 2003, p. 2). Even though the K-12 classroom is in essence its own form of stage or theater and even though teaching is almost always a performance (Sarason, 1999); a performance complete with a captive audience sitting in neat rows, props in terms of white boards, overhead projectors, erasers, posters, etc. (Armstrong, 2003) the use of drama as pedagogy “remains a relatively new and burgeoning phenomenon in contemporary education” (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2011, p. 1). Ironically, though “teachers are actors” (Armstrong, 2003, p. 2) who certainly rely on improvisation (the classroom is an ever-changing context that requires flexibility), they are overtly discouraged from making improvisation and dramatics center point of their pedagogy. Improvisation in the classroom is to pre-service teachers learn in their training, akin to being unprepared. “The success with which a teacher conducts a lesson is often thought to depend upon the effectiveness with which the lesson was planned” (Farrell, 2002, p. 30) and how closely they stick to that lesson. Novice teachers, one study found, were prone to using a “traditional lesson [that] did not anticipate learners’ reactions and responses to their lessons and were not

able to make adjustments when needed in their efforts to stick to the plan” (Doyle and Holm, 1998, p. 70). So strong is the focus of teacher education on careful planning that novice teachers often enter the classroom overly reliant upon the script (Borko and Livingston, 1989; Kauchak and Eggen, 1989); combined with fears of inadequacy and pressure to obtain high test scores, there is little impetus for new teachers to deviate from their scripted lesson or attempt new or dramatic pedagogies. Despite the fact that expert teachers do deviate from their lessons, albeit in relatively routine ways (Farrell, 2002), new teachers tend to stick to detailed lesson plans (some with scripted questions and assumed student answers in addition to procedures to follow) that negate spontaneity and improvisation (Farrell, 2002).

In another irony, elementary teachers have for years been encouraged to engage students with dramatics in the form of storytelling, puppet shows, use of movement and voice, etc. while the secondary teacher has been taught to remain calm, ideologically neutral and relatively staid in her/his delivery of information; a white, classical liberal arts, Calvinistic tradition (Ellsworth, 1997; Foster, 1997; Freire, 1970; Liston and Zeichner, 1988). Again the historical tradition which has tended to carry over even into the modern era is that the secondary teacher is to avoid many of the approaches used by elementary teachers. It is only relatively recently that pedagogues have started to examine the positive ways in which teachers (and students) can use dramatics as a pedagogical and learning tool (Simons, 1997). Yet this body of research tends to be focused on the teaching of drama rather than an examination of drama and improvisation as a more general pedagogical tool. The use of dramatic pedagogy is all the more important today, an era in which virtually all large-scale curricula are corporately produced, paced, and scripted for teachers. Now there is ever less impetus for teachers to be creative. Scripted curricula too often mean “our performances are already determined for us, leaving little room for the expression of our own identity.” Scripted curricula, however, provide all the more reason to engage in dramatic and divergent pedagogies. Their one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning ignores culture, context, and nuance in individual communities, classrooms, and learners.

As we can see from the gospel sermon, dramatic pedagogy and improvisation are not anathematic to careful lesson planning, a deep knowledge of one’s material, or effectively engaging one’s audience. Instead they rely upon these things. The gospel preacher is effective *because* he connects dramatic presentation with careful planning; the use of props at precise moments, improvisation to “change up” the atmosphere when he senses that he needs to reengage the audience (Holt, 1999). He is able to deviate from his script because he knows the material so well and because he knows best

how to connect that material to his audience and vice versa. Just as good improvisation “is not totally unscripted” (Armstrong, 2003, p. 3), good teaching can and should deviate from a rigid script. Thanks to the tight curricular control forced upon teachers by scripted curricula, there is all the more reason to dramatically change (pun intended) their delivery of that information. Not doing so is ultimately hegemonic (Apple, 2000, 2003; Carlson and Apple, 1999).

### ***Call and response: Active audience engagement and participation***

As suggested above, a common attribute of many if not most black gospel churches are a connection between the pastor and his audience during the delivery of the sermon. Unlike the exemplar classroom of the past in which students silently listened (and supposedly learned) as teachers disseminated information in a one-way manner (Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Tyack, 1976), the gospel church is centered on audience participation. Unable to use assessments and unable to stop his message call out to question individual parishioners in order to gauge their understanding of his message, the pastor relies on audience participation to know that he is connecting with his congregation. Audience reaction is the primary means through which the gospel preacher knows that both he and his message are being well received. The forms of audience participation and thus the feedback that he receives can take many forms, from simple nods of the head to clapping, from unsolicited murmurs of assent to solicited shouts of praise and encouragement, from hands waving toward heaven to dancing in the aisles.

Because “people start hearing at different levels and at different points” (White, 2000), the gospel pastor tailors his message to create a sense of participation within the congregation, ever raising the “call and response” strategy (and the tone and volume of his voice) to correspond with the importance of the message itself (Holt, 1999):

It [the sermon] requires that kind of exuberance, that kind of celebration; the celebration is vocal, the celebration is exciting, the celebration can even be long, as long as the emotion has reached a point where now the mind has kicked in. “I’m hearing you. I’m hearing you because you connected with a very deep place within me that have been pricked by the excitement of the music, the atmosphere” ... It’s called participatory worship (White, 2000).

The norm in the gospel church is for the audience to be actively engaged in the message and to show that

engagement with more than just eye contact or the carefully timed nod of the head, (gestures that can and are often “tricks” used to belie the fact that one is not truly paying attention (Tauber and Mester, 2007)). The gospel parishioner is expected to give verbal assent and encouragement to the pastor both solicited (“can I get an amen?” “Are ya with me?”) and unsolicited so that he can keep moving forward with the message. Unlike both mainstream white preachers and most teachers, without verbal feedback (and/or obvious gestures from the audience such as hands in the air or clapping) the gospel preacher will often repeat information that he did not think was initially understood or he will feel unsuccessful in his sermon altogether. So high is the expectation for active call and response in the gospel church that an unresponsive audience to a sermon is the proverbial death knell for the preacher:

Silence in traditional black churches is generally not viewed as indicative of a mesmerized or attentive audience; instead it typically carries negative connotations...Black preachers who do not get congregational responses (for example, Amen, Das right, You sho’ ‘nuff preachin’) will feel a sense of separation from the audience. Either they have “lost” the congregation by speaking “above their heads” or by boring them or they are presenting material with which the audience disagrees” (Wharry, 2003, p. 205).

The call and response tradition though a long standing and integral part of the black gospel tradition (one that is oft repeated in civic meetings, in public speeches, and in other traditionally or majority black performance events) is unfortunately in direct opposition to the communication style that dominates the vast majority of K-12 classrooms. One of the first lessons of the “hidden curriculum” (Longstreet and Shane, 1993; Eisner, 1994; Delpit, 1995) that students learn when they enter the school door on their first day is the rule that they are to remain silent until directed, otherwise by the teacher. Schools have largely come to be characterized by uniformity in behavior and speech norms, turn-taking, and teacher as decision-maker (Cubberly, 2004). The well managed classroom has come to be defined by procedures and routines (Wong and Wong, 2009); these procedures however, are often not made explicit to students entering the classroom (Delpit, 1995). Just as importantly, the norms and procedures that most preservice teachers learn and to which most teachers adhere is based upon a white, western norm. Such norms are, of course, culturally based. They are therefore best understood by some students (mainstream students) while foreign to other students (nonmainstream and minority students).

Understanding the call and response/active participa-

tion form of preaching/teaching has merits for all students because it represents a more dynamic and engaged way of learning. It is inherently participatory because it is a manner of teaching that relies upon audience feedback. It is in this sense, a way of teaching in which the teacher is constantly (or at least frequently) using informal assessments to gauge student interest and understanding of the materials being presented. The level of feedback students give is an indicator of their level of understanding. By being interactive, students have to take responsibility for hearing and understanding the message. They have to listen closely for the oral of gestural clues that the teacher uses to solicit feedback (a strategy that is frequently employed in elementary school as a means of capturing student attention and bringing the class to order).

Finally, this form of classroom interaction also allows for cooperative learning; much as parishioners in a gospel church sometimes confer with each other over a particular issue (Holt, 1999; Wharry, 2003), students in a participatory environment are freer to use each other as resources for understanding concepts.

The call and response format is especially worthy of study if not implementation in classrooms, in light of the struggles of African American students in today’s classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Oral performance in research shows, much more closely aligned with these students’ cultural traditions and ways of understanding than are linear, written texts; “Because of the multiple cultural functions of the spoken word, African Americans have tended to value oral performance much more highly than do cultures that are closer to the literate end of the literacy-orality continuum” (Wharry, 2003). The widespread popularity of rap music and signifying both with their emphasis on verbal repartee, highlight the importance of the oral tradition to many African Americans. Author Toni Morrison (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994) says of language and African American culture:

It is the thing that Black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It’s love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher’s, to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worse of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language (p. 123).

Yet losing that language or at least being forced to repress or hide it while in the classroom, is exactly what tends to happen when these students enter school (Ogbu, 1993, 2004; White, 2007, 2011; White and Lowenthal, 2009). Students whose dialect, discursive styles, use of idioms, etc. differ from that expected in schools find themselves corrected when they speak. Similarly, they are most likely to hear only teachers whose

manner of speaking (and teaching) differs radically from the styles to which they are accustomed. Said one pastor about the difference in the way he preaches and the way most teachers teach:

...the school's environment, the environment in which teachers were taught and trained is sometimes alien to the concept just expressed, and this sometimes results in a disconnect...and that disconnect means that some teachers have not seen the value of that [participatory education, drama, culturally relevant teaching]. Those who are real teachers, if they could be exposed to that, and see it, they will incorporate it. There are some teachers who would do anything that they could possibly do to excite their students and help them learn, but they are not exposed to all of this (White, 2000).

Few teachers have been taught how to employ the gospel sermon style into their teaching in part, because this style differs so much from "tradition" and because it represents a minority cultural tradition. Though teachers were taught to use a more participatory and dramatic teaching styles (and were they free to use this and other alternative communication styles in their classrooms), they might better reach one of the student demographics now at exponentially greater danger of disengaging from school and dropping out, young African Americans (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; U.S. Department of Education). At the same time, mainstream (white) students might also learn a great deal about cultural traditions, about the richness of communication styles, and have their myriad "multiple intelligences" (Gardner, 1999) engaged were they exposed to the participatory gospel church teaching style.

### **Code switching, dialect and use of colloquialisms**

Discourse analyses of the rhetorical styles of effective black gospel preachers demonstrate that, as a whole, they rely heavily on code switching (the conscious and unconscious change in discursive registers that accompany different discourse communities and contexts). They also engage in code meshing in that they sometimes mix different forms of vocabulary and discourse within a given presentation or topic (Caponi, 1999). Within the gospel sermon, the preacher's vocabulary and rhetorical style often move effortlessly from the familiar to the academic, from the common to the esoteric. The ways that they use code switching tends to correspond to the specific context of the sermon. Holt (1999) notes how gospel preachers tend to start off their sermons using slang, colloquialisms, and verna-

cular. They do so in an attempt to engage their audiences by first speaking with them in an almost conversational style. There is, in many gospel church sermons, an introductory phase during which the pastor tries to relate an issue to his audience, in many cases, the sermon itself follows from a scripture reading. The pastor is, in this sense, trying to tie the message to come with his audience's experiences and beliefs (Wharry, 2003), thereby using a form of culturally responsive teaching. To do this well, the preacher first tends to engage his audience with a humorous anecdote; a story with which the audience can relate. Most often, the language used for this purpose is everyday or colloquial speech. Holt's (1999) study of the gospel style highlights the use of colloquial speech early in a sermon:

Preacher: Husbands getting' money and ain't comin' home wit it...hunh?

Audience: (*Usually female response here. Men will begin to fidget, shift arm positions, stare straight ahead, lean forward slightly, or lower the head*): Yes? Let's go, alright now!

Preacher: Getting' Hogs (Cadillacs), booze, etc. Can I get a witness? Y'all know what I mean?

Audience: You know it is. You got a witness. Oh Yes. Yes, Jesus!

Preacher: Dressin' it up when the children don't have shoes to wear and decent clothes.

Audience: (*Females will react with anger and glee in responding*): Keep goin', go on, you telling it, Preach! Lord, Yes!

Preacher: Don't you think they got a *right* to what you earn?

Audience: Yeah, Preach; take your time now, awright, awright now! (Holt, 1999, p. 334)

Rather than "talking over their heads" (that is, using academic speech or vocabulary), the pastor here presents his message "in the language and culture of the people, the vernacular [and it] must speak to contemporary people and their needs" (Wharry, 2003, p. 205). He starts by speaking in the code or register with which his audience is most familiar. He demonstrates that he is one of them. By doing so, he connects himself to the audience and captures its imagination.

Yet the black preacher's style of speaking tends to change during the sermon, assuming different forms along the continuum from informal to formal, colloquial to professional, as the spirit moves him. There is in the gospel sermon, a perceived connection between how the pastor speaks and his connection to the supernatural; as he is "moved" from relatively informal discussions of the

everyday (thereby connecting both himself and his message with his audience) to the more heady and existential, the pastor's language, vocabulary, and manner of delivery change form as well. He begins to use what Wharry (2003) described as elevated language. No longer speaking in a common dialect, his language takes a new form that corresponds with the notion that his ideas are themselves being delivered from "on high":

This perceived connection finds its most telling confirmation in sermons, where the same heightened style often emerges at the point of "elevation," when preachers are said to start receiving ideas and words from on high. Again the voice eases from a conversational to a poetic mode. Again the words pattern themselves into short, cadenced phrases. And again these phrases assume a distinctly melodic lilt, taking on tonal contours that lend the whole a chant-like character. In the sermon, these features emerge markedly when the preacher moves into "high gear" and the Spirit is said to take greater control of the preaching voice. (Hinson, 2000, p. 71)

Detroit pastor, Tellis Chapman often provides an excellent example of the change in discursive style from colloquial to using the rhetorical flourishes of parallelism, alliteration, and staccato phrasing. Having introduced his topic (continuing despite hardships) in a more casual discursive manner, he later in the sermon says the following:

Many have given up, they've given out, they've given over, they've given in, and they've given down. They've thrown in the towel; they've waived the white flag. They've retreated, they've recanted, they recall, they rescinded their resolution. And they have decided to try no more, reach no higher, dig no deeper, pray no more, search no more, all because they haven't been able to deal with failure (Chapman, 2007).

To further hone his point, the pastor often engages in code meshing; he moves freely between the "elevated language" of the climax of his sermon into a more familiar dialect or even into a new discursive register or code. It is not uncommon, for example, for a black preacher to break into song, either with his written or preplanned statements or to "break into a line of a moving song to accomplish the same purpose"<sup>1</sup> (Holt, 1999, p. 336). Dr. Tellis Chapman (above) frequently sets parts of his sermon to an improvised sing-song pattern; he moves back and forth between formal speech, colloquialisms,

and musical tones. Possibly one of the best examples of the code meshing style comes from Georgetown University Sociology Professor, Michael Eric Dyson (who also happens to be an ordained Baptist minister); Dyson code meshes throughout his public speeches. He shifts registers or codes at will, often moving from Black Vernacular English to academic English to the lyrics of a common rap or hip hop song, sometimes all within one vein of thought or one line of spoken text. The black gospel sermon is replete with examples of code meshing. Without belaboring the point, the black gospel preacher knows that to best reach his audience *and* to convey fully the importance of his message he must code switch and even code mesh. He shows through example that the beauty of language is not in stasis, but in variety. This is, unfortunately, a lesson that too often seems to be lost on teachers.

As White (2011) notes, many teachers (and especially English teachers) see a part of their job as being "the language police" (p. 45). They feel that to best teach the "codes of power" (Delpit, 1995) and to maintain linguistic purity against outside (non-white) attack, they must correct it not eliminate any non-standard English that they hear in the classroom. This attitude represents a failure to recognize that languages and discourses cannot (and should not) be hierarchically categorized (Chomsky, 1956). To do so, is to privilege one form of English over all others regardless of context. It also ignores the dynamic nature of language itself; languages change to represent the societies of which they are a part. Most problematic in terms of education, however, is that this is an approach that shames and silences students whose dominant discourse is not "standard" English. As Toni Morrison noted in an interview in *The New Republic*, "It is terrible to think that a child with five different tenses comes to school to be faced with books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which to him, that are permanently damaging...this is a really cruel fallout from racism" (Leclair, 1981, p. 123). Not only are teachers of minority children inadvertently perpetuating racist attitudes toward language and discourse, they are being counter-productive. The strict adherence to one narrow form of discourse creates in some students a resistance to learning or appropriating "standard" English even in those situations where it is necessary for survival (Ogbu, 1993, 2004; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986; White, 2007). Without teachers and others to model how to code switch and code mesh, students come to see the adoption of "standard" English as a zero-sum game rather than as an "additive" process (Ogbu and Wilson, 1990) in which one simply add another discursive tradition and ability to one's existing repertoire (Kutz, 1998). Finally, teachers' resistance to teaching code switching or code meshing (preferring instead a strategy that mirrors "English only" programs for English language learners) ignores the

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Tellis Chapman's sermon entitled "Close and Holla" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7r9Zc-Nwxg>)

changing nature of American English itself. In an ever more diverse and connected world, English in the United States if not worldwide is changing at a rapid pace. New forms of language, new vocabulary and altered rules for grammar are changing the English language as never before. Holding too tightly to one narrow form of English as the arbiter of effective communication is likely to prove, ultimately, ethnocentric and outdated.

## CONCLUSION

The black gospel church has helped its millions of congregants to overcome three hundred years of subjugation, oppression, overt and covert racism and open hostility. In the midst of all of this, the church has thrived. Understanding the significant role that the church has played and continues to play in the lives of African Americans may itself help teachers become more culturally relevant.

More importantly, recognizing of some of the ways in which the black gospel church succeeds in teaching its many lessons may bring with it, the encouragement that some teachers need to take risks within the classroom. It may help teachers both better understand their students and change the way they interact with them in the classroom. It may also help teachers begin to break away from the ethnocentrism of linguistic stagnation. Following the example of the gospel church, teachers might begin to allow and even encourage unsolicited participation, they might begin to forego strict boundaries on time and space, and they might start to create more enjoyable, inviting, entertaining and thus welcoming classrooms. If educators truly wish to engage our youth African American or not, they need to look to the myriad cultures and pedagogies that exist outside of the school doors and appropriate the strengths of these traditions within the classroom itself. The black gospel church is, I believe, the perfect place to start. Can I get an Amen?

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