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Personal Reflections

This paper represents the second part of a journey I began seven years ago. I sat in a professional development training class for literacy educators at Lesley College in Cambridge, MA., and challenged my professor. We'd been discussing David Wood's book, How Children Think and Learn, which addresses language learning and the use of dialect by African American students. Until this point I disdained Black English Vernacular (BEV), and what I termed "that kind of talk." My instructor elucidated Wood's insights by informing me that African American dialect was not "inferior" or bungled English. BEV was simply a dialect--something different from standard English. What was she saying? Who was she, a white scholar telling me, a highly educated African American professional that I was ignorant regarding an African American subject? But that was a mentor's role according to Daloz (1986). That is, in my journey as a literacy educator, she was helping me to become a "competent traveler." I became confused yet stimulated. My beliefs about people who talked "that way" were challenged.

This spirited discussion prompted me to begin my own informal research about the nature of African American dialect. I began to listen carefully to people who used that dialect-- particularly on television--and to examine my responses as they spoke. Instead of discounting what they said if they happened to leave an 'ed' off the end of a word, I learned that, indeed, one's speech had little to do with the level of wisdom presented. I remember listening to a tenant organizer in Chicago's Cabrini Green section. She spoke in Black English Vernacular. I marveled at this woman's courage--courage that I lacked-- and the wealth of ideas she expressed.

Today, I take pride in the fact that I've become an advocate for linguistic diversity, enlightening and supporting teachers who find themselves challenged in meeting the educational demands of such cross-cultural communication (Nelson-Barber and Meier, 1990; Pine and Hilliard, 1990). At the same time, I am ashamed that I reached graduate school before realizing my ignorance and need for a new "thought-set" (Good and Brophy, 1987).

With these revelations came a tentative release of long held views about "highly stigmatized" (Dandy, 1991) forms of spoken English. I'd heard both of my parents say "wit" for "with" and "dem" for "them." My father always called me "MayAnn" instead of

MaryAnn in keeping with the BEV rule that drops the final "r" such as in Southern dialect (doe for door). But that was forgiven because he was my dad, and not "highly educated." However, I cringed whenever I heard other African Americans speak "that way" in my neighborhood, in school or in the media. I raised my son forbidding him to ever talk "that way" because I believed such talk denoted illiteracy and ignorance.

As a college instructor and teacher educator, I've now entered another era of learning as I seek to expand and share these new insights that engender greater awareness. All that I discuss here represents my present understandings about linguistic diversity and the African American Ebonics speaker. My intent is to raise levels of consciousness, change attitudes and spark informed discourse.

Ebonics: Definition and Theories of Origin What is Ebonics?

Ebonics may be defined as the linguistic and paralinguistic features, which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and the United States slave descendants of African origin. It includes the grammar, various idioms. . . idiolects, and social dialects of Black people. Ebonics also includes nonverbal sounds, cues, and gestures, which are systematically and predictably utilized in the process of communication by Afro-Americans. - Dr. Ernie Smith, linguist, 1973

The word Ebonics is formed by combining ebony (black) and phonics (speech sounds). Before December 1996, when the Oakland school board decided to embrace Ebonics as a language bridge to standard English, most people hadn't heard of the term. Outrage erupted across the nation, in white and African American communities. Due, in part, to the "media's negative spin" (Williams, 1997, p. 208), the board's intent was completely misrepresented. Oakland's actual goals emphasized the teaching of standard English, but in ways that valued, utilized and supported students' use of their home or native language. Some myths that prevailed included:

Oakland is condoning slang and street language.

Oakland is teaching Ebonics instead of standard English.

Oakland has no research to support the use of code switching (bridging between Ebonics and standard English) to improve student achievement.

Ogbu (1997) underscores Oakland educators' intent and sense of urgency, as he provides compelling data regarding achievement of Black students in the Oakland Unified School District. The GPA in 1995-96 was 1.80 compared to the district average of 2.40. Black students comprised 53% of the student population; 71% of which were in Special Needs classes and 37% of gifted education population; 64% of students repeating grades were African American and 19% of Black twelfth graders had not met graduation requirements. A task force found that of the eight major language groups in Oakland,

African Americans had the lowest scores on standardized language tests. Black children were over represented in Special Needs classes primarily due to low language assessment test scores.

This information prompted the Oakland school board to adopt Ebonics as a way to provide strategies that would help Black students effectively transition from their home language to standard English. Their basic concern was not that Ebonics was a separate language, but that African American children--more than any other language group--were not achieving levels of English proficiency. Oakland Superintendent Carolyn Getridge (1997) wrote "...this policy mandates that effective instructional strategies be utilized to ensure that every child has the opportunity to achieve English language proficiency. Language development for African American students...will be enhanced with the recognition and understanding of the language structures unique to many African American students..."(p. 27).

In essence, many African American children speak Ebonics at home, and take it to school. They've learned it from their families and communities. Unfortunately, at school peers tease and teachers often scold, correct and admonish African American students not to "talk like that." As a result, African American Ebonics speakers feel degraded and inadequate.

It is out of this need to affirm the culture of African-American children while simultaneously transitioning them to "standard" English that the Ebonics movement evolved. Dr. Robert Williams, who coined the term Ebonics, states "the important point here is that my language is me! It is an extension of my being, my essence. It is a reflection and badge of my culture. Criticism of my language is essentially a direct attack on my self esteem and cultural identity" (1997, p. 209).

History of Black English Vernacular

Before describing predominant responses to the Ebonics controversy, I will present two theories concerning its roots as a linguistic system: The two are referred to as the Pidgin/Creole and the African Retention theories (Williams, 1997).

According to the Pidgin/Creole theory, Africans were brought from predominantly West African areas to America speaking a variety of languages. Holloway (1996) describes the enforced isolation of Bantu tribes on American plantations in the Carolinas. This allowed slaves to retain many aspects of their culture including religion, folk tales, storytelling and naming practices. As a result of this separateness, Africans were able to retain much of their cultural identity -- sharing across and between tribes - while adopting American customs and language. This composite language of various slave groups evolved into "pidgin" language. Pidgin was not the native language of any one group. Creole has pidgin as its source; children learned this pidgin language from their parents and the newly created language was called Creole (Williams, p. 211). Asante (1996) describes a

second stage of language development, "Englishization" or Ebonics whereby the Creole speaker began to "code switch." This is a process of transitioning back and forth to standard English.

The second theory, African Retention, posits that Ebonics has evolved from West African languages such as Ibu, Twi, Yoruba, Wolof, Fante, and Mandinka. They are dialects of the same speech system. Dr. Ernie Smith, an African American linguist, asserts that Ebonics is the mother tongue of the African American child just as Spanish is native to the Hispanic child. He believes that "Ebonics is the African American's linguistic memory of Africa applied to English words. Ebonics is the linguistic continuation of Africa in Black America "(1997). Examples of African retention include:

absence of double consonant in final position (tes for test)

lack of possessives (John house, Mommy shoe)absence of verb (we late, you bad)

absent ed (it snow yesterday)

Prevailing Responses to the Ebonics Debate

As a result of readings and many discussions with my colleagues, I have discovered three predominant responses to the Ebonics controversy. . I present these responses based on two seemingly conflicting personal beliefs. First of all, I value language differences, and believe individuals and groups benefit by maintaining vernacular speech varieties. At the same time, I contend that a successful life in America is facilitated by mastery of standard English, and that resources should be made available to all who aspire to such mastery. I believe that teachers will be more prone to provide the resources if they understand the concept of linguistic diversity as a strength upon which to build. The following responses provide educators with a broader view of that idea emanating from the work of noted scholars in the field of linguistics.

Response One: Ebonics is a separate language. Speakers deserve bilingual services if needed. The work of several African American linguists supports this view (Dilliard, 1973; Smitherman,

1986; Spears, 1996). They believe that the label 'Black English' is an oxymoron. That is, African American and Euro-American speech emanate from a separate linguistic base. English has Germanic roots with a completely different rule system than Ebonics. According to most linguists who support Ebonics, it is a separate language that has its origin in West and Niger- Congo African languages, and is not a mere dialect of English. Ebonics is, in essence, the mother tongue of African Americans. Thus, students have a right to receive bilingual support services because English is not their native language.

Dr. Ernie Smith contends that African American children have been viewed by teachers as "linguistic invalids." He argues that these children have a separate language, and thus

qualify for Limited English or Non-English Proficient (LEP/NEP) programs just as Hispanic, Asian or Native American children who come to school with different mother tongues. In his view Ebonics speakers are "equally entitled, and should be given ESL and their literacy instruction in the vernacular that they natively understand" (1995, p. 15).

Supporting this view, psychologists Williams and Rivers (1973) and educational researchers Simpkins, Holt and Simpkins (1974), have demonstrated how the use of Ebonics and the instructional strategy of code switching or bridging has served to increase reading scores of African American children. Results indicated that poor test performance did not mean that African American children were incapable of processing standard language. "...The child's intake gates [were] not activated by the stimulus properties of standard English. The child must be taught to code switch -- to move from Ebonics to Standard English" (Williams, 1997, p. 212). Although, I am heartened by results of such studies, I believe more expanded research efforts are necessary to support the call for formal bilingual support services for Ebonics speakers.

Response Two: Ebonics is a dialect of English. Speakers need culturally sensitive teachers to assist hem in "code switching" or transitioning (back and forth) to standard English.

This particular theory originated from the work of Labov (1970,1979) who studied language patterns of inner city children in Philadelphia. Labov concluded that non-Standard English was "just as logical and consistent as Standard English; it could be reproduced and it made sense. It is merely different." Lindfors (1980) defines standard English as a "dialect that doesn't call attention to itself, standard English is English as I speak it. The notion of a 'regional standard' dialect(rather than just a standard for the language in general) seems better to reflect the situation of dialect diversity in that it recognizes that there are many identifiable varieties of English, and that they are all valid linguistic systems" (p. 355).

Dandy, in her book, Black Communications: Breaking Down the Barriers (1991), defines a dialect as a "variation within a particular language." She contends that all English speakers speak a dialect of their native language. Consider the dialect differences of President Clinton and Senator Edward Kennedy. In Dandy's view, dialect is not inferior as is the popular belief. It is simply "something slightly different from another of the same type." She notes the fact that American sign language has dialect differences. She posits that dialect is a language system peculiar to a region or social group. It is set off from other dialects by unique features of pronunciation, word order and vocabulary." Dandy prefers to use Hoover's (1985) term Black Communications because she believes dialect is more than speech; it is a system of communication including speech sounds, grammar, vocabulary, verbal strategies, style, nonverbal behavior, sociolinguistic rules, special speaking behaviors and moral teachings (1991,

12). Proponents of this view encourage teachers to "view dialect different speakers as human beings who are developing the ability to communicate in two different modes: Standard or Educated English and Black Communications" (Dandy, 1991, p.110). The educator's task, according to this theory, is to view language as a medium of exchange and to help students become bidialectal---able to switch from one "code" to another as needed. Advocates of this view help students learn that standard English serves as a "passport allowing them to travel anywhere they want to go" (Brice-Finch, 1991). Dandy reminds teachers that "they were not born speaking Standard English as adults. . . Just as someone taught them the language, teachers must teach their language to students. The key lies in a teacher's attitude and expectations..." (p. 110).

Response Three: Ebonics is a substandard dialect reflecting deficient language skills. Speakers need immediate correction and formal instruction in standard English.

Psychologist Robert Williams convened a conference in 1973 at Washington University in St. Louis on language development because he'd "grown sick and tired"of African American speech being referred to as "substandard", "restrictive ", "deviant ", "deficit", "non-standard"...(1997, p. 209). Asa Hilliard, Professor of Education at Georgia State, describes the consequences of this deficit view: Feelings of shame and doubt among African American children are consequences of stigma since many African Americans, even the well educated, misunderstand basic linguistic principles...(1983, p. 32). Labov (1979) believes that most teachers "have no systematic knowledge of non-standard forms which oppose and contradict standard English" (p. 4). Smitherman and Cunningham, educators at Michigan State University, view the "negative pronouncements on Ebonics" as indication of a "serious lack of knowledge about the scientific approaches to language analysis, and a galling ignorance about what Ebonics is . . ." (1997, p. 227).

Teachers holding the deficit view look upon deviations from standard English as "inherently evil, and they attribute these mistakes to laziness, sloppiness or the child's natural disposition to be wrong" (Labov, 1979, p. 4). These educators perceive the teaching of English as a "question of imposing rules upon chaotic, shapeless speech filling a vacuum by supplying rules where no rules existed before" (p.5).

Herein lies the challenge for those of us hoping to convince this camp that Ebonics is valuable--a strength upon which to build. We must persuade educators that the African American child's speech is NOT chaotic, shapeless or empty -- a point on which all linguists agree. There is a moral imperative for educators to initiate informed and mediated discourse in order to eradicate this pervasive, ill-informed ,damaging response to the Ebonics speaker.

Equipping Ourselves to Work With Ebonics Speakers

What helpful attitudes, beliefs or personal constructs should teachers be aware of?

The need to determine and evaluate one's personal attitude regarding Ebonics is, I believe, the most appropriate place for educators to begin. Without knowledge and appreciation of diverse communication styles, teachers may respond with lowered expectations and inappropriate teaching and assessment procedures as illustrated in Oakland.

Dandy (1991) describes research in actual classrooms "... Teachers interrupt these children more frequently in their oral reading, call on them less frequently, give them less time to answer questions, provide less verbal feedback for their answers, and provide them with less eye contact and positive nonverbal attention" (pp. 128-129). In a survey of teachers' attitudes about language differences, Shuy (1975) found that teachers equated lack of standard English vocabulary with overall lack of vocabulary. If children did not talk much at school and were unfamiliar with school related terms, teachers inferred that children just didn't have a vocabulary.

To address the needs of Ebonics speakers, a new mind set by teachers is required. I agree with Gere and Smith (1979) that attitude change necessitates "a conscious effort which entails the modification of one's thinking." They present five ways to begin this process of change, which I've posited as questions.

Am I aware of how language develops and its role in educating children?

What internal and external forces can I use to help change my perspective about Ebonics speakers?

Am I open to strategies and resources available to me?

Am I willing to try new approaches that include constructive feedback from peers and others?

Am I seeking ongoing support to adopt different linguistic perspectives?

By broadening their linguistic views, teachers equip themselves to serve as more able communicators with Ebonics speakers. In addition, teachers can play a critical role in helping such speakers understand how use of standard English provides access to educational, career and other opportunities. Equally important is the realization by educators that their expectations, beliefs and responses substantially raise or reduce communication barriers in the classroom.

What basic concepts or theory should I be familiar with?

The furor created by the Ebonics resolution passed in Oakland has brought the issue of language differences in our public schools to the national limelight. Ogbu (1997) has conducted compelling research that underscores the fact that this issue is not as simple as it appears. Results of his studies call for educators to become more knowledgeable in two major categories: language differences and "cultural meanings" of those language differences.

The following captures what I believe is required information for an educator's "linguistic diversity" repertoire:

Understanding language differences--both form and function--sensitizes educators; knowing the history of their own language as well as the history of English provides them with research based information that enables them to support students who speak "differently"(Labov, 1970, 1979; Hilliard,1983).

Being aware of sociocultural factors provides teachers with a "big picture" perspective allowing for more flexible thinking and responses. This idea has been impressively articulated by Ogbu (1974, 1978, 1995) who found that when whites from similar socioeconomic status backgrounds are compared--at every class level--Blacks consistently perform lower than their White counterparts..." He concluded that the "phenomenon of low academic performance of Black students is not a product of mere poverty, inner city residence:..." Blacks experience this problem because of their particular type of minority status" (1997, p. 197). Ogbu refers to this phenomenon as "cultural ecological" in nature. The African American child comes to school with a culturally based or community based set of attitudes, knowledge or understanding that predisposes him or her toward doing well or poorly, depending on what he or she encounters in school. If we apply this idea to the issue of language differences, Ogbu maintains that cultural ways of speaking represent "Black collective identity." For historical, social and cultural reasons African Americans, particularly youth, are not willing to give up their way of speaking. For many, including parents, teaching students to speak standard English represents one more intrusion by White man into their world. This relationship between language and collective identity among Blacks involves two conflicting beliefs. Ogbu maintains that African Americans hold these dissonant beliefs about standard English--which they may not fully realize. Helping students explore this conflict serves, I think, to educate and empower them as bidialectal speakers. We must sensitively assist students and their parents in understanding that mastering Standard English does not have to be detrimental to their cultural identity or sense of loyalty to their race (Ogbu, 1995). I speak from personal experience. I may "talk white" but remain fiercely proud of my African American heritage.

It is evident that issues emanating from language differences are quite complex. Prudent, sensitive educators are those who skillfully utilize this information to sharpen their sense of awareness, and establish a sound knowledge base on which to build ongoing insights.

With sound theory and a heightened sense of personal blind spots, educators are now more prepared to consider instructional issues.

What instructional steps can literacy teachers take to support the Ebonics speaker?

Dandy (1991) recounts a story of Joey, an African American third grader who is asked to read by Alice, a white student teacher. Joey is in the highest reading group, and will read with Alice in a demonstration lesson for her supervisor. As Joey begins to read, it is evident that he is a dialectal speaker; he pronounces street as "skreet." Alice responds "not skreet, Joey, say street." Joey says "skreet." Alice again interrupts Joey when he mispronounces the word a second time. As he reads on, he reads about a cat who "skretched" out... Alice says "No Joey. You're doing it again." Joey repeats "skretched"; Joey's voice becomes more quiet, and he finally stops because he's lost his place. Sims (1972) reviews the idea of miscue (mistake) quality. "A miscue(mistake) that doesn't cause a loss of information or interfere with the originally intended meaning of the passage is high quality (meaningful and useful). . ." Johnson (1975) calls this "alternation skr for str a dialect shift-a translation without a loss in comprehension." I believe that teachers need to understand that constant interruptions for mispronunciations break the flow of the story line, and erroneously stress reading as a sounding out process. Much more importantly, it demoralizes children. Krashen (1987) in his studies of second language acquisition refers to an "affective filter" that operates when a student is "over anxious about his performance... (causing) a mental block.. (which) will prevent the input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition" (p. 232). When students are constantly corrected, the affective filter gets raised which causes them to become self-conscious and monitor their speech making talking difficult. Generally, it is nearly impossible to apply or monitor language for rules while speaking or reading. Typically, silence results as the teaching example with Joey illustrates. In contrast to spontaneous oral language or public reading, writing seems to lend itself more to opportunities for editing, which doesn't damage the spirit of a child. It is a mediated process allowing for reworking before there is public display.

Dandy (1991) offers eight instructional strategies, based on Taylor's work (1986) that enable teachers to provide learning opportunities for students to develop communicative competence in standard English while preserving the home dialect.

Maintain a positive attitude towards one's own language [and others]

Use books, stories and poems that are written in standard English as well as in various dialects

Encourage students (older) to recognize, label, contrastt distinctive features of various dialects.

Provide instruction that highlights underlying meanings/intentions associated with particular dialect forms .e. bad=good, mean=impressive

Teach students (by modeling) to recognize situational rules of communication i.e. greeting friends vs. greeting prospective employer.

Teach students (initially via scripts) production of certain grammatical forms in structured situations i.e., she ain't here vs. She's not at home right now.

Allow students to practice standard English use in controlled situations (no script) i.e. retell stories read, drama presentations

Celebrate demonstration by students of increasing communicative competence in spontaneous real life experiences

While the above suggestions can assist all teachers in the more general area of communicative skills, Labov (1979) provides suggestions aimed at improving the practice of reading teachers.

Teachers should distinguish between mistakes in oral reading and differences in pronunciation .

Teachers (early grades) should be willing to accept homophones in the speech of young children. This acceptance preserves confidence in the phonics code and facilitates learning without "affective filters."

Teachers of spelling may find it necessary to spend more time on grammatical inflections

i.e. he walk yesterday

Teachers (early grades) must know the system of homophones used by BEV speakers and the grammatical differences that separate their own speech from that of the child.

If teachers are unaware of homophone differences and insist on forcing what they deem "proper" pronunciation, children may lose confidence (typically in third and fourth grades) refusing to read and remaining essentially nonreaders (Labov, 1979).

Conclusion

At this point in time, I too hold the "different" view espoused by Dandy. That is, Ebonics is a dialect of English. Students who speak this way must be sensitively taught to code switch by teachers who acknowledge and accept the child's home language. It is incumbent upon us as teachers to assist students in becoming bidialectal speakers. To do anything less is to miseducate a child. These strong views arise out of my reflections on the words of David Wood (1988):

No one dialect of English, in any linguistic sense, is superior as a means of communication to any other...Although dialects and creole vary in pronunciation and grammatical structure (due to their distinct historical origins) they are no less

grammatical than Standard English. All anguages, dialects and creole are governed by rules of grammar...they are all 'equally' grammatical...the fact that one way of speaking is viewed as superior, more intelligent or more 'proper' than another is not a linguistic phenomenon, but a political, social and economic affair. A particular way of speaking has become dominant because those who speak it have risen to power, and control functions like education, mass communication and the means of production. (p.92)

It is imperative that teachers develop new ways of thinking about diversity. A teacher's major role is that of a communicator. Educators must be able to communicate meaning across individual differences. This complex task involves interaction across issues of race, culture, socioeconomic status and power. All demographic data points to the fact that the United States is becoming a nation characterized by diversity as never before. What can educators do? What should we do? I recommend that we must first look inward and develop a sensitivity to issues of language differences. From there we can gain helpful insights and knowledge which allows us to view diversity as a resource not a barrier: Following this we can build an arsenal of understanding that equips us as culturally sensitive communicators and problem solvers.

I hope that the energy educators have expended to eliminate Ebonics will be redirected towards supporting its historical, cultural, social and linguistic utility. By implementing approaches that assist students in becoming bidialectal,we equip African American children to become skilled participants at any table of opportunity in mainstream America. As Spanish is valued by most Hispanic Americans and Yiddish is for Jewish Americans; as French is to Haitian Americans, so Ebonics is to most African Americans. While we teach students to value standard English as the language of commerce, access, power and intergroup communication, we all should strive to learn more about the cultural value of Ebonics or Black Communications (Burnett et al., 1997; Dandy, 1991).

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