

Don't Bite Off da Skreets

BY MONICA McDONALD

I have loved English since I myself was a student; I also love my heritage and my culture. As an African

American teacher, these two loves have not always mixed. In school I've learned that traditional English is not only socially acceptable but necessary for success in life. At the same time, however, slang has been an integral part of my life and my community. This language is also a part of my students' lives.

But this does not mean that my slang is necessarily my students' slang. Since I am only ten years older than my eighth and ninth graders, there is not much of a generation gap between us and yet we speak as if we come from different planets, not different educational backgrounds.

My classrooms are filled with the proverbial "yo," which sounds like "Joe," to represent an answer or a hello. Young men shorter than me consistently call me, and other females, "short" and beautiful girls are referred to as "dime pieces," although I fail to understand why a woman would be compared to a dime as opposed to a quarter or a silver dollar.

My students don't have cars, they have "rides" or even "whips." The noun "club" no longer means an object for knocking some large animal out or any other of its five or six dictionary definitions. It means any party on Friday night.

In struggling to get my students to converse in

standard English, I have had to reach across our two worlds. Somewhere along the way, my "Be quiet, class" has turned into the less socially acceptable, "Yo, listen up." And when I speak that way, they *do* listen up. Words like this can close the gap between teacher and students. They see me as someone who can move from the formal register into their language. I become more acceptable, and they pay attention.

But as a teacher, being accepted doesn't mean I am liked by my students. In many instances, I am disliked because I assign "too much" work. But when I use their language, we do communicate. I can get my students to do more work if I say "Yo, let's get this done. Do ya'll understand everything? Are ya'll skraight or do I need to go over it again?" Invariably they laugh, and usually turn in the work.

My students need to feel comfortable using slang; it is part of their culture and community. And they need to survive at home. But they also need to adapt the language of the larger community so that they can pass standardized tests, graduate and get good jobs.

The truth is, they and I are both still learning unfamiliar languages. When I hear a sentence like, "He carried you, yo," I wonder how it comments on the insult that has just been uttered. I've learned that if someone "bites" off of someone else, one person has stolen another's idea or word, and that is not "chill." While my mother would have encouraged someone to slow

down by saying "stop," my students prefer "chill out."

Student often end up at each other's "cribs," a word that suggests to me an environment inhabited by three-month olds, not hulking adolescents twice my size. I'm frequently told by agonized students that they have too many other things to do besides my homework. "You're trippin', Ms. McDonald. All this work?"

I like to respond: "Well, I've been tripping over my feet all my life. What makes you any different?" This usually exasperates them, but often they smile as they say, "Naw, yo, you just don't understand, yo." Or they may they just shake their heads. But usually the work gets done.

Bridging the cultural gap is not only necessary for successful teaching, it also makes teaching "hip" students more interesting, even fun. My students need to establish their own identities in the community, in the "skreets" and at home. They need to know that it is okay to speak slang, but that at school, on the job or with people different from them, they will need to speak standard English. They need most of all an understanding of with whom to speak which language. Once students figure out that not everything they say is bad, they grow more confident and more willing to learn. They instruct me daily in their special language, and I learn as much from them as I have learned in any English class I have taken. Besides, all this knowledge is necessary, yo.