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PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS

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R. W. Reising, Professor of Communicative Arts and Native American Studies at Pembroke State University in North Carolina, provides a point counterpoint on the question of whether students' dialects interfere with their ability to read. He suggests three specific actions to which educators concerned with reading instruction might turn their efforts in order to enhance the quality of such instruction for students who normally use a dialect other than standard.

Despite decades of investigation and discussion, the profession remains divided on the role of dialect in learning to read. Typical of one group is Doris C. Ching, who accurately alleges that "most of the evidence indicates that dialect differences per se are not major barriers to learning to read" (*Reading and the Bilingual Child*, IRA, 1976, p. 8). "Most" is obviously a key word in Dr. Ching's cautiously worded contention. Indeed, some evidence favors a different conclusion, one which the internationally respected Kenneth S. Goodman doubtless has in mind when, in his often-anthologized essay "Dialect Barriers to Reading Comprehension," he argues, first, that "it is harder for a child to learn to read a dialect which is not his own than to learn to read his own dialect" and, later, that "an important hypothesis" is valid: "*The more divergence there is between the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning, the more difficult will be the task of learning to read* [Goodman's underlining]."

The two most recent pronouncements involving reading and dialect have brought not finality but increasing furor to the dispute. The judgment in the case of *Martin Luther King, Jr., Elementary School v. Ann Arbor School District Board*, rendered in a U.S. district court in July of 1979, legally decrees that at least one collection of minority dialects, those known as black English, does not represent a language barrier in and of itself, yet simultaneously suggests, as Sharon Kossack notes, that dialect differences "affect the number and quality of oral-reading miscues made by youngsters who speak black English" ("District Court's

Ruling on Nonstandard Dialects Needs Cautious Interpretation," *Phi Delta Kappan*, May, 1980, pp. 617-19).

Published just a few months ago, Patrick Hartwell's allegations have already elicited several rebuttals—and promise to elicit still others. In a thoroughly researched, amply documented essay, Hartwell maintains that "all apparent dialect interference in writing is reading-related . . . that systematic error in writing is correlated with reading disfunction, both reflecting an imperfectly developed neural coding system, the print code" ("Dialect Interference in Writing: A Critical View," *Research in the Teaching of English*, May, 1980, pp. 101-18). Unfortunately, Hartwell's explanation of "reading disfunction" fails to indicate whether such disfunction creates, is created by or is even directly related to dialects different from standard English. Similarly, his explanation fails to identify how and why dialect speakers—as individuals and as groups—are uniquely victimized by an "imperfectly developed neural coding system."

Thus the controversy continues, and administrators, classroom teachers, and reading personnel have reason, perhaps, to sense that they are caught between two feuding camps. Yet, instead of fleeing the field and surrendering the whole question of reading and dialect to researchers and scholars, they should commit themselves to three actions. In fact, to remain effective in their respective positions, educators *must* commit themselves to those actions:

1. They must stay abreast of scholarship bearing on reading and dialect. All of the materials mentioned earlier in this article are worthy of study. Two others are, too, because of the horde of information and insights they contain: "Everyone Does Not Think Alike," by Grace C. Cooper, in the April, 1980, issue of *English Journal*, the NCTE publication; and *Reading and Dialect Differences*, one of the five booklets making up the *Dialects and Educational Equity* series published in 1979 by the Center for Applied Linguistics, located in Arlington, Virginia. As Hartwell's provocative article proves, the profession is inching toward significant breakthroughs in understanding the ties between reading and dialect, and all professionals have countless reasons, moral as well as pedagogical, for learning about the progress as it unfolds.
2. They must be aware that negative attitudes toward dialects militate against success in reading for dialect speakers. "The task of learning to read is not an easy one," Goodman concedes, and teachers and other educators who through words or actions indicate less than respect for students' native dialects are only making the task that much harder for those students. For professionals who sense difficulty in acquiring or maintaining that respect, help is available. *Attitudes, Language, and Change*, by Ann Gere and Eugene Smith, provides 108 pages of enlightened discussion of the three matters listed in its title. The third chapter of that NCTE volume, published in 1979, is particularly relevant: treating

“Changing Language Attitudes within the Profession,” it contains several superb suggestions for educators to consider.

3. They must determine and exploit what works for them in teaching dialect speakers to read. Once they have recognized that research in reading is a powerful ally, they must go one step further and recognize that research that they conduct in their own schools is the most valuable ally of all. Educators across the globe can learn from one another, certainly; but since no two learning situations are perfectly analogous, just as no two dialects are exactly alike, the staff of a particular school must identify and then continue to employ what works for them. They must neither apologize for nor feel guilty about strategies and materials that they use, even if those strategies and materials are not fashionable or effective elsewhere. There must be a commitment to what works—nothing less—and they must be convinced of what works not by wishful thinking or sales pitches but by evidence gleaned from and in their own classrooms.

Amidst the reading-dialect controversy, practitioners should feel not confused but confident. They obviously have a chance not merely to learn from it but also to continue to contribute an essential ingredient to it—sense, common and uncommon.