African American Dialects and Schooling
A Review

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African American dialects (variously known as “nonstandard English,” “non-standard Black English,” “Black Vernacular English,” “Vernacular Black English,” “Standard Black English,” “Negro Speech,” and so on) constitute a controversial issue in American education. This chapter reviews 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 pupils.

Because the issues surrounding African American dialects are so vast, and because the state of knowledge concerning appropriate interventions is so limited, our focus is on providing practitioners with a general introduction that highlights the key principles in teaching children who speak an African American dialect. Our 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, South America) is beyond our expertise.

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 ethnolinguistic 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 college entry, and high college attrition (see Comer, 1985; Fairchild, 1984a; Fisher, 1981; White, 1984). These educational failures, then, have been linked with vulnerabilities to poor self-concepts (Fairchild, 1988a, 1989; Macias, 1973), unemployment (Banks, 1982; Comer, 1985), the reproduction of economic inequality (Apple, 1978), and a plethora of “social plagues” of the African American community, including crime, drug abuse, homicide/suicide, intergenerational poverty, and threats to physical and mental well-being (Fairchild, 1989). 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 communities.

Note also that we select the phrase, African American dialects, in favor of the other terms in order to avoid the unfortunate color symbolism associated with racial labeling in the United States (see Fairchild, 1985, 1988a). In addition, African American dialects conveys the fact that the subject of our chapter falls on a continuum, and that discrete categorizations (e.g., “Black English”) are inevitably misleading. This latter point also applies to any operational definition of Standard English, which we view as an “idealized standard” that masks tremendous regional diversity even within this “standard.”

This chapter presents an overview of the research controversies surrounding African American dialects and a review of research on teacher attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. The chapter presents 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 (see Bowser & Hunt, 1981), much of the social sciences, including education, linguistics, and psychology, has revealed clear White racial biases concerning studies of African Americans (see Fairchild & Gurin, 1978). These biases were revealed, for example, in theories that concluded that Africans were genetically inferior to “Whites” (e.g., Jensen, 1985).

In the context of language, early researchers concluded that African American dialects were reflective of a simplistic cognitive style and of low intelli-
gence (for reviews, see Baratz, 1970; Baugh, 1983; Jenkins, 1982; White, 1984). Linguists and educational psychologists, prior to the 1950s, were generally convinced that Africans were inherently inferior to Europeans, 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 (see Akbar, 1985; Persell, 1981). 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" (Ryan, 1971) 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 production (see Fairchild, 1984a).

Rejoiners

In response to the biased conclusions that endorsed racial inequality, researchers have generated a great deal of evidence and critiques in debunking those conclusions (see Baugh, 1983).

It is now generally accepted, for example, that although African American dialects differ from "Standard English" in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, they operate according to the same sorts of structural rules as any other language or dialect. Wolfram (1969, 1970) and Pasold and Wolfram (1970), for example, provided exhaustive examples of the complex linguistic features of African American dialects. This research in descriptive linguistics has concluded that African American dialects are not deficient or defective and should be accorded an equal status relationship with "Standard English" or any other language.

A number of researchers have enumerated the varieties of African American dialects. Although frequently classified in different ways, most researchers recognize that African American dialects fall on a continuum with a vast range of similarity or difference with "Standard English" (see Baugh, 1983). Region and urbanicity are also strong determinants of specific African American dialectical characteristics.

Researchers have also identified the "bidialectical" nature of the African American population (Hilliard, 1983). 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 (Torrey, 1983). These "varieties" of African American dialects are closely tied to socioeconomic level, region, urbanicity, and level of residential integration and mobility (see Baugh, 1983, concerning dialect diversity; see Fairchild & Tucker, 1982, concerning constraints on residential 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. White (1984), 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 (Baugh, 1983; Cooke, 1980). A final illustration of the complexity of African American dialects is revealed in the recent (mid- to late 1980s) 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 indicate that teachers, and the public, continue to harbor negative attitudes and beliefs about the nature of African American dialects and their role in schooling.

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 scores of studies, educational researchers have documented the processes underlying the "self-fulfilling prophecy" (see Eder, 1981, 1983; Jenkins, 1982).

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 (see, for example, Washington, 1982). Some evidence also suggests that African American males are the most at risk of these pessimistic teacher attitudes and behaviors. Simpson and Erickson (1983), for example, reported that teachers in their sample 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 (see DeStefano, 1978; Freeman, 1982). Politzer and Hoover (1976), for example, showed 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 teachers 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 (Murray & Fairchild, 1989), African American children develop a sense of “conditioned 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 (Weisz, 1981), which may account for the increasing achievement disparities between Whites and African Americans with increasing grade levels. It is worth noting, as well, that many of these negative expectations and behaviors are characteristic of African American teachers as well as White teachers (Washington, 1982).

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 (see Freeman, 1982; Jenkins, 1982; Vaughn-Cooke, 1980; Whatley, 1980; White, 1984; White- man, 1980). Indeed, it was found that the teachers explicitly degraded the legitimacy of the children’s dialects, and this was harmful to their academic achievement and self-esteem.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The foregoing review of literature suggests a number of principles for the education of African American children. These principles apply, usually, 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 has deeply embedded racist ideologies within American culture. It is our 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 White racial superiority and the inferiority of other groups on a sliding scale that corresponds to skin color (see Fairchild & Gurin, 1978; Fairchild & Tucker, 1982). Others have also demonstrated the effects of dialect or native language on teachers’ attitudes (Ovando, 1983). Thus, unless these negative attitudes are consciously acknowledged and combated, they are likely to invade the classroom in ways that re-create racial and ethnic inequality (see Freeman, 1982; Gere & Smith, 1979; Lewis, 1980).

Teachers must presume academic success for all students. Teachers’ expectations work 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 (Lewis, 1980). 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 dialect differences alone.

Behaviors

Teachers must accept each child’s language or dialect as legitimate (Freeman, 1982). In so doing, teachers must use teaching techniques that meaningfully communicate with children in ways that provide for academic enrichment. Berdan (1980), for example, showed that teachers who reject African American dialects tended to "hypercorrect" the oral reading of children who speak an African American dialect. These corrections, however, were often 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 directed toward their native linguistic styles. Berdan (1980) concluded with the identification of a general principle for reading instruction: 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 (Goodlad, 1979), by providing opportunities for students to experience success (Slavin, 1983, 1987), providing rewards and other incentives (Goodlad, 1979), varying tasks and the length of instructional segments (Boykin, 1982), and directing learning activities toward topics that are germane to the students themselves (Barona, 1986; Peyton, this volume; Shuy, 1970).

Curriculum Content

The educational community must combat ethnic, racial, and linguistic biases in the curriculum (see Akbar, 1985). In this regard, the content of curriculum must recognize multicultural education as a part of basic education (Fortune, 1979). The curriculum must demonstrate its relevance to various cultural groups (Edmonds, 1981; Macias, 1973) 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 (see Graman, 1988; Smitherman & McGinnis, 1980; Stewart, 1970). In this regard, the purpose of education should be geared toward helping students be generators of knowledge rather than passive receivers of information (Graman, 1988). In this sense, the classroom becomes a microcosm of the world, with the world’s problems and perils and with a mandate to seek problem resolution.

School Administration

School administrators must recognize the role of school environments in enhancing academic achievement. 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 achievement (see Cuttance, 1980; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Wynne, 1981).

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. Fairchild (1984b, 1988b), for example, has articulated a creative effort to develop “prosocial television” programming that reverses ethnic and gender stereotypes. His educational program, Star Crusaders, portrays African Americans in cooperative leadership roles with other ethnic groups, demonstrates gender equality, and advances the tenets of the peaceful resolution of conflict (Fairchild, 1984b, 1988b).

More fundamentally, a need exists for the broader American social culture to accept linguistic and dialect diversity as a national resource and asset (see Kochman, 1987; Padilla, this volume; Tucker, 1990). 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 (Goodlad, 1979; Wilson, 1983). 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 (see, in this connection, Ovando, 1983).

More fundamentally, we are concerned with evidence of the continuing denial of equal educational opportunities. Fairchild (1984a), 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 (e.g., Day, 1979; Smith & Glass, 1980). In addition to higher achievement, small classes are also conducive to teacher/student verbal interactions (Asher & Erickson, 1979).
CONCLUSIONS

The debates concerning African American dialects are likely to continue 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 the whole of society. As we recognize the special perils confronting African American children, we expand our curriculum to include multicultural content and, we hope, multicultural understanding. As we pursue the development of language competence on the part of linguistic or dialect minorities, we 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.

REFERENCES


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