A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF A SIXTH GRADE CLASSROOM: PRELIMINARY ETHNOGRAPHY [1]

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Every fall as I entered my new school classroom, I was accompanied not only by excitement, but also by fear. What was this new environment going to be like? Who would the teachers and students be? As a researcher entering a new classroom setting, these same feelings and thoughts came into my mind. My observations in a West Philadelphia public school over a limited period of time served as the basis for the present study. In 1972 Dell Hymes stated in reference to his descriptive theory of a sociolinguistic system, "What is presented here is quite preliminary - if English and its grammarians permitted, one might call it 'toward toward a theory'" (Hymes 1972: 52). This paper represents my own preliminary ethnography. To describe the classroom I observed I will borrow from Hymes' schema of the components of speech events, using the mnemonic code SPEAKING. The issues that arose through the observations regarding research methodology, teacher/ researcher expectations and attitudes and particularly those relating to standard and non - standard English usage, and patterns of communication in the classroom and community, are also the concern of this paper and will be discussed in light of relevant sociolinguistic literature.

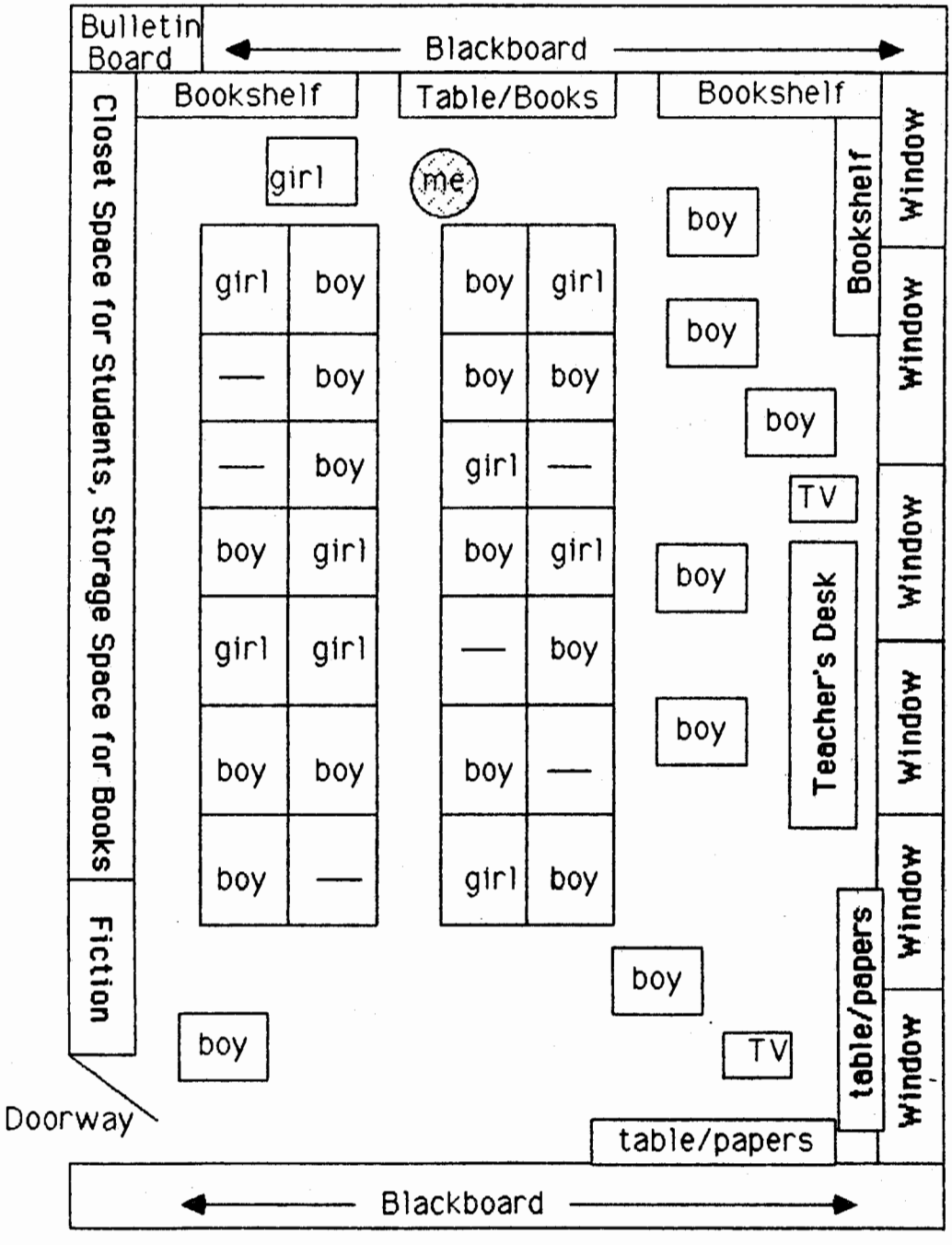
The following description is based on fieldnotes written while observing the classroom. Each time I observed I sat in the same place in the back of the room near the students. Although no tape recording was done, every effort was make to write down exact language used. Both my location in the classroom and dependence on written notes

imposed constraints on the description, i.e. the way I saw and heard what went on in the classroom. For instance, by sitting where I was, I was able to hear conversation between a group of three students, an opportunity I would not have had while seated in the front of the room, in a corner, or at the teacher's desk. Seated elsewhere it is possible I would have overheard and seen different activity. Had I tape recorded, I would have picked up exact exchanges and timing that I might not have captured because I was trying to write, listen and look simultaneously.

A description of the setting (S in SPEAKING)[2] provides background information about the time, place, and physical arrangement of the classroom. I observed the class on four separate occasions within a two week period, for a total of six hours. Three of the observations took place right after lunch and recess until the end of the school day; the other time was for the two hours before lunch, but afterwards the class left school for the rest of the day. Aside from the obvious constraints of the limited time spent both in the classroom in terms of actual hours and the short time span, the observations occurred during the last three weeks of the school year. Although three of the observations did take place at the same time of the day, what went on in the classroom varied considerably as a result of the unusually flexible scheduling due to the time of the year. Interspersed between my visits were an all-school activity day, 6th grade graduation rehearsal at the nearby middle school and a class trip with parents to Baltimore. These activities necessitated discussion which took time away from regularly scheduled social studies and English instruction. However, those discussions were also of interest linguistically and educationally.

The observations took place in the only sixth-grade classroom in a West Philadelphia public school; one other class in the school was a 5th and 6th grade split class. The school was located in a low-income and working-class[3] black neighborhood, and because of this, qualifies for Title I funding and possibly other federal monies; I did not inquire in detail about school funding. The room was located on the second floor of a five-story building which was built approximately forty years ago. One entire side of the room

was windows and overlooked the blacktop playground. The layout of the classroom appears below.



The seating arrangement was such that the desks were placed touching the others so that students were sitting next to and directly across from one another. The seven additional seats were in a row or up front near the chalkboard. Aside from fluctuations because of absenteeism, the seating appeared to be assigned. I did not know the rationale behind the seating and surmised that the individual seats were given to students that could not handle the close seating and were too easily distracted. I would need to ask the teacher specifically, however, for her reasons. There was an abundance of books and stacks of papers in the room. I did not read any of the textbooks, but I did notice the presence of a few math books for grades four and five. With the problem of below grade level achievement of intercity school children commonly known, I was not surprised to see the materials, but this sparked my interest in the extent of their use and the number of students that are one, two, or more years behind.

My knowledge of the participants (P in SPEAKING) in the setting was highly differential; given my prior professional relationship with the teacher and little familiarity with the students prior to the observations. The teacher (I will refer to her as Betty) was a black woman in her early fifties who had been teaching 6th grade at the school for approximately twenty five years. She was a kind, caring, devoted teacher who took her work very seriously. The following two examples will illustrate these qualities. Although Betty was supposed to retire this year, because of her involvement in a research project with researchers from the University of Pennsylvania (of which I am a part), she decided to postpone retirement for another year; she wanted to continue her participation and witness her students' improvement. Also, when I asked her before class one day how she was, she mentioned that she had felt sick earlier that morning; her husband had tried to convince her to stay home since she was not well, but she told me she had said to him, "I can't. It's not the kind of job that you can just not go to."

It seemed that Betty's sense of commitment to her students was heightened because she lived in the neighborhood surrounding the school where the students also lived. She

had been an integral part of the home and school community, having personal and professional relationships with parents and students over the years. Interestingly, Betty has had many relatives or even parents of her current students as former students.

In comparision to the teacher, I knew very little about the students in the class. There was a total of 31 students, although there was never an occasion when all were present in class (1st observation: 24 students, 2nd: 25, 3rd: 30, 4th: 23). Betty had mentioned that one of the students had been absent for over three weeks. All of the students were black. There were twenty-one boys and nine girls[4]. The students appeared to be like any others their age. The girls were for the most part, physically more developed than the boys (many of whom were a foot or two taller), and they flirted with each other during class and when lining up to leave at the end of the day. The students came from low-income and working class families, although I do not know exact numbers of each. Of the students I knew something about through my other research involvement, one had a long history of academic, emotional, and behavioral problems and switched off living with a grandmother and neighborhood couple. Six of the students that will be going to middle school next year have been identified by the teacher as "at risk" - they will graduate from elementary school, but without additional academic and parental support before the transition and afterwards, they will be at risk of future school failure. I did not specifically pay attention to observing these students, as I was interested in learning about the class as a group first, given my time limitations.

The ends, purpose in terms of outcomes and goals (E in SPEAKING), were many, as is the nature of elementary education itself where one teacher teaches a variety of instructional areas. In all four observations the "conventionally recognized and expected outcomes" (Hymes 1972: 61) of the classroom were education of the students in the subjects social studies, English (spelling and reading) and math. The goals were for the students to learn these subjects from the teacher and with extra help from a reading aide, and ultimately, to be on grade level. This goal has been only partially met, as the teacher

admitted that on the average, the students leave 6th grade one year behind. She did not specify achievement in particular subject areas.

That these first more conventionally recognized outcomes and goals of the classroom were recognized by the students as worth achieving were questionable, given what I observed. In many instances, the students exerted little or no energy or involvement in their studies. One of the most illustrative incidents occurred when the teacher presented her lesson using a worksheet the students were to have completed on the Constitution. Seven of the twenty-four students did not have the paper or any paper in front of them. The majority of the students that I could see had not done the work. The teacher and student dialogue was even more revealing, particularly because of the lack of the second:

> Teacher: Tamika, how do you think the Constitution establishes justice? What is justice? (silence) Maybe that's why you don't know. Where is your paper Jamal? (brings it out from inside his desk) Think of a synonym for justice. What is justice Lonnie? (silence) John,what is justice? (silence) (student enters room late) John, I'm still waiting. Maybe if you listen you will hear. Nicole, what is justice? (silence) I see I have to add to your homework.
> Tosha: Freedom.
> Teacher: Tosha says freedom.
> April: Peace.
> Teacher: You think it is peace.
> Dwayne: Rights.
> Carl: Security
> Teacher: Justice? Maybe you have to look up security also. Yolanda, what did you write? Did the Constitution give us justice? Let's hear what you have (silence) Yolanda?

The lesson following this one which dealt with the subject of senators and representatives, preceeded similiarly, with students not answering the teacher's questions. Also, during other observations, particularly in social studies and reading, when the students were supposed to be reading and writing by themselves the majority were not doing this. Either they were staring somewhere else, looking at each other, or working for a few moments, stopping and working again. During the few minutes when some of the students were at the front of the board doing math problems, a girl and boy sitting across from each other were playing with razor blades, shaving their pencils.

In addition, the purposes of this classroom were for the teacher to teach behavior for both inside and outside of the classroom, dress, and hygiene; presumably she did this with the intention that this conduct will carry over into their future school and personal experiences. Betty kept reminding the students during individual working time and when copying from the board: "Back to work, not back to talk," "I know I don't hear talking from people who couldn't get their homework completed," and "Can you do that with your pen and pencil and not with your lips," "Use your pencil and not your lips." Regarding an upcoming trip to Baltimore, Betty stated:

> We are not going anywhere to run wild. We are going to see, eat, and enjoy and you don't have to act like you are going out of a cage. If your parents are not going, you are my responsibility and you will behave. You will practice when you go to ---(name of middle school), going and coming back in an orderly fashion.

Immediately before the students walked to the middle school to practice for graduation, Betty told them:

> You won't go through the neighborhood like you haven't been through the neighborhood. Walk orderly to--(school) and back. I will see how you walk on stage...your behavior will be beyond reproach, perfect.

Betty also reinforced specific dress in the classroom. When one boy walked in the classroom wearing shorts, she immediately said, "Don't ever come into my classroom like that again. You come here to learn, not play." The student went and got pants from his bag to change. On another occasion, when a boy was sitting and not working Betty said, "Get some work done William. You came dressed for play. Dress for work from now on." He was wearing a tank top and shorts.

Finally, Betty saw that part of her purpose as a teacher was to remind and inform students about personal hygiene. During my observations the weather was hot and Betty said to the students:

> It will be very warm the next few days. Make sure you are ready to meet the public. To be close to people you have to prepare ahead. You shouldn't be ashamed to have a reminder. You have to use Dial in the morning.

To fully describe act sequence, which is composed of both form and content (A in SPEAKING) for all four observations would be an entire paper in itself (as each of these

components could be). In this section, therefore, my focus will be on content, which "enters analysis first of all perhaps as a question of topic and of change of topic" (Hymes 1972: 60) and attention to the form of a number of these topic switches. Below is a description of the topics covered in each observation.

Observation One

Social studies was being taught, and within the broader subject fell the topics of "We the People," discussing answers to a worksheet on the Constitution, and answering questions out loud based on a booklet about senators and representatives. As the end of the school day neared, the last minutes were spent on students' copying homework from the board for the next day. Announcements about an upcoming trip and school candy sale followed.

Observation Two

Similiar components to the first day were observed, only in differing order. First, focus was on upcoming class outings: filling out permission slips to go to the middle school for graduation rehearsal and discussion about the trip to Baltimore with parents. Social studies followed, with students reading and writing in workbooks at their seats; the topic was "Understanding Plains Indians" in their textbook Western Hemisphere--Latin America and Canada. During this time the teacher wrote down the homework for the next day which the students copied into their notebooks. The end of the day was marked by collecting the textbooks and reciting a poem aloud as a class in preparation for their graduation ceremony.

Observation Three

Students were doing math problems at the board as I entered the room. This was followed by a five-minute recess; upon return they completed unfinished or incorrect work. Spelling followed, with students reciting words from a list as called on by the teacher, explaining what could be problematic with each, and copying new words into notebooks. Reading was next. Students read in their seats or were called on to join a group at the front table with a reading aide, or to a group with the teacher which met at a group

of student desks, the teacher sitting on top of one of them. (Since I only saw this occur one time I was unsure about the grouping and which students, if any in particular, got small group attention.) Students wrote down homework assignments for the next day before going to lunch. This practice, which in the previous two observations marked the end of the school day, was appropriate given the fact that after lunch they went to the middle school for graduation rehearsal for the rest of the day.

Observation Four

This differed from the previous three observations as there were no distinct subjects taught and the homework assignment was given out at the beginning of the period. The following time consisted of a discussion about the all-school activity day the next day: what it would consist of and how they would participate. (During the discussion I noticed a few students putting their knapsacks on their desks for the remainder of the class time. This signaled to me that they thought the atmosphere was less formal and that they were 'ready to go.' Did this have to do with the fact that the homework assignment was given out first, followed by a discussion about the activity as opposed to starting with a lesson?) The importance of having a library card and using the library in the summer was discussed, followed by filling out a worksheet about the card catalogue in their school library. The day ended with a distribution of class and individual school pictures.

In getting the students to switch from reading and writing alone to another activity the teacher used direct commands:

> **Stop working now so we can collect papers and books. Pass the papers first so they won't be left in the books. Make sure you have the proper heading on the papers.**
>
> **Close your books and go back to your seats. Terrance are you finished? (Terrance: No) You should be writing on your desk, not on your lap. (12:30 bell) Close your spelling books and pass them to the front of the room.**

These forms were used without possible opening comments such as "ok/ um/ well/ will you (please), it's time to.." (before the verbs) which would have softened the switch. The statements seemed appropriate, however, given the fact that during the previous topic the teacher had had to continually watch over and often prod the students to work. It is as

if she was ordering them to do something, which was in contrast to some of their 'not doing.'

The switches in topic from spelling to reading, and from one topic in social studies to the next, were less abrupt. The smoother transitions could have been in part due to the fact that the topic changes themselves were not drastic and the teacher had already had their attention in a joint class activity. They appear below:

> Let's go over the list from number one. (Students all repeat together the spelling list.) First, copy the words in your notebook and do pages 129-130 before you do the reading assignment. I will work with a few of you.
>
> If you're smart, you'll underline the words on paper (from worksheet). So, let's do the social studies homework that dealt with the Constitution. Get it out quickly. You had three questions from the booklet on representatives and senators.

After the class had gone through the spelling list, the teacher had the students go over it together from the beginning, using the inclusive 'let's.' Perhaps doing it all together as a final repetition was a signal to them of spelling wrap-up. This was the only spelling lesson I observed but it could be a patterned activity. Betty then moved from spelling to the reading assignment within the same sentence. Her directions were explicit and short, moving the class ahead. She assumed the students knew what it was they had to do. In the second quote above, the teacher also used 'so, let's' to signal the move to the next activity. Her directions sounded somewhat ambiguous to me because the previous work had also dealt with the Constitution. When she explicitly talked about the senators and representatives it became clearer. By looking at the students it was difficult to determine if they did not know what she was directing them to, if they were just moving slowly, or if they did not even have the booklet; the end result, no matter what the reason, was that few students brought out the booklet to work from.

The key, the "tone, manner or spirit in which an act is done," (Hymes 1972: 62) in the classroom observations (K in SPEAKING), was particularly striking because of my prior relationship with the teacher. Outside of the classroom, without her students, Betty spoke in a relaxed and friendly manner. Once she told me that in the classroom she was tough on the students and kept on top of them. During all of the observations she exhibited this

manner in her speech, which can already be seen from previous examples. She was serious about school and conveyed this sense to the students through her speech:

> I'm going to return the spelling papers from Wednesday. From the looks of them, half of you don't do your classwork correctly and half of you don't study. There is no excuse for it; some of you only had one or two words right, some had no words right. You spend too much time on nonsense and not enough on study. Andre, I don't need your noise. School is not over so study is not over.

Betty seemed to believe that things were better left said, rather than unsaid. She was strict, but did not raise her voice, which remained in a steady tone:

> What's your problem young man. You're not working. Whatever your problem is, put it away before I have to take it away.
>
> You fellas are gonna have to stay after school and practice sitting quietly. Put the chair in, Carl.

Betty used the strength of her directness to get her point across:

> Teacher: How many of you didn't do the homework? (four hands are raised) Shrugging of shoulders is not a good answer. Why didn't you do it? (to one student) You know there was a reason. You had something in mind. Eric, why didn't you do it? (murmurs: left the book...) Jamal, why didn't you?
> Jamal: Left the book.
> Teacher: You didn't get time to pack the books before dismissal? Yeah, everyone does. I am very angry with you first of all. I will check for your homework in the morning. There will be no recess until you do your homework.

While Betty's tone was mainly serious and controlled, her manner could also be caring and humorous at the same time. In response to a girl's question which I did not hear (as she was in the front of the room and spoke quietly) Betty replied, "I have no way of knowing, sweetheart." She told the students regarding their upcoming trip to Baltimore:

> "Dress for the weather. I prefer girls don't wear shorts. I haven't decided yet if I will wear pants or a skirt. I'll let you know."

and, when talking about transportation:

> Teacher: They are nice buses.
> Student: Are they air conditioned?
> Teacher: They're air conditioned and with a bathroom. It's the only way to travel! (laughs)

As an outsider to the classroom, the overall impression Betty gave through her tone was that of a mother who knew her children very well and wanted the best for them:

> Be sure to go to sleep early enough, you have a habit of being late for everything.
> Plan on being here by 7:30 a.m....Lay your clothes out the night before so you will be ready.

While describing the component of key for the teacher was relatively straightforward, doing the same for the students was difficult because of the lack of verbal data from them. Most of the students responded to the teacher in short sentences and spoke too softly for me to be able to hear to write down their comments. Generally, their manner in response to the teacher was serious and respectful. Speaking to one another, their tone was relaxed and often appeared to be in a joking, friendly manner. An example appears below from the spelling lesson:

> Teacher: Derrick next...
> Derrick: Admitted.
> Teacher: What might you forget to do?
> Derrick: *D* well, maybe...
> April: You might forget the double *ts*
> Teacher: Yes. Daniel?
> Daniel: Approval.
> Teacher: What might give you problems?
> Daniel: The *ps*.
> Teacher: Repeat the word.
> Class: Approval.
> Teacher: Number four, Lateya.
> Lateya: Backward.
> Teacher: What kind of a work is that?
> Lateya: Compound.
> Teacher: Notice you say 'word' but the spelling is different. Next word...
> Student: Conceal.
> Teacher: This might give you problems. It sounds like an *'s'* and is *'ea'* which gives a long *'e'* sound.

The description of the component instrumentalities, composed of channel and forms of speech (I in SPEAKING), allowed me to focus more specifically on the students. Regarding channel, my knowledge of written and non-verbal modes was limited. The students did writing from their seats (during social studies, spelling, reading, the worksheet on the card catalogue) but I could not see any of their papers from where I was

sitting as I was a non-participant observer. While I was waiting in the room before one observation, however, I did look at a worksheet from one student. I was able to quickly jot down one of the tasks before the class arrived:

> Describe the main character
> Val love animals and what she would always do is feed them.

Although this answer was only one small sample from which to judge, it signalled to me the disparity between the spoken and written mode, standard and non-standard English specifically, that could be present for a number, if not all, of the children. Did she write as she spoke? For that matter, how **did** she speak? Was the answer in her dialect or an attempt to write in standard English, albeit imperfect standard English? Without exposure to her language I did not want to venture a specific analysis beyond asking questions.

My description of the non-verbal mode was confined to broad generalizations because I spent my time writing notes and looking up as much as possible to observe goings-on in the classroom; I knew that much was going on that I was missing. During discussions about upcoming trips and class activities the teacher would not stand up in front of the room to address the students, but rather, would sit on one of the empty student desks. This change alone signalled a different kind of interaction than the usual lesson. During silent reading and writing time the students often would look at each other, making faces or staring, in order to distract or get each others' attention. They would mouth words but not speak outloud, and squirm in their seats. I also saw two students closing their eyes. I could see many of the students were not working, but it was difficult to know the meaning of their non-verbal signs; they could have been bored, lacked the attention span and interest, or in the case of sleeping, could really have just been tired. I did not know what their lives outside of the classroom were like.

Because of the constraints of the study, my exposure was mainly confined to the transmission of speech. The mode used by the teacher and students was through spoken speech, as opposed to other forms such as singing or humming. During my observations

the spoken mode operated the vast majority of the time. This may not have been representative of their school day as a whole or during other times other than the very end of the school year. It would be premature for me to draw conclusions about any operating hierarchy among modes without a greater amount of information on a variety of channels.

It was also difficult to determine the forms of speech, the verbal resources in this particular community, given the small number of instances I was able to gather. These instances served more as windows through which to peer into what forms might be available to the teacher and students and which they might use, rather than as a basis for specific conclusions. It appeared that in this classroom there were a number of varieties present: standard English, non-standard English and the contact between the two. From what I observed of the teacher, both outside and inside the classroom, she spoke only standard English. It is possible that she also has available to her other varieties that might include nonstandard forms which she uses in the neighborhood or in other situations. On only one occasion in the classroom did I hear her use language which to my midwestern ears signaled influence of a variety:

> (to a student) You call across the room one more time and you and I are gonna have a fashion, like a ruler against your bottom.

The teacher made herself known to the student instantly; presumably to him this did not sound foreign at all. The comment may have been seen as a solidarity move to both of them.

The other examples I picked up through the observations or from overhearing conversations were from the speech of the students. They were few in number and had a form noticeably different from standard English. This led me to hypothesize that many, if not all of the students spoke a dialect of standard English, Black English. I would need more data from a greater number of students to specifically determine just how many spoke it. In two cases, the students spoke using Black English forms:

(during spelling)
Teacher: Number seven.
Student: Confess.
Teacher: Read again.
Student: Confessed.
Teacher: If the 'ed' is not on the word I will mark it wrong.

(during reading small group) The teacher asked a student a question which I could not hear. He answered, "They pump out water." She replied, "Yes, they pumped out water." Two other isolated examples appear below:

Girl to boy: I ain't neither... you get that foo fo free?
Boy to girl: My sister she gonna wai fo me... how you do that? How you know?

Also, in expressing their excitement about going to Baltimore two boys gave each other a handshake and one said, "We gonna be bad." Finally, as the students were leaving class one day I overheard one boy say to the other, "You took my transformer, nigger." Certainly, one would have to be from the same ethnic and speech community to be able to say something like that to another person and have it seem appropriate.

In another example, it is probable that the student's speech and the teacher's reaction could not be attributed to use of a dialect (it might have only reflected common practice among teachers), but it did point to Betty's interest in encouraging standard English grammar in the classroom:

Teacher: What does the Constitution do?
Student: Bring justice to our lives.
Teacher: I hear part of the sentence. I heard the predicate. What is the subject?
Student: The Constitution helps bring justice to our lives.

Through my observations, norms of interaction and interpretion in the classroom (N in SPEAKING) became recognizable. The norms reinforced the differential roles of teacher and students, with the teacher in control of language and activity. The class was typical of the 'chalk and talk' classrooms where the teacher spoke and asked questions of the students (that she already knew the answers to), and exerted her authority through control of turn taking. In addition, the teacher spoke at least two thirds of the time, if not more. To speak when the teacher was speaking was worthy of a reprimand and perhaps the students were conditioned against doing this:

(to a student) Don't spoil good work by doing something foolish like talking at the wrong time.

The students listened to the teacher, or if they were not particularly paying attention, as it often appeared, they were for the most part very quiet.

The aspect of silence was particularly noticeable because it was present each observation and not in response to anything the teacher particularly said, such as yelling at them to be quiet. The students appeared to be conscious of this norm. For instance, when they were supposed to be doing seatwork by themselves, they often exerted opportunities to 'cheat' and break the silence, but only by attracting each other's attention through careful motions or whispers when the teacher was not looking.

In addition, I observed many instances where the teacher publicly criticized the students, beyond their not paying attention or talking. In this classroom the belief system seemed to include the possiblity, the right, or even the responsibility of the teacher to openly (as opposed to in a one to one private discussion) confront students' shortcomings. Even though I observed the classroom only four times, these incidents occurred regularly and a pattern became apparent. The teacher directed her comments to different students, and not to any one or two students in particular that she may have been singling out. Examples will illustrate this classroom norm. The teacher commented on specific language problems that the students should have been able to master:

(Troy said one of the spelling words and she added...) Your spelling goes up and down. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad. This might give you problems because it's a long word, but not if you study the syllables.

Student: What is t'is?
Teacher: T'is, it is. You're in sixth grade and you don't know about contractions?

(Teacher looked at student's completed permission slip and said to him) How do you copy the name of the school in all small letters? It is the name of a particular place - (name) Middle School. I should give you an 'F' in language.

The teacher also exposed a student's more general lack of responsibility:

> (The phone rang, the teacher spoke, hung up the phone and said...)
> Teacher: Corey, did you return your library book yet?
> Corey: No.
> Teacher: We keep asking you. When are you bringing it in? The librarian is very annoyed with you.

The teacher included the word 'failure' when talking about a student's lack of academic achievement:

> (Pointing to a boy that is not paying attention) You need strict attention to your book. Your papers were consistent failures."

In another instance, the teacher gave a lengthy and confrontational lecture directed at one student while the others listened:

> Carl Wilson, I haven't heard from you. What determines how many representatives there are? (pause) You're not aware of anything. Monday, the talk about the Constitution should have perked your antennas. Carl, you have nothing on your desk, you're here every day. Very lazy. Mrs. Latham was scolding you because you put forth no effort to do anything. You don't do your regular work and then you expect to go on to the next grade.

The final component, genre (G in SPEAKING) was fairly constant in the classroom as the majority of the time it could be classified as lectures or instruction by the teacher. Other genres I observed were joking and storytelling by the teacher. Once, when she got off the telephone, she said, "These are the days that try men's souls. I don't know what it does for women" (none of the students responded). Also, when the teacher spoke about the upcoming all-school activity day, she warned the students about horseplay in the school yard by way of a story. She told them about a young man, a former student of hers, that was running around at a similiar event years ago and had an accident that left him with a large scar on his face. The story was powerful because the man was someone they knew from the neighborhood. The genre of poem was evident once, as the students recited a poem as practice for their graduation ceremony:

> Wisdom
> I stand most humbly before man's wisdom
> Knowing we are not really wise
> If we were we would open up
> the kingdom as the -?- of skies

Although I only heard isolated sentences of the students' speech, I imagined that had I heard the students (outside on the playground or at lunch), I might have heard other genres associated with Black English such as 'jiving' or 'sounding'.

Discussion

On a general level, these observations brought to life concerns associated with doing research that I had otherwise identified with intellectually through readings. The concept of the observer's paradox was a constantly nagging question for me. William Labov (1972:181) stated the situation as such: "...the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation." I wondered if the classroom 'talk' was any different when I, an obvious 'outsider', was not present. Additionally, I could not help but wonder if my being the only white person in the classroom had any effect on what went on and what was said. There were moments during the last two observations when I thought that the students were not altering what they did or said because of me; I sat near the boy and girl playing with the razor blades during the lesson and the boys that passed notes to one another and whispered during reading time. Of course, these students could have been doing it for my benefit, but it seemed as if they were unconcerned with my constant notetaking and observing. I came to realize more than ever how necessary it is to do **participant** observation over a considerable period of time. This allows one to integrate into the classroom and become more of an 'insider' than by non-participant observation. By being present over time, it would have been possible to gather more data from a number of topic areas in the classroom and from other settings such as field trips, the playground and lunchroom.

I also saw the importance of interviewing both teacher and students as part of ongoing work in a research setting, but that it could be potentially problematic, once again because of my ethnic identity. As Nessa Wolfson (forthcoming) pointed out in reference to Labov's work, "... the ethnic identity of the researcher can pose a very serious research

bias." I would hope that through participation in and study of the classroom over time, I would be able to gain the trust of the people and knowledge of the rules of speaking even though I have a different ethnic identity. Obviously, both the informants and I would know that our ethnic identities differ, but ideally it would be viewed as a given in the situation and not a major obstacle in the research process.

With regard to biases--to be avoided where humanly possible in doing ethnographic research--one specific incident happened that made me realize how I, as the researcher, entered the classroom with my own unconsious biases. When the teacher announced that she was going to hand out the school pictures that had been taken of the students both individually and as a class, I looked around the room and put down my pencil. Within a minute or two she finished handing them out and I suddenly realized that, unlike what I remembered from my own childhood experience, not all of the students in this class received pictures. As a matter of fact, only a few did, and the others were asking to see what the pictures looked like. For whatever the reasons, monetary or otherwise, I discovered that even something as ordinary as school pictures in this classroom had a different meaning from what I had expected.

Another relevant issue was in regard to researcher and teacher expectations about the students. As I mentioned previously, I had known beforehand that a number of students had been identified as 'at risk.' While I specifically chose not to pay special attention to these children, I would have, had I been able to spend a greater amount of time in the classroom. I would have done so only after getting to know all the students first. To have selectively observed in this study, I would have been afraid of observing and seeing certain students in a particular light that would have colored my view of their linguistic and academic abilities. Two studies have spoken to this issue. In the first Seligman, Tucker and Lambert (1972) found that teachers evaluated students according to factors such as how they looked and their voice quality, rather than judging more academic and creative talents of the children; Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) pointed to the dangers of self-fulfilling prophecies, i.e. teachers' expectations coloring actual treatment and evaluation

of students. Interestingly, by the end of my observations, I realized that had I not known which of the students were the '6' at-risk children, I would have had difficulty picking them out. From my limited observation, it appeared that many of the students in the classroom exhibited similiar patterns such as being quiet and seemingly uninterested, speaking infrequently and for short periods of time.

As I realized the impact in general of researcher and teacher attitudes, I became interested in Betty's own attitudes about her students and how they were manifested through her language. As I did not ask her directly about any of this, my only clues were from what I observed in the classroom. I was curious about how she viewed standard and non-standard English (presuming once again that some, if not all of her students spoke Black English), and how they should be handled in school. Wolfram and Fasold (1974: 178) stated in reference to non-standard speakers that many teachers of Black children even, those from the same communities as the children, see it as their duty to eradicate non-standard forms from their students' speech. Betty appeared to share this belief, as she corrected the students' non-standard forms, but did not talk about how they were 'bad' or 'wrong.' It seemed that Betty would not adhere to the eradicationist position that schools should encourage children to replace their home dialect with 'correct' English at all times. Instead, Betty's behavior seemed to exhibit the bidialectal approach, where the teaching of standard English in school is important, but the use of non-standard/home dialect is also recognized as appropriate for other situations. For instance, when the students were talking to one another informally and non-standard forms were used, she did not correct them or ridicule their use. As a member of their community, I think Betty wanted as Peter Trudgill (1983:75) said, "...to help the child(ren) to develop an ability in code-switching - switching from one variety to another when the situation demands." In the classroom and with homework (an extension of the classroom) standard English was appropriate.

Although I have no conclusive evidence of the role standard vs. non-standard English has played regarding the success or failure of the students in Betty's classroom, it would seem that it was highly significant. Sociolinguistic literature (Labov 1969, Trudgill

1983, Burling 1973) mentions the educational difficulties of lower-class and working -class children due to language differences between home and school, difficulties also alluded to by Betty when she mentioned that her students were at least one year behind. Betty seemed to be acknowledging, and possibly answering the problem by her frequent urging of the students to work, as well as her public treatment of individuals' failure, and correction of non-standard forms (i.e. "you need to succeed academically and this entails learning standard English").

I could not help but think that it would have been easy to view this class linguistically in a negative light. Had I been a researcher particularly in the 1960's, I could have easily cited it as evidence of Basil Bernstein's theory of restricted and elaborated codes, the language forms used by two classes, working and middle. In this case, I did not have middle-class speakers to compare them to, but the students' speech appeared to be similiar to the restricted code, "...concrete, visual, full of short simple statements, commands, questions" (Wolfson forthcoming). Also, although what I observed was not as extreme, the students lack of participation reminded me of what Burling (1973:91) described, "Visitors to schools in lower-class neighborhoods often report that the children use language very poorly. In extreme cases, the children are said hardly to speak at all."

The portrayal of classroom speech above does not take into consideration this classroom as its own speech community, with rules of speaking and patterns of communication that are worthy of discovery and analysis. Studies in the ethnography of speaking have shown that what goes on in the classroom needs to be seen in its own terms, in light of the cultural and linguistic framework of the group both inside and outside of the school. For instance, Heath's work (1982) in Trackton and Roadville revealed that that which was vieded by white teachers as deficiency on the part of their black students in school, amounted to differences in questioning patterns in their own community versus the white community and school. Similiarly, Philips' work (1972) in the Warm Springs community addressed the Indian children's seeming reluctance to participate in the

classroom; one of Philips' findings was that, "...Indian children fail to participate verbally in classroom interaction because the social conditions for participation to which they have become accustomed in the Indian community are lacking" (1972:182).

The present study represented only a preliminary ethnography of this classroom in West Philadelphia. Ethnographic work similiar to Heath's and Phillip's could be undertaken in the classroom and in the community from which Betty and her students come, in order to better understand the meaning and patterning of what is observable in the classroom. The relationship of standard and non-standard English usage and possible differing communication patterns of home/school could be ascertained. Then, the culturally situated knowledge of these linguistic issues could be used to better educate teachers and students, and hopefully improve student interest and achievement.

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[1] This paper was written for the course "Sociolinguistics in Education" taught by Cheri Micheau.

[2] Spiegel's description of the setting for her study has been shortened in the interest of space.

[3] I am following William Labov's (1969: 181) use of the terms : "lower class families are typically female-based...working class there is typically an intact nuclear family with a father holding a semi-skilled or unskilled job."

[4] I will also use pseudonyms in referring to the students.

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