African American Dialects and Schooling: A Review
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African American dialects (variously known as “nonstandard English,” “nonstandard Black English,” “Black Vernacular English,” “Vernacular Black English, “Standard Black English,” “Negro Speech, and so on) constitute a controversial issue in American education. This paper is an attempt to review the research debates about the nature of African American dialects, with an emphasis on the attitudes and behaviors of teachers in shaping the achievement behaviors and school adjustments of African American students.

Because the issues surrounding African American dialects are so vast, and because the state of knowledge concerning appropriate interventions is so limited, my focus is on providing practitioners with a general introduction that highlights the key principles in teaching children who speak an African American dialect. My focus is also limited to the situation in the United States, because the relationship between schooling and African American dialects outside of the United States (e.g., the Caribbean, Central America, and South America) is at this time beyond my research.

It is important to contextualize this discussion however, within the broader reality of the educational crises confronting the nation concerning the education of African Americans and other ethno-linguistic minority groups. Namely, African Americans and other linguistic minorities (particularly the Spanish-speaking) are plagued by a number of grim statistics in scholastic achievement. These include low test scores, high dropout rates prior to the completion of high school, low university entry, and high university attrition. These educational failures accordingly, have been linked with vulnerabilities to poor self-concepts, unemployment, the reproduction of economic inequality, also the plethora of “social plagues” of today’s African American community, including crime, drug abuse, homicide/suicide, intergenerational poverty, and severe threats to physical and mental well-being. Although African American dialects play a role in these broader social, cultural, and economic realities, they are only a part of a complex matrix of factors that create and sustain the victimization of African American and other ethnic communities.

Note also that I have selected the phrase, African American dialects, in favor of the other terms in order to avoid the unfortunate color symbolism associated with racial labeling the United States. In addition, African American dialects convey the fact that the subject of my research centers on a continuum and those discrete categorizations (e.g., Black English) are inevitably misleading. This latter point also applies to any operational definition of Standard English, which I view as an “idealized standard’ that masks tremendous regional diversity even within this “standard.”
This paper is an attempt to present an overview of the research controversies surrounding African American dialects and a review of research on teacher attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. The discussions present a number of emerging principles concerning teaching pupils who speak African American dialects and concludes with a call for the total restructuring of American education.

Research Controversies

Racial Biases

Because of the omnipresence of White racism, much of the social sciences, including education, linguistics, and psychology has revealed clear White racial biases concerning studies of African Americans. Many of these biases are revealed for example in theories that concluded that Africans were genetically inferior to “Whites”.

In the context of language, early researchers concluded that African American dialects were reflective of a simplistic cognitive style and of low intelligence. Linguists and educational psychologists are generally convinced that Africans are inherently inferior to European Americans, and this inferiority was reflected in their patterns of thinking and language.

These biases, as absurd as they may seem, were consistent with the complex ideological system that supported racial inequality in the United States. Unfortunately, these biases remain well-entrenched in the public and educational arenas today. The contemporary entrenchment of these ideological biases are revealed, for example, by (a) the public’s willingness to “blame the victim” for failure in school and in life, and (b) researchers’ focus on individual-level predictors (such as motivation or self-esteem) and the well-established tradition of “controlling for race and class” in studies of educational achievement.

A number of researchers have enumerated the varieties of African American dialects. Although frequently classified in different ways, most researchers now recognize that African American dialects fall on a continuum with a vast range of similarity or difference within “Standard English.” Region and urbanicity are also strong determinants of specific African American dialectical characteristics.

Researchers have also identified the “bi-dialectical” nature of the African American population. That is, many speakers of African American dialects speak both “Standard English” (or close approximations thereof) and one or more varieties of African American dialects. These “varieties” of African American dialects are closely tied to socio-economic level, region, urbanicity and level of residential integration and mobility.

In some respects, it could be argued that some African American dialects “meet or exceed” the sophistication of “Standard English” by the use of intonation, syllable stress, and nonverbal cues to modify meaning. I have, in emphasizing the rich oral tradition of Africans and African Americans, recounted in some detail the verbal and nonverbal rituals that may be found in many African American communities. Others have noted the importance of nonverbal cues in
conveying or modifying the meaning of the spoken word. A final illustration of the complexity of African American dialects is revealed in the recent cultural phenomenon known as “Rap,” where African American language forms are created in sharply syncopated rhythms and rhymes.

In sum, research on African American dialects has concluded that they are a legitimate variant of English that operate according to their own rules of syntax, grammar, and the derivation of meaning. As such, they should be accorded an “equal status” relationship with “Standard English.” Yet, studies still indicate that teachers, and the public continue to harbor negative attitudes and beliefs about the nature of African American dialects and their role in school and society.

**Teacher Attitudes**

**Manifestation**

The attitude that a teacher has for a student, demonstrably affects the student’s attitudes and behaviors. After years of research and score of studies, educational researchers have documented the processes underlying the “self-fulfilling prophecy”.

In essence, the **self-fulfilling prophecy** is a process where a teacher’s expectation of a student’s performance is communicated to the student in a way that affects the attitudes and behaviors of both student and teacher. The result is that the teacher’s expectation (for example, “Johnnie can’t read”) becomes true. Teachers who expect failure typically demand less, provide less information and feedback, and generally engage in conscious and unconscious behaviors that produce failure. Teachers who expect success typically have high standards and demands, provide a great deal of input, and give students consistent feedback and positive rewards.

Most of the research in this area has demonstrated negative expectations, and related behaviors, based on **race**. The expectation of lower academic achievement potential for African Americans is so pervasive, it might be considered an axiom of American education. Some recent evidence also suggests that African American males are the **most** at risk of these pessimistic teacher attitudes and behaviors. Many researchers have also reported that teachers in their studies gave the “least” amount of praise, and the “most” amount of verbal and nonverbal criticism, to **African American males**.

Some studies have also demonstrated that teachers have generally more negative attitudes toward linguistic minority children. I have found that teachers demonstrated lower expectations for speakers of “Vernacular Black English” than for speakers of “Standard Black English” (the differences between these two dialects are also strongly related to social class). It is easy to imagine that African American dialectical styles are a contributing factor to the generally negative attitudes and expectations that teacher have for African American students. It is also easy to imagine that race and dialect may interact in their relationship with teachers’ **attitudes**.

The most troubling aspect of teachers’ attitudes and behaviors is the effect these attitudes may have on students. According to one theoretical formulation, African American children develop a sense of “conditional failure” as a result of negative scholastic experiences (especially
interactions with teachers who harbor negative expectations) and become willing participants in their own failure syndrome. Research indicates that performance deteriorates in response to failure which may account for the increasing achievement disparities between Whites and African Americans with increasing grade levels in the U.S. today. It is worth noting, as well, that many of these negative expectations and behaviors are characteristic of African American teachers as well as many dominant culture teachers.

In a landmark Supreme Court decision, it was found that the Ann Arbor Michigan, school district failed to provide an equal educational opportunity to African American students because of their failure to take into account the pedagogical implications of African American dialects. Indeed, it was noted that the teachers explicitly degraded the legitimacy of the children’s dialects, and this was harmful to their academic achievement and especially their self-esteem.

Pedagogical Implications

My extensive review of historical literature suggests a number of principles for the education of African American children. These principles, however may apply to the education of all children.

Expectations

Teachers must consciously monitor their attitudes and behaviors toward racial and linguistic minorities. A long history of prejudice and discrimination against African Americans in the United States has deeply embedded racist ideologies within American culture. It is my perspective that few if any individuals can live in the United States and not be affected by racism. Unfortunately, racism is generally manifested in the belief in dominate culture racial superiority and the inferiority of other groups on a sliding scale that seems to correspond to skin color. Other researchers have also demonstrated the effects of dialect or native language on teachers’ attitudes. Thus, unless these negative attitudes are consciously acknowledged and examined, they are likely to invade the classroom in ways that re-create racial and ethnic inequality.

Teachers must presume academic success for all students. Teachers expectations apply in both directions: Negative expectations may produce failure; positive expectations may produce success. Teachers must not assume, for example, that dialect or native language differences are tied in any systematic way to academic achievement potentials. Due to the variety of African American dialects, and due to the “dialect-switching” that characterizes many of the speakers of African American dialects, it is inappropriate to assume anything based on dialectical differences alone.

Behaviors

Teachers must begin to accept “each” child’s language or dialect as legitimate. In so doing, teachers must use teaching techniques that meaningfully communicate with children in ways that provide for academic enrichment. Teachers who reject African American dialects tend to “hypercorrect” the oral reading of children who speak an African American dialect. These
corrections, however, have often been rigidly applied to pronunciation and other dialect differences rather than the actual content or meaning of reading passages. As a result, students engaged in a number of “survival strategies,” such as withdrawal and “acting out” behaviors, in order to escape the pejorative treatment that teachers direct toward their native linguistic styles. Teachers should accept oral pronunciations that are appropriate for each student’s normal speech (unless an obvious error related to meaning is made). Thus teachers should avoid interrupting students while reading for, the purposes of minor corrections; they should not force adherence to an idealized standard that is inappropriate when universally applied.

Teachers must condition academic success. They can do this by structuring the classroom in a way that engenders involvement and academic success. This includes meaningful communication that ensures understanding by providing opportunities for students to experience success, providing rewards and other incentives and varying tasks and the length of instructional segments, and directing learning activities toward topics that are relevant to the students themselves.

**Curriculum Content**

The educational community must combat ethnic, racial, and linguistic biases in the curriculum. In this regard, the content of curriculum must recognize multicultural education as a part of basic education. The curriculum must demonstrate its relevance to various cultural groups and accurately reflect cultural pluralism. Teachers must aggressively seek curricular materials and resource persons that provide this relevance.

More fundamentally, the content of education should “empower” students to solve problems in their lives and communities. In this regard, the purpose of education should be geared toward helping students be generators of knowledge rather than passive receivers of information. In this sense, the classroom becomes a microcosm of the world, with the world’s problems and perils and with a mandate to seek critical thinking skills and problem-solving resolutions!

**School Administrators**

School administrators must recognize the role of school environments in enhancing academic achievement. Extensive research has concluded that the climate of the school, including curricular supports, adequacy of materials, and the role of the principal, are keys to academic success and achievement.

**Social Culture**

Inasmuch as general racial and ethnic attitudes underlie the attitudes of teachers, efforts must be made to generate alternative representations of these groups in the mass media. I have always supported a creative effort to develop “pro-social television” programming that reverses ethnic and gender stereotypes. There is a popular program entitled, Star Crusaders that portrays African Americans in cooperative leadership roles with other ethnic groups, demonstrates gender equality, and advances the tenets of the peaceful resolution of conflict.
More fundamentally, a need exists for the broader urban social culture to accept linguistic and dialect diversity as a national resource and asset. Part of this recognition then, must be translated into the involvement of the citizenry and communities in enhancing the learning opportunities of all of the nation’s children. The general citizenry can act, for example, as resources of multicultural education and as professional role models for students.

**Public Policy**

In the area of public policy, the guiding principle must continue to be the **provision** of equal educational opportunities for all children. This means, without doubt, the ultimate development of a national policy on language education. There must also be federal funding for “**language unique**” students of color.

More fundamentally, I am concerned with evidence of the continuing denial of equal educational opportunities. For example, documented large disparities in the amount of instructional funding provided to predominantly Black, Hispanic, and white schools. Moreover, instructional expenditures and school size were significantly related to standardized measures of academic achievement. Other studies have shown the benefits of small class sizes, which **naturally** involve a commitment for much greater resources to the educational arena. In addition to higher achievement, small classes are also conducive to teacher/student verbal interactions.

**Conclusions**

The debates concerning African American dialects are likely to continue far into the foreseeable future. Both the African American community and the public at large must address fundamental pedagogical questions about the nature of language, and language education, in order to redress the cycles of educational failure that characterize a **disturbingly large** proportion of African American children.

This search for a transformation in American education is likely to benefit our entire urban society. As we recognize the special perils confronting African American children, we expand our curriculum to include multicultural content and, I hope, multicultural understanding. As we pursue the development of language competence on the part of linguistic or dialect minorities, hopefully we will enhance our understanding of the processes of language acquisition and the education of “special populations.”

Most important, as we address the individualized needs of our students, we transform education into a purposeful activity that provides students with skills that will enable them to pursue productive economic lives, and to assist in the empowerment of their communities. **Only then will I feel we have succeeded in urban public education.**