

Bilingualism and How it Impacts the African American Child

Taiwana D. Anthony

PhD Student in Educational Leadership
Prairie View A & M University
College of Education
Technology Applications Teacher
Dallas Independent School District
Dallas, Texas

William A. Kritsonis

Professor
PhD Program in Educational Leadership
Prairie View A & M University
Visiting Lecturer (2005)
Oxford Round Table
University of Oxford, Oxford, England
Distinguished Alumnus (2004)
Central Washington University
College of Education and Professional Studies

ABSTRACT

As the era of bilingualism increase in many states, African American children are some how being overlooked. There are many challenges for non-native Spanish speakers. Many of the school programs are focused on ESL (English as a Second Language), ELL (English Language Learner), or LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students. The authors provide recommendations on how African American children should be prepared to meet various educational challenges and opportunities.

Children of color are faced with many academic challenges. They are required to maintain certain academic standards that are difficult because of the manner in which their education is being delivered to them. In many instances, they cannot comprehend their academic subjects. It is imperative they are educated in a way that is conducive to their educational needs. Many children of color are placed in special education, housed under the umbrella of 504 because of the teacher's inability to present the information in away that is conducive to their learning styles. Some teachers do not understand their behavior. They are tired of dealing with their disruptive behaviors in class, which is in many cases a cry for help. African American students are not lacking in

the area of academics. Many African American children learn in ways that are not typical or traditional in their present classroom setting.

The purpose of this article is to discuss ways in which bilingualism impacts African American children in the arena of education and how bilingualism will impact African American children in futuristic situations. The authors provide recommendations and modifications on how African American children should be prepared to meet these educational challenges.

Living in the Era of Bilingualism

According to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary-Tenth Edition (1993), the word "bilingualism" is of Latin origin. Derived into English from French, etymologically, the word bilingual is from the Latin word "bilinguis". It consists of a prefix "bi" which means two and a root or base word "lingua" which means tongue. From a strictly etymological standpoint, the word "bilingual" means simply "two tongues".

As the era of bilingualism increase in many states, African American children are some how being overlooked. Many challenges exist for non-native Spanish speakers. Many of the school programs are focused on ESL (English as a Second Language), ELL (English Language Learner), or LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students. Literacy has been on the decline in the African American culture for many years. The study of African American speech has been, like the study of other aspects of African American culture and behavior, influenced by the ideologies of different periods and the ideological perspectives of the different language and culture scholars of these periods. (Alleyne 1971:121) According to Smith, E., (1994), the clear implication for education is that, in the preparation of teachers, particularly in the area of English language, literacy and reading skills, where the focus in on the African American child, there needs to be a major alteration in the curriculums of teacher education and training programs.

There needs to be a major shift from the subtle "pathology" and deficit" model that is inherent in the failed compensatory education approach. Teacher preparation should include a view towards full recognition of the humanity of African people. They should not be viewed as having a separate language but instead as linguistic invalids, unlike Asian American, Hispanic American, Native American, and other limited and non-English proficient (LEP/NEP) children, who are acknowledged as being LEP/NEP students. African American children are not extended this dignity. Teachers have low expectations for African American students (Obiakor, 1999). Rist (1970) observed that starting as young as kindergarten, low income children were called on less frequently, received less positive feedback and interacted less with teachers than their middle income peers regardless of their enthusiasm and motivation. According to Washington (2001, these low expectations continued beyond kindergarten for many of these low income children and most were not as successful academically as their middle income peers, fulfilling what Rist (1970) referred to as the "self-fulfilling prophecy" for these children. These low expectations are reportedly influenced by teacher and student variables,

cultural bias by the teacher, significant dialect use by the child and the child's income status. The influence of the teacher's bias cannot be overlooked as a significant achievement variable (Washington, 2001).

Throughout the United States, African American children are denied their ancestor's humanity and instead receive placement in Title 1 and Special Education classes that are discriminatory in nature. They should be placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Bilingual Education programs. Other factors such as drugs, poverty, and gangs are primary in the African American community. Education is often in last place on their list of priorities. Societal pressures place many obstacles in the path of African American students. Reasons given for African American students not completing their education include a lack of understanding of the material, pressures from their environment, and family responsibilities. There are very few programs designed to help African American students reach their goals of becoming high school graduates, bilingual, or college graduates.

How Bilingualism Will Impact the African American Child in the Future?

African American children's literacy in math and reading are declining. State mandated tests show African American children not performing as well as their counterparts. The gap in achievement between African American students and their white peers has been well documented (Jencks & Phillips, Phillips, Crose & Ralph, 1998). African American children are consistently performing below their grade levels in the areas of math, science, reading, and writing.

The National Research Council (1998) expressed concern about reading difficulties in general, but in particular for those children who are culturally and linguistically different. It states that:

Four in ten children overall will reportedly have difficulty learning to read, but ...children from poor families, children of African American and Hispanic descent, and children attending urban schools are at greater risk of poor reading outcomes than are middle-class, European-American, and suburban children," (National Research Council, 1998).

The time is now to change these statistics. If teachers of African American students do not step up to close this educational gap, African American children will continue to suffer and perhaps fail even more. African American children will not be adequately prepared for the future if the current educational system does not implement the necessary programs geared toward the African American child. Many researchers believe that Ebonics should be used as a second language. "Ebonics" may be defined as the linguistic and paralinguistic feature that on a concentric continuum represents 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 (Smith, 1994). 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.

Child-based explanations for failure to achieve grade level reading skills frequently focus on sociolinguistic differences evident for African American children compared to their white peers. Frequently cited are the decreased world knowledge, with resultant deficiencies in oral language skills, and the dialectal variations that young African American children reportedly bring to the classroom experience (Hart & Risley, 1995, Washington & Craig, 1999, Washington, 2001). These differences purportedly result in “mismatch” between the language and culture of the classroom and the language and culture of the African American child, making the child’s transition to the school environment difficult and adversely affecting academic achievement (Lemoine, 2001).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, some teachers are partially to blame for the low level performance of African American students. Teachers expect all students to know a certain amount of information by the time they reach their specific grades. In many cases, African-American students are removed from their classes and placed in special education due to the simple fact their teachers cannot relate to them. In addition, low teacher expectations play an important role in low achievement for African-American students and placement in these classes. They should be given the same educational considerations as other non-English speaking students.

References

- Alleyne, M.C. (1971). Linguistic continuity of Africa in the Caribbean. In H.J. Richards (Eds.), *Topics in Afro-American studies* (pp. 118 -134). New York: Black Academy Press.
- Hart, B. & Riseley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Hartmann, R.R.K., Stork, F.C. (1976). *Dictionary of language and linguistics*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Jencks, C. & Phillips, M. (1998). *The black-white test score gap*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution.

-
- Lemoine, N.R. (2001). Language variation and literacy acquisition in African American students. In J. L. Harris, A.G. Kamhi & K.E. Pollock (Eds.), *Literacy in African American communities*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Association.
- Merriam Webster's collegiate dictionary (10th ed.). Springfield: Merriam-Webster Incorporated.
- National Research Council. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Obiakor, F.E. (1999). Teacher expectations of minority exceptional learners: Impact on "accuracy" of self-concepts. *Exceptional Children*, 66 (1), 39-53.
- Phillips, M., Crouse, J. & Ralph, J. (1998). Does the black-white test score gap widen after children enter school? In C. Jencks & M. Phillips (Eds.), *The black-white test score gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Smith, Ernie A. (1994). *The historical development of African American language*. Los Angeles, CA: Watts Collage Press.
- Washington, J. (2001). Early literacy skills in African American children: Research considerations. *Learning Disabilities Research and practice*, 16(4), 213-221.
- Washington, J. A. & Craig, H.K. (1999). Performances of at-risk, African American preschoolers on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in the Schools*, 30(1), 75-82.