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# WHAT IS BEING DONE FOR BLACK CHILDREN IN READING?

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That there are concerns for reading problems in general is evident by the profusion of studies that have been, are being, and will be reported. However, the history of research reports regarding the reading ability of speakers of Black English is rather brief. Only in recent years have there been published reports on the high frequency of failures of Black children in reading (Smith, 1975), the urgent situation of language differences of Blacks (Knapp, 1975), and the disparity between the reading achievement levels of Black children and White children (Rupley and Robeck, 1978). This report is intended to review the literature regarding some of the practices or approaches used in teaching primary reading to Black children.

Before discussing the approaches used in reading instruction for Black speakers of nonstandard English, some theories or philosophical orientations concerning these practices should be briefly reviewed. The theorists generally fall into three groups: educators, psychologists, and linguists. Many educators and psychologists in the earlier studies felt that Black children came to school with a deficient language system, restricted in potential for abstraction, underdeveloped due to an impoverished environment, and a barrier to school success (Bailey, 1976; Bereiter and Englemann, 1966; Deutsch, 1963). Interpretations of this theory led many teachers to try to eradicate the children's dialect and replace it with Standard English (Fowler, 1976). However, far too many children began to discontinue efforts to communicate. This theory has "generally fallen out of favor due to linguistic research in addition to obviously humanistic concerns of educators relating to the welfare of students" (Fowler, 1976, p. 246).

Since the third group of theorists, by profession, study the structure of languages, they, therefore, hold the viewpoint that Black English is a highly structured, rule-governed system (Harper & Bryen, 1976; Shuy, 1970b; Stewart, 1969). Black English and Standard English have many of the same linguistic features in phonology, vocabulary, syntax, and grammar (Dillard, 1972); Fasold and Wolfram, 1970; Harber and Beatty, 1978; Labov, 1970). Black English is not a deficient system but a different legitimate language system in its own right (Baratz, 1969; Goodman, 1965; Houston, 1970).

According to the research on approaches to be used in teaching reading to Black speakers of nonstandard English, the main practices appeared to have been categorized into the following: language

remediation, instruction with dialect-based materials, dialect rendering of extent materials, neutralization of dialect differences, a language experience approach, or combinations of the former approaches.

Even though the “deficient” language theory has been, by and large, fading out as a basis for reading instruction, there are some educators and psychologists who still hold this viewpoint. The DISTAR (Direct Instructional System for Teaching Reading) program, developed by Englemann and Bereiter and initiated in 1964, is based on the premise that socially and economically deprived children need remedial reading involving repetitive sequential drills. Ogletree and Dipasalegne (1975) reported on an evaluation of the DISTAR program by twenty-one primary grade teachers who taught DISTAR in a Chicago elementary school for one to three years. The findings indicated effectiveness in teaching reading. However, there were qualifying statements: too structured; teachers should have flexibility in modifying format; update materials every two years; reduce boredom of some students by readily moving them into another DISTAR subgroup; program should be used as a supplement to other methods of teaching reading.

Much of the research in the latter part of the sixties and some in the seventies appeared to focus on dialect-based readers in reading instruction. This approach was based on studies that indicated Black children failed in reading because there were dialect interferences between some linguistic features of Black English and those of Standard English (Baratz, 1969; Stewart, 1969). These researchers advocated that initial reading materials should be written in a Black vernacular until the child has an ability to read. Then, transitional materials would be used to gradually introduce Standard English. Baratz (1969) felt that the child’s self-identity and self-concept would be strengthened by using these types of readers.

However, Venezky (1970) discussed some liabilities with the dialect-based reader approach. One, there are practical problems of implementation in integrated classroom reading material. Two, it is an enormous job preparing special materials for each dialect group. There are variations of English forms among Black English speakers. Nor are all Black children speakers of Black English (Dillard, 1972; Labov, 1967). Three, there are studies that have indicated that dialect differences *per se* were not major barriers for learning to read (Peisach, 1965; Weiner, 1969).

Smitherman (1975) stated that “it is nearly impossible to render the flavor and excitement of Black speech via the written word.” Mays (1976, cited in Rupley and Robeck, 1978) reported that Black second graders preferred dialect speech over Standard English. However, they did not exhibit confusion or problems when reading words which were expressed in traditional orthography. Rystrom (1970) found that a dialect training program had a negative effect on decoding skills. Another finding (Hunt, 1974-1975) indicated that differences between Black English and Standard English did not appear to interfere with

Black children's oral comprehension of Standard English materials. Cagney (1977) reported on listening comprehension abilities of kindergarten and first grade children when stories were presented in Standard English as well as Black English. Overall, the 48 children made more correct responses to all questions after listening to stories presented in Standard English. The study, thus, did not support the "interference" theory behind dialect-based readers.

Since some linguists advocate that the Black child's language is a legitimate system and should be left intact and appreciated for its rightful worth, they (Douglas, 1973; Goodman, 1965) recommended that the child use traditional materials but read aloud in his Black vernacular. Yet, others (Hendrickson, 1971; Venezky, 1970) suggested that Standard English be taught simultaneously with or prior to primary reading. However, no matter how much the linguist attempts to or suggests change from Black English to Standard English, the Black child will persist with his native language patterns in some form or another (Wolfram, 1970).

Another approach reported in the literature was dialect neutralization. Shuy (1970a) recommended that dialect differences, specifically grammar, be neutralized. Since there are many similarities between the two grammatical systems, this would mean a lessening of interference between them. Materials should concentrate on similarities between Black English and Standard English and not differences. Venezky (1970) offered a variation to this approach in which the content and vocabulary of Standard English materials are modified to better reflect the environment of the child. However, spelling and syntax are not altered, other than to try to avoid those patterns which are markedly different in the nonstandard dialect. From his longitudinal study of Black and White children from the second to seventh grade, Marwit (1977) found that there was a linguistic convergence with time. There were no significant differences between Black children and their White peers by the seventh grade. However, this convergence was only on three or four linguistic features out of the whole area of the language systems.

Another practice which appears to be a combination or variation of the dialect and neutralization methods is the language experience approach. Teachers should have the child relate his own experience in stories in the early steps of the program. The teacher writes exactly what the child has said. When writing, s/he would use standard orthography so that the child would not have to learn two spelling systems. Thus, Standard English would be gradually learned without "putting down" or eradicating the child's language.

In all the above mentioned practices, the authors observed or recommended that the teacher's attitude in teaching these approaches is an important aspect which affects achievement in reading Fowler, 1976; Hoover, 1978. Teachers should accept, appreciate, respect, show interest in, and have positive attitudes toward Black children and their language system and its usage. They should be flexible in scheduling, in

matching materials to students and implementing instruction.

Cureton (1978) discussed a “Black learning style” as described and used successfully by some inner city teachers. These teachers suggested that they learned to understand the type of motivation that “turns on” Black children to learning—utilize their strengths. The strengths are usually overlooked or not measured by readiness tests. The teachers suggested that the strengths can be determined through cognitive style mapping; whether the students learn better through auditory or visual means or what is the best day and time for learning. They reported that the inner city child learned more effectively through physical, oral, and group involvement.

A “new” approach reported by Hoover (1978) advocates the use of basic skills along with a philosophical “Excellence” perspective. Emphasis is placed on strong motivations for excellence, for high expectations, in working toward group-valued community while achieving basic skills in traditional orthographies, in comprehension, vocabulary, study skill exercises. These are practiced in addition to a language experience approach. This method also advocates strong teacher training programs and use of paraprofessionals and volunteers. As evidence of program success, the students were reported to have achieved at grade level on standard reading tests.

From the studies reviewed, there appears to be several possible approaches in teaching primary reading to Black nonstandard speakers of English. But why are there conflicting findings? Various researchers have listed factors that should be considered in evaluating the methodology of research, e.g. sampling bias, overlooked variables, weaknesses or limitations in measurement techniques. Because there appears to be some methodological problems within some of the studies reviewed previously, there could be caution about generalizing results. Harber and Bryen (1976) identified some points worthy of consideration:

1. Some investigations study only a few surface linguistic features, e.g. third person singular verb markers. If the material were translated into Black English, there would be no change in meaning. Therefore, apprehension should not be affected.
2. The subjects in some studies were not screened to assure that all the Black subjects spoke Black English and that all the White subjects spoke Standard English. There is evidence that all Blacks do not speak Black English and that there are intraspeaker as well as interspeaker variability in linguistic features (Dillard, 1972).
3. In having subjects perform on oral reading tasks, non-readers would appear to be automatically excluded from the study.
4. Very few longitudinal studies have been conducted to investigate the long term effectiveness of these methods.
5. Many variables that affect reading performance may need further investigation, e.g. environment, perceptual deficiencies, health status, teacher attitude, test bias (Harber and Beatty, 1978).

Even though there are educational alternatives to teaching reading to Black English speakers and there are reports of success, there appears to be some unanswered questions concerning the shortcomings in the research on these methods. When these are investigated carefully and all possible variables explored, then maybe the introduction of the reports of studies on teaching Blacks to read will not have such openers as "Black students in American cities have serious reading problems and are failing. . . ."

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