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African American English and Urban Literature: Creating Culturally Caring Classrooms

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Abstract

Language and literacy are a means of delivering care through consideration of students' home culture; however, a cultural mismatch between the predominantly white, female educator population and the diverse urban student population is reflected in language and literacy instruction. Urban curricula often fail to incorporate culturally relevant literature, in part due to a dearth of texts that reflect student experiences. Dialectal differences between African American English (AAE) and Mainstream American English (MAE) and a history of racism have attached a reformatory stigma to AAE and its speakers. The authors assert that language and literacy instruction that validates children's lived experience mediates this hegemony, leads to empathetic relationships between teachers and students of different cultural backgrounds, and promotes academic success. This paper seeks to 1) dissect the relationship between academic achievement and affirmation of student culture through language and literacy instruction, 2) enumerate classroom strategies that empower students and foster the development of self-efficacy 3) identify ways teachers might weave value for diversity in language and literacy into a pedagogy of care for urban classrooms.

Keywords: Literacy, cultural care, dialect, race, inequity, curriculum, education policy

Background

Background

The history of race relations in the United States and the current state of its urban education systems are inextricably intertwined topics. For holistic understanding, one must conceptualize them not as separate issues with

a few tangential points, nor within a cause-and-effect framework that oversimplifies the situation, but rather as an ongoing, interwoven, multi-faceted story. The Black student population, which is the main subject of the following discussion, lives and learns in schools that have blatantly discriminated against it since 1866—around the end of the Civil War—when the Freedmen’s Bureau opened the first “separate but equal” schools for children of freed slaves (Butchart, 2002). The landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling 90 years later may have made it illegal to segregate Black and white students, but it did not repair one-hundred fifty years of systemic racial discrimination and social inequity, nor did it change the public’s opinion about how Black children ought to look, speak, learn, and act. Thus, the young, white authors of this paper write with a continuously developing understanding of their past and present positions of privilege within the education and socio-political system, bearing knowledge gleaned only vicariously through research and fieldwork. Central to our discussion is what we term cultural care—a process of self-reflection on racial and ethnic identity and its meaning in an increasingly race-conscious society, in tandem with inclusion and validation of the lived experiences of racial and ethnic minority voices.

The experience of students in the United States today is heavily dependent on a number of sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical factors. The result is that the experience of Black students in urban schools is indisputably different from and less conducive to academic success than the experience of non-minority students in suburban or otherwise better-funded urban schools. Black students in the United States have consistently lower standardized test scores, particularly in reading and writing (NCES, 2015), as well as lower graduation rates (NCES, 2015), higher rates of subjection to disciplinary action (OCR, 2014), and underrepresentation in honors, AP, and gifted programs (Havis, 2015). While the causes of this situation include many non-linguistic and non-literary tributaries, we posit that the achievement gap can be ameliorated through implementing authentic care and inclusion of diversity in language and literacy curriculum and policy. This is illustrated in the following research relating to linguistic discrimination and a lack of cultural understanding. The paper is organized by topic, with the first half discussing language use and the second half discussing literacy and children’s literature. These sections are each further divided into background, pertinent issues, classroom strategies, and policy discussion. The paper concludes with synthesis of how these themes can be woven into a pedagogy of care for diverse, urban classrooms.

Background

Language

The Afro-Caribbean philosopher Frantz Fanon said, “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.” Language and culture, indeed, share a similar relationship to the one between racism and urban education mentioned previously, in that one was not created by the other, but rather they were created for and by each other. The language ideal which the majority of Americans see as normal or appropriate is known as Mainstream American English, or MAE. In reality, there exists upwards of twenty-five documented American English dialects (CITE) rule-governed, linguistic systems shared by a group of people. Dialects employ their own distinct patterns which cover the five domains of language—phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, and semantics. This paper focuses on a dialect used by many, but not all, Black Americans—known as African-American English or AAE. AAE has taken many names: Nonstandard Negro English, Negro English, Black English Vernacular, African American Vernacular English, Black American English, African American Language, and Ebonics—among others—and these names reflect differences in attitudes towards AAE across various historical and sociocultural climates. For example, Ebonics (a portmanteau of ebony and phonics) was coined by Black scholars and activists in the late 20th century to replace outdated and offensive terms such as Nonstandard Negro English. Many contemporary linguists and related professionals use African American Vernacular English to describe the dialect, but this term devalues and delegitimizes the dialect by instilling a connotation that AAE can only be used in informal, ‘slang’ settings. Instead, the authors prefer to use African American English (AAE) because this term maintains the deserved status of the dialect that was created by, belongs to, and serves to describe the culture and everyday life of Black and African-American people in the United States; in the same way, other non-mainstream dialects fit the same purpose for other linguistic and ethnic minorities. Unlike other non-mainstream American English dialects, such as the regional dialect of New York City, whose linguistic characteristics are drifting closer to those of MAE (Becker, 2014; Labov, 2006), AAE is becoming increasingly distinct as a result of continued, de facto residential segregation (Labov, 2006). A 1998 figure estimates approximately eight million students to be speakers of AAE (Snow, 239), and this number is likely to have increased in the near twenty years since (Labov, 2010).

Linguistically, there are many notable differences between African American English and other American English dialects. Phonetically, there is an absence of the fricative sound /θ/ (e.g., *bath* pronounced as *bat* or *baff*) and a shift in the pronunciation of certain vowels (e.g., *I'm* produced as *ahm*). There are additional morphosyntactical differences, such as the production of *going to* as *gonna* and the absence or invariant usage of the copula 'be', and production of [ŋ] for /n/ (e.g., *He be tryna* for *He is trying to*). Double negatives are permitted in the syntax of AAE and often serve to add emphasis to a clause. The semantics of this dialect include vocabulary not present in other American English dialects, although many words or phrases have been appropriated into MAE from AAE. While AAE is characterized by the aforementioned markers, its traits are not distributed evenly among speakers and contexts (Rickford et al., 2015; Rickford, 2010). Just as no population or culture is homogeneous, nor is its language, even in terms of the linguistic markers in one user's speech.

Noting all of these dialectal differences and the rampant racism following slavery and continuing through the 21st century, one can understand the root of the stigma attached to AAE and its speakers. Those who used AAE are afforded less status and presumed to have less intelligence than speakers of other American English dialects (Lewis, 2015). The American Speech Language Hearing Association (*ASHA*) originally classified AAE as disordered speech, and many Black children who used AAE were referred for remedial speech and language instruction. In 1983, ASHA released an updated statement on their position on dialects, which reclassified AAE as a difference, not as a disorder requiring special services. While this is the official position of the national accrediting association for speech-language pathologists, licensed speech-language therapists and educators vary in how they vary in how they incorporate this reality into their practice (Levey & Sola, 2013; Robinson et al., 2009). A study conducted in 2010 revealed that 63% of teachers surveyed, the majority of whom worked in a school with a significant population of AAE speakers, believed that AAE is "not an adequate language system." (Gupta, 2010). There is controversy as to the extent to which AAE should be valued and respected in educational institutions. Educators and legislators continue to debate whether students should be discouraged from speaking all non-mainstream dialects, whether value exists in celebrating dialectal variation, and whether teachers should deliver lessons in a student's home dialect.

The first connection between dialect use and academic achievement was

found in a study conducted under President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration during his 'War on Poverty'. The study reported significant negative correlation between dialect use and academic achievement. Since then, others have confirmed and discussed the same phenomenon (Steele, 1992). Several explanations are offered:

1. Most teachers have never had to learn to use a second dialect, and thus may be insensitive to students who have difficulty learning Mainstream American English; other people in power, such as principals and administrators, are often unfamiliar with and unaccepting of ideas presented in a communication style different from their own, which presents additional barriers to students. (Fisher & Lapp, 2013).
2. Common adjectives assigned to AAE speakers include "lazy", "unintelligent", and "unprofessional" (Linguistic Society of America, 1997; Pew Internet Survey, 2000). Teachers may hold these negative impressions of students who speak non-mainstream dialects of English, such as AAE, (Edwards & Rosin, 2016) which has the potential to impact student achievement (Tauber, 1997; Green, 2002; Randolph, 2005).
3. Teachers who speak MAE as their native dialect have difficulty understanding AAE or other non-mainstream varieties of English, particularly in a noisy environment such as a classroom (Edwards & Rosin, 2016). A 2015 study by Beyer, Edwards, and Fuller further bolsters this theory, adding that there are frequent misunderstandings and misinterpretations of AAE by adult speakers of MAE in the domains of phonetics and syntax. Misunderstandings of a child's language by an authority figure are deleterious to the child's academic success (Beneke & Cheatham, 2014).
4. Established educational practices are structured in a way that does not celebrate, but rather invalidates, linguistic diversity.
5. Schools are not adequately endowing students the metalinguistic skills and situational code-switching abilities necessary to navigate dialectal differences (Edwards & Rosin, 2016).

More likely, however, the correlation is not explainable by one sole factor, but rather attributable to an amalgam of socioeconomic, cultural, academic, and linguistic variables.

Curriculum

The research described here has a strong focus on strategies to rectify the gap in achievement, which has recently entered public discourse following contentious legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. Fisher and Lapp (2013) and Edwards and Rosin (2016) incorporated contrastive analysis between MAE and the students' home dialect, most frequently AAE, into classroom instruction. Fisher and Lapp worked with high school students who spent at least fifteen minutes per day practicing speaking in MAE. Instruction of MAE was accomplished through student acknowledgment of the differences between AAE and MAE and built upon the students' mastery of their home dialect. Students practiced code-switching activities at the word and phrase level to differentiate between dialects. An important element of this method was to learn the language expected by the educational system without disparaging the language students used at home. In Edwards and Rosin's study, a curriculum was implemented to introduce preschoolers to the differences between MAE and AAE before entering kindergarten. The focus of the contrastive analysis was on phonological, pragmatic, and morphosyntactic differences between dialects, and this was delivered in what the researchers deemed to be a developmentally-appropriate manner. The contrastive analysis method yielded positive results in both study groups. Fisher and Kapp saw passing rates of African American students on a standardized test rise from 0% to 97% over a three year period during which students received two years of contrastive analysis practice. Students felt significantly more confident navigating dialectal differences. Edwards and Rosin also saw significantly higher scores compared to a control group on a preschool language measure after the instruction period, and parent feedback to the program was unanimously positive. Several other studies report similar success with contrastive analysis in the classroom (Crowell, Kolbar, Stewart & Johnson, 1974; Taylor, 1990; Harris-Wright, 1999; Wheeler & Swords, 2006; Sweetland, 2006). This method was extolled as well by Beneke and Cheatham (2014) and Rickford & Rickford (2007).

Another method to promote academic achievement is described by Allen et al.: offering enrichment classes to all students in a linguistically-diverse school uniformly increased student performance in attendance, giftedness, agency, and engagement. In complement to both of these strategies, Beneke and Cheatham (2014) promote equity and inclusion in order to create a better environment for all students. With regard to language instruction, by

adopting an attitude of sincere cultural care, teachers show respect and value for students' lived experiences. This means validating as well as fostering positive attention to student language use—mainstream dialect or otherwise.

Developing metalinguistic skills—the ability to reflect on language use—has important implications for other areas of achievement. For multi- and mono-lingual Danish adolescents, level of metalinguistic awareness was correlated with scores on a high school exit exam (Spellerberg, 2015). Metalinguistic skills have also been found to predict reading performance (Capellini, Santos & Conti Uvo, 2014). The ability to think critically and purposefully about how one uses language creates a more effective communicator in both written and oral modalities. For students, this could manifest as knowing when to switch from home dialect to the academic register—the English expected by educators and employers. Understanding and feeling empowered to use code switching has a positive effect on students' self-efficacy (Giordano, 2009), which correlates positively with academic achievement (Motlagh, Amrai, Yazdani, Abderahim & Souri, 2011; Honicke & Broadbent, 2016; Fátima Goulão, 2014). Through encouraging metalinguistic skills for students, they are better able to think about language and the wonderful powers communication endows them.

Policy

A notable example of recognition of AAE is the controversial 1996 Oakland Ebonics Resolution, in which the Oakland School Board classified AAE as an independent African language and introduced policies with the intention to use AAE as a tool for teaching MAE. Additionally, the school district called for State bilingual education funds to be allocated to developing the Ebonics program. Although, this decision was endorsed by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA, 1997) and the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) Board (TESOL, 1997), it was met with vehement opposition from the general public, politicians, and civil rights activist Rev. Jesse Jackson. In response to Oakland's decision, the state governments of Georgia, Oklahoma, and South Carolina passed legislation banning AAE instruction in schools (Georgia State Senate, Bill S.B. 51, 1997; South Carolina Bill H.B. 3145; Oklahoma Bill 1810). The concerns directed towards the resolution are addressed concisely by Weldon (2000) as primarily stemming from misinterpretation of the decision's aim—which is to provide the foundation for students to use existing AAE language skills and apply them to MAE and other subjects, as well as to reduce stigma regarding dialect use. Wolfram

(1998) posits that the intensity of the pushback is expository of American society's underlying attitudes towards linguistic diversity. In 1997, the Oakland School Board amended the resolution to clarify some of the linguistic jargon and temper the criticism by increasing the emphasis on using AAE to teach MAE. An important point of the amended resolution is that, "the Superintendent shall devise a program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills, while respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of the language patterns whether they are known as 'Ebonics'...or other description." While many linguists argue the classification of AAE as a language, rather than a dialect, the practice of recognizing and honouring linguistic diversity receives consensus in the modern linguistic community and instills cultural care into education policy; and as discussed prior, using techniques such as contrastive analysis, students can gain metalinguistic competence and confidence through incorporating home language into the curriculum.

Oakland's resolution is preceded and influenced by the 1978 federal court case *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. vs. Ann Arbor School District*, which marks a seminal decision in policy regarding AAE. Parents of AAE-speaking children at Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School sued the district for not adequately providing resources for the school's children to fluently use MAE. Judge Charles Joiner ruled that the school must develop a plan to address the children's difficulty acquiring MAE as a second dialect (Baron, 2010). The school's plan included teacher education—set to include information about how the two dialects compare and contrast linguistically, how to identify and assist student speakers of AAE, and "accommodation of the code-switching needs" of AAE speakers. Teachers were taught how to apply this "linguistic knowledge" to prepare students to be successful communicators in MAE (473 F. Supp. 1371 [E.D. Michigan, 1979]). While Oakland and Ann Arbor were influential in bringing AAE to the forefront of public and educational attention, neither led to widespread policy or curriculum changes.

There is still a need for adjustments to teacher education—to better train them to recognize what constitutes a speech or language impairment or disorder and to avoid admonishing a child's use of their home dialect. On a survey of teacher perceptions of AAE, over half of the teachers responded that their teacher preparation program had not prepared them to address the linguistic needs of student speakers of AAE and that their in-service trainings did not undertake this either (Gupta, 2010). Additionally, Samson

and Lesaux (2015) found that teachers of linguistic minority students tended to have lower rates of teaching certification and fewer years of experience than teachers working with non-linguistic minority students (Samson & Lesaux, 2015). Recruitment of skilled teachers, hiring of a diverse teaching force, and additional training for teachers of linguistic minority students need to be among the priorities for policy-makers.

Literacy

Background

Literacy, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics, is “the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential”. Our daily lives center around literacy, because the way in which we communicate through reading and writing, whether professionally or socially, is essential to our perceived success. Thus, when standardized reading scores and literacy statistics tell us that an alarming percentage of urban learners are not reading at an age appropriate level, one has to wonder what environmental and educational factors contribute to their difficulty, and whether the numbers provide an accurate, generalizable depiction of reading ability in urban schools. Scott and Teale (2009) synthesized an extensive list of unmet needs in terms of literacy instruction, described by experienced urban educators in a series of interviews regarding effective instructional practices, into several major themes: emotional support, exposure to positive environments, and validating students’ sociolinguistic backgrounds (339). They describe a number of strategies and classroom activities which incorporate their students varied interests, learning styles, and lived experiences, and take a strengths-based approach that engage and level with students. These educators, in actively reflecting on not only the needs of their students but also on their own needs in terms of cultural competence, embody cultural care and serve as paragons for the following discussion.

Curriculum

The implications of culturally relevant literature must be fundamental in literacy instruction today. Researchers have found that primary school age children prefer to engage with readings with which they personally identify (Cartledge et al., 2015). Cartledge (2015) and her colleagues found that first

and second grade subjects rated readings that involved characters with backgrounds and cultures similar to their own that made decisions with positive, affirming outcomes most highly, even after controlling for the variables not tested. It is crucial to teach students that reading is a fun, worthwhile experience from the moment they enter a classroom, whether that be in preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. In accordance with this research, if students in predominantly Black, urban schools were given engaging literature that reflected the positive experiences they have outside of the classroom, students would be more likely to actively engage in reading at an early age and have a solid foundation for literacy skills later in their academic careers, as well as an ability to “examine critically the society in which they live and work for social change.” (Cartledge et. al, 2015:401).

Having optimal literature in urban classrooms is but one step in helping urban learners succeed; another critical aspect of classroom success is provision of educator training. In a pseudo-case study, in which Salem State University partnered with a local “failing” urban elementary school, literacy coaching, reading instruction, and professional development were shown to produce an overall improvement in students’ reading comprehension (Pomerantz & Pierce, 2013.) The classroom presence of a certified literacy coach during reading instruction, as well as coach/teacher collaboration, demonstration lessons, lesson observations, exchanged feedback on observed lessons, co-teaching, open-ended questions in teacher/coach dialogue, and collaborative review of assessment data was instrumental improving teacher efficacy. In addition to partnering with the in-class literacy coach, teachers also engaged in sessions that focused on “knowledge building... demonstration/modeling, co-teaching, and observations/feedback, with co-teaching at the heart of the collaborative process.” (103). Informed by current research on literacy education, these literacy coaches co-taught with teachers over the course of two years and compared the progress of students from their baseline “needs assessment” with a post-professional development assessment.

While the overall efficacy of literature instruction improved at the elementary school, as illustrated by students’ improved test scores a number of complications and limitations arose in the process that are worth noting. The two major issues that presented themselves that were not remediable through professional development were the amount of reading time and the availability of “authentic texts”. The insufficient amount of time devoted to reading may be attributed to any number of factors: the pressure on teachers to teach to a certain curriculum, the strong emphasis placed on science and

mathematics over literature, or an honest lack of knowledge regarding the critical nature of sustained periods of reading in the classroom could all play a part. A shortage of authentic texts—meaning texts not written for the explicit purpose of aiding language development—is troubling because while culturally relevant texts are better than inapplicable Eurocentric texts, the latter is better than nothing at all. Instruction using authentic texts have been shown to improve literacy outcomes and engage and excite students at a personal level; these can be inexpensively integrated into classroom instruction with some imagination in the form of newspapers, magazines, etc. (Honeyghan, 2000). If the majority of reading occurs in functional contexts, then these authentic sources ought to be incorporated into reading instruction at a young age. However, these two obstacles have a common source: a dearth of resources, both physical and philosophical, in the urban school setting. Teachers are not given the tangible resource of authentic texts to enrich their students' literacy knowledge, nor the abstract resource of time with which to instruct in a sufficient way. Similar university partnerships with urban middle and high schools delivered promising outcomes, but were met with similar systemic inadequacy (Meyers, Cydis & Haria, 2015) (Davis, Mitchell, Dray & Keenan, 2012). This is not to minimize the gains made by students; if anything, the gains are reason to prioritize this approach and explore creative solutions to the present limitations. This may seem like a costly addition to school systems whose budgets are already stretched thin, but university-led programs open up the potential for graduate students and volunteer faculty to provide these services free of charge in a mutually beneficial partnership, in which schools gain access to research-based practices and universities can expand their students' knowledge with experiential learning.

A nascent area of research and controversy in literacy pedagogy is the metalinguistic import of teaching texts in MAE to students who speak AAE. Edwards and Taub (2016) note that MAE is the *ideal* form of American English spoken by most white teachers and the dialect present in most books found in public schools (76). A problem discussed earlier manifests itself here; considering most African American students speak AAE when entering school, a lack of culturally relevant texts that include AAE as a primary language perhaps contributes to the difficulty in achieving appropriate literacy skills. A potential remedial strategy lies in the contrastive analysis method discussed earlier; pointing out differences between the language of the texts and students' spoken dialect allows students to increase phonemic awareness and in turn, literacy skills. Phonemic awareness—the ability to blend and

segment individual speech sounds within words—is inextricably involved in reading and spelling words. and “the best single predictor of students’ future reading success” (74). Because of the aforementioned differences in phonology between MAE and AAE, Black students who speak AAE are naturally at a disadvantage from the beginning of literacy instruction should the educator not take this difference into account. Edwards and Taub’s study concluded that students who speak AAE have lower phonemic awareness, and thus a higher risk for reading failure; however, it is important to note that perhaps this is not a disadvantage that stems from a “deviation from MAE”, as the authors put it, but rather a dialectal difference that teachers can acknowledge and build a curriculum around to improve students’ metalinguistic skills, literacy achievement, and foster meaningful connections to reading material.

Within all of the statistical information and research-driven work that goes into understanding urban education, it is prudent to remember that young children are the subjects of these studies and experiments, and caring genuinely for their mental well-being is what is important above all else. Soo Lee and Jonson-Reid studied the effects of self-efficacy—that is, people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance on reading achievement in an urban third grade class, and found, unsurprisingly, that a significant relationship exists between student’s perceived ability to succeed in reading tasks, and successful performance (85). The authors noted that the statistical significance between the self-efficacy and achievement variates was relatively small as compared to previous studies of the same nature, but attributed this to their subjects “already being at risk for reading failure” (86). Whether or not this statement is erroneous or misleading seems less important than the implications the study has in that building up children’s notion of self-efficacy could be an environmental factor that pushes children in the right direction in terms of literacy achievement. The authors point to social workers as the primary facilitators for this environmental shift, but teacher-child relationships and high quality instruction are also cited as being potential factors that boost academic success (87).

Policy

With all of the complex and abstract barriers complicating literacy instruction for students who speak AAE and other non-mainstream English dialects, it is easy to deem the situation too difficult to remedy by policy alone; however, a common sense, interdisciplinary approach is an attainable

goal that could have measurable, long-term benefits. Rickford and Rickford (2010) provide a convincing argument for the potential role of sociolinguists in the development of new, linguistics-based curriculum. Sociolinguists have known for years that students who speak dialects that deviate from MAE often perform poorly on literacy and language tests (Wolfram, 1976), but have rarely taken the initiative to write or influence curriculum policies. A collaboration between these professionals and educators in urban settings could birth a new body of work that is not only fresh and intriguing, but also desperately necessary for educators and students alike who do not have the knowledge or skills to reconcile this disparity. The possibility and intention behind this research is that lawmakers then create a formal training process for the new generation of teachers entering our linguistically diverse urban schools.

Conclusion

The documented importance of sociolinguistically relevant instruction and student self-efficacy across language and literacy pedagogy lends itself to the overarching concept of cultural care—roughly defined as a combination of reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of both educators and students in terms of cultural competence, and recognition of the validity and vibrancy of the diverse mosaic of experiences present in urban classrooms. Only when educators create spaces in which they acknowledge their privilege, demonstrate that they value the lived experiences of their students, and take action to make meaningful connections despite perceived barriers, can classrooms become caring environments in which learning, rather than cultural mismatch, is the primary focus. The common threads among all of these articles involve seemingly intuitive concepts that circle back on themselves: socioeconomic disadvantage and scarce resources in urban settings put children at risk for below-average literacy achievement; these disadvantages divest children of equitable opportunity for academic success and subsequently, for high-wage jobs; thus perpetuating cyclical, generations-long poverty in cities. Two possible solutions are, 1) high-quality instruction with a focus on evidence-based education and, 2) mental health and policy changes that give educators tools and opportunities for professional development in cultural competence. Despite research that indicates their importance, these two areas receive very little focus in our curriculum-centric education system. One can only hope that researchers will continue to educate administrators, and reform will be

initiated from the inside out, so that bright, young, urban learners will begin to rewrite the narrative of the failing city school system.

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“Whitridge Ave Mural” Taken at 401 Whitridge Ave, Baltimore, MD on October 7, 2017

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