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As state-wide writing assessment rapidly becomes a reality for all fifth, eighth, and tenth grade students in Michigan, schools near the time when the successful completion of state-mandated high school proficiency tests in writing loom as necessary for state endorsement on a student's diploma. Based on the *Assessment Framework For The High School Proficiency Test In Writing* (1993) developed by The Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MCTE), the tests which will determine a student's being endorsed as proficient in writing are currently under construction and will soon be piloted in schools around the State.

Such tests raise a number of serious concerns. One of the most serious centers around whether writing tests can be designed and scored which fairly, validly, and reliably assess students in an unbiased fashion in regard to gender, ethnic or racial background, socio-economic or religious background, native language, sexual orientation, and intellectual or physical abilities. Indeed, MCTE has taken a strong position on this issue and has insisted that "it is imperative that the proficiency examination validate the experiences of all Michigan students" (*MCTE Position Statement*, 2). To this end, Ellen Brinkley, former MCTE President and Project Manager of the group of educators who wrote the *Assessment Framework*, reports that a subcommittee has been established to "ensure a fair assessment for students for whom English is a second language" and that another has "considered the needs of special education students" (6). Additionally, a Bias Review Committee will meet in early 1994 to review the test and its prompts.

Still, I remain deeply concerned. Put simply, my question is: Given the evidence of negative attitudes toward non-standard dialects of English widespread among English language arts professionals, can an assessment instrument and procedure fairly score the writing performance of students whose home languages and dialects are other than so-called standard English?

Official documents of the English language arts profession consistently assert the value of linguistic diversity. The 1974 Students Right to Their Own Language Proposition adopted by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Council on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) affirmed students' rights to their own patterns and varieties of language, "the dialects of their nurture," and stated that teach-

ers must "respect and uphold the right of students to their own language" (Allen 144). In 1987, the NCTE condemned "any attempts to render invisible the native languages of any Americans or to deprive English of the rich influences of the languages and cultures of any of the people of America" (Daniels vii). NCTE is on record as "affirming America's multilingual heritage" (Daniels iii). The 1989 CCCC National Language Policy, while it asserts the necessity of enabling all students to achieve competency in the language of wider communication, so-called standard English, demands respect for the many languages "which have contributed to our rich cultural and linguistic heritage." The CCCC policy "supports programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in the mother tongue will not be lost" (Smitherman 116).

Despite the official positions of the NCTE and the CCCC, the largest organizations of teachers of English language arts, a great deal of negativism toward dialectal variants of English remains among English language arts professionals and in the literature of the profession. Linguist Roger Shuy has found that most of the teachers he interviewed consider non-standard speakers to have a "limited" rather than a "different" vocabulary. Too often their teachers conclude that these students' lack of school vocabulary and lack of school grammar indicate an inability to make complete thoughts (Kutz and Roskelly 59.) In a *College Composition and Communications* article written in the mid 1980s, Thomas Farrell argues that "students whose dialect doesn't include the full inflection of the verb 'to be' (e.g. Black English Vernacular speakers) are unable to discuss states of being rather than actions and end up being incapable of abstract thought" (Kutz and Roskelly 59). Larry Andrews reviews what Gere and Smith have called widely held "Ignotions About Language," all of which disparage non-standard variants of English, and states that many of these "Ignotions" are commonly found and reinforced in the grammar books used in the schools (128-130).

My recent analyses of high school American literature anthologies (Harmon 1993) found non-standard usage and dialectal speakers consistently linked with humor and with words like *substandard, shabbiness, corruption, queer talk, mispronunciation, mangled language, deviation, and peculiarity*. Both the 1992 and the 1994 editions of McDougal Littell's *Literature and Language* twice incorrectly assert that "standard English is language that is appropriate at all times and in all places" (317, 946). Closer to home, a 1993 flyer advertising the upcoming presentations at the October MCTE Conference may have betrayed unconscious language biases as it titled one session "Coping With Dialect Diversity in The Writing Classroom." Fortunately, no session by that title appeared on the actual MCTE Conference Program.

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In a professional climate so often chilly toward non-prestigious variants of English, can test writers produce a test format that can fairly score Michigan students' writing proficiency? In a recent conversation with me, Victor Villanueva, well-known sociolinguist and three-time speaker at November's NCTE Convention, voiced skepticism. When I asked him if he thought it possible for a state-wide writing assessment to be unbiased against and non-exclusionary of dialectal speakers and writers, he replied, "I don't think so; I really doubt it" (personal conversation, 1993).

If Villanueva's doubts prove accurate, large numbers of Michigan's students will be assessed unfairly and denied a state endorsement in writing as they graduate. Primarily affected will be those non-standard speaking students whose writing retains phonological, syntactic, and semantic features of their home dialects. Although grammatically correct within the student's dialect and often rhetorically powerful, features of students' home dialects may render their writing incompetent or non-proficient. Incompetent in

which contexts? Non-proficient for which purposes? Three times the sample scoring guides provided in the *Framework* document speak favorably of a writer's use of "standard writing conventions" (44,49) and negatively to "errors in usage, sentence structure, spelling, or punctuation" which repeatedly distract the reader (44). Will dialectal carryover and dialectal usage be scored as "error" even when grammatically correct within the home dialect and even when rhetorically effective? Will dialect interference render a writer "incompetent"? If scorers demand an adherence to "standard writing conventions" is it possible that moving and powerful writing might be deemed unacceptable? It is true that the above phrases taken from sample scoring guides appear late in those guides, their placement perhaps indicating their degree of importance to the evaluation of the piece of writing as a whole. However my experience as a four-time table leader at Advanced Placement readings and my ten years of experience as a reader of Advanced Placement examinations in English have taught me that a reader/scorer's attitudes toward language use and users play an important role in the scores essays receive, even though readers have been taught to score "holistically."

Ironically enough, while the scoring guides in the *Framework* document call for writing that displays standard writing conventions, some of the sample test prompts could, feasibly, invite dialectal responses. One prompt, which fails to acknowledge the distinction between spoken and written language use, reads: "You have received an award for your writing and have been asked to *speak* [my emphasis] to a sixth grade class about how you work as a writer. Write your speech" (29). The prompt calls for spoken English delivered in a rather informal situation, a situation in which an informal, dialectal delivery might prove more effective with some audiences than one in standard written English. Other prompts advise writers to think of a respected adult as an audience for their written pieces. In many cases, a writer might choose a respected adult who finds written discourse with dialectal usage not only appropriate but also highly persuasive. How will this kind of response to such prompts be scored and assessed?

The standard response of test writers to concerns and questions like those above has been to establish Bias Review Committees to screen test prompts for overt or hidden ethnic, religious, gender, or social class prejudice. Clearly these committees are both needed and important, especially if they review not only the test questions and prompts but the language of the test itself and the scripts (containing test-taking directions) written for test administrators to read to test takers. In doing so, reviewers should remember that, according to linguist Walt Wolfram, "the more distant a person's speaking style is from the language used in testing, the greater the potential for task interference from the language register of the test" (240). Additionally bias reviewers need to be alert to ensure that "assessment strategies are focused on underlying language capabilities in realistic communicative contexts" (246). The nature of the "realistic communicative contexts" designed by test makers and presented as prompts to students must be carefully scrutinized for sociolinguistic bias.

Yet bias review as discussed above offers only partial, though important, safeguards against test bias. Such review will be useful and valid only to the degree of language expertise held by the reviewers and the degree to which reviewers' recommendations are acted upon. In addition to bias review, several other measures are necessary if dialectal speakers/writers are to participate equally and to be scored fairly in state-wide writing assessment:

1. The State of Michigan, Michigan Department of Education, Michigan Council of Teachers of English, and other involved parties must directly confront the critical question of just what the upcoming tests are to assess: the ability to competently write correctly in standard English or the ability to communicate effectively in writing. The distinction between the two should be obvious to persons who have read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* or Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, all powerful works written in dialects radically different from contemporary standard English.

Competent and effective writing does not always require the use of so-called standard written English.

2. Sample papers used during the actual test reading to exemplify the various scores to be assigned to papers by readers as well as those samples which appear in published materials which detail or explain the Proficiency Test in Writing must include among those samples rated "proficient" papers by students who write effectively in dialect or experience dialect carryover in their writing. Among those papers scored "non-proficient" must appear some papers which demonstrate correct standard English usage but are deficient for other reasons.

3. The words "standard writing conventions" or "standard English" must disappear from all published materials relating to the test and from test leaders' discussions of the tests' scoring at scoring sites as readers receive training.

4. Readers should be chosen from diverse populations and areas of the state.

5. Most important, and, admittedly most difficult, readers and scoring site leaders grading essays which determine Michigan's evaluation of a student's writing proficiency must be selected carefully partially on the basis of their language awareness, sensitivity, and expertise. Readers' training, a task not likely to be achieved in a few short hours of generalized training, must ensure a thawing of the chilly attitudes found toward dialectal language use apparent among too many English language arts professionals. This training should work to dispel language "ignotions" and prompt movement away from the language policing that too often reveals evidence of negativity toward dialectal language use and users.

It is in bias review in conjunction with the five measures above that my hopes lie for a writing proficiency test which does not disadvantage large groups of the student population due to their home languages and dialects, an examination that reliably, validly and fairly "validates the experiences of all Michigan students" (*MCTE Position Statement* 2) as it assesses their writing. And it is in the careful implementation of these measures that I find potential for fostering real growth and learning about language among all English language arts professionals in Michigan associated in any way with the assessment tests, a valuable, if perhaps unanticipated, spin-off.

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