Supporting Students Who Use African American English

How Families Can Become Strong Advocates for Their Children

By Anne H. Charity Hudley, Christine Mallinson, Rachel Samuels, and Kimberly Bigelow

Through our teaching and our research, we have seen the magnificent ways that Black people use language to connect people, families, and communities across the Black diaspora. Unfortunately, Black language and culture do not always get the respect they deserve. Language-based prejudice is common in society and can play a significant and biased role in school-based experiences. It is important for families and educators to understand how racialized beliefs about language can surface in educational settings.*

*For a longer version of this article written for educators, see go.aft.org/1md.

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When students come to school using African American English, they know that many of their relatives, friends, and neighbors speak like them.[1] They may also know that many of their educators do not use this variety of English. The message that African American students may internalize is that educators expect them to learn a new way of communicating—and that it may be at odds with their home language and culture. This messaging can affect students' identities, and over time, the burden takes an emotional toll. Making matters worse, students who use varieties of African American English may not fully benefit from appropriate assessments or resources. Too often, their brilliance goes unrecognized.

As a result, parents and caregivers may need to advocate for their children by connecting with key educators and community members—including guidance counselors, learning specialists, administrators, teachers, and doctors. Through advocacy, we can meet students' needs by working together to ensure that support and resources are fully available for all Black students.

This article focuses on four key educational situations where advocacy may be particularly important: (1) building reading

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and literacy skills; (2) accessing speech, language, and hearing services; (3) developing individualized education plans; and (4) identifying support for gifted and talented students.

1. Building Reading and Literacy Skills

From the very beginning of school—preschool or kindergarten—it's important for your child's teacher to be tuned in to your home language and culture. Be sure to share your child's strengths!

As you share information about your child, ask about your school's approach to literacy instruction. *Are foundational skills being delivered through direct instruction following a specific sequence?* Foundational literacy skills include sound play, letter identification, phonics, and word recognition strategies.* Reading skills are acquired as students learn how speech sounds can be represented with letters. Children's ability to hear and manipulate speech sounds is an important pre-literacy skill. Without instruction that recognizes and values how speech sounds vary, children who use African American English may face challenges mapping their speech sounds onto standardized representations of English in school.

In addition to asking about literacy instruction, ask about the assessments and how students are expected to progress. *What literacy assessments are used and how are student results and progress shared?* Many elementary schools employ reading specialists. These individuals can usually answer questions about the literacy instruction and support your child may receive at school. If your child is having difficulty, there may be opportunities for specialized literacy instruction, such as in-school support or supplemental instruction. *How is a child's use of African American English (or any other variety of English) accounted for in the assessment process? How are students' linguistic and cultural assets affirmed in the classroom?* Many early literacy assessments do not adjust for language variation, and teachers may not know how to adjust reading instruction for students who use African American English. To help your child's teacher learn about African American English, share our article for educators, "Lift Every Voice"; it's available for free at go.aft.org/1md.

*To learn more about these skills, see Nell K. Duke's article on page 14 and Linnea C. Ehri's article on page 17.

As a parent or primary caregiver, you have the right to access information on your child's proficiency and progress. You know your child best. Through open communication channels, you and the school can work together to support the development of your child's reading skills.

2. Accessing Speech, Language, and Hearing Services

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association states that all language varieties are equally valuable communicative and cultural resources.[2] Making this statement a reality takes work, however.

Black students face a double challenge with speech and hearing services that families must be aware of. The first is that Black students may be over-referred for services that they do not need. This happens when standardized assessments are not sensitive to the students' language variety and to the normal range of Black language use. Along with advocating for an appropriate assessment, ask for language samples from your family and your child's community to be considered in the assessment process.[3]

The second challenge is that being unfamiliar with Black language patterns can lead to the under-delivery of services to Black students. In some cases, clinicians may overgeneralize and misattribute linguistic characteristics to African American English that are not part of the variety at all—thereby overlooking actual speech issues that deserve extra supports (like tutoring). How can this happen? Characteristics of Black language varieties can appear similar to signals of potential concerns in other varieties of English.[4] Even clinicians who are aware of Black language patterns can still misdiagnose a student if they do not have the skill to distinguish linguistic detail and context.

Your perspective on your child's language matters. Let clinicians know about the language of your home and community and tell them what you notice. The National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing's member referral service (available at nbaslh.org/member-referral) can also help you find professionals who use or are familiar with African American English and other Black language varieties. (This list only includes

association members who have opted to be included; it might not include all the professionals in your area. Just because a particular professional is not included on this list does not mean that they lack qualifications or competency.)

3. Developing Individualized Education Plans

Coming to terms with your child having a disability can be challenging for any parent or caregiver. For parents of Black students, the experience can be even more daunting. It is well documented that there is an overrepresentation of Black children, particularly Black males, in special education as a result of racial bias.[5] As a result, some parents of Black children may be reluctant to attach a "label" to their child. For others, it may be intimidating to navigate the process from evaluation to the implementation of an individualized education plan (IEP).

If you think your child may have a disability and would benefit from specialized instruction and services, share your concerns with your child's teacher. If you have concerns, the teacher likely does as well. You have the right to request an initial evaluation to determine if your child has a disability. The local educational agency then has 60 days to complete the evaluation and determine eligibility for specialized instruction. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, you (as a parent or caregiver) are a member of your child's IEP team and therefore have a voice in the development of your child's IEP.

In regular and special education, teacher perceptions and bias can play a significant role in students' educational experiences. When teachers have low expectations for students and view them through a deficit mindset (focusing on what students can't do or areas where their skills are weak), students' learning suffers. Bias can also cause specialized services to be inequitably provided for Black families. Evaluations may be delayed, specialized service hours may be distributed unequally, accommodations may be misaligned, and Black students may receive segregated placement.

It is important that educators view students through a strengths-based mindset, aligning their actions and their expectations for students' behavior and academic achievement. Start by asking your child's teacher to share three strengths about your child as a learner. How well do they know your child as a person (e.g., their interests)? It's particularly important to ask questions related to language to see if language variation and cultural differences play a role in your child's assessment.

4. Identifying Support for Gifted and Talented Students

Giftedness occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, yet students of color are underrepresented in gifted programs.[6] As the National Association for Gifted Children affirms, Black students are less likely to be identified as gifted and are less likely to have access to gifted education programs and services.[7] Language contributes to this disparity in two ways. First, as we've mentioned, standardized assessments tend not to be sensitive to language variation and don't recognize strengths in African American English. Second, resources are not always transparently offered. Parents and caregivers may not have a full understanding of what programs and services are needed and available for their gifted children.

Author Joy Lawson Davis has dedicated her career to studying the experiences of gifted Black students. She explains that being gifted and talented and also African American creates a "double minority" situation and that Black gifted children may have unique differences in language, demeanor, interests, creative pursuits, intellectual capacity, and so on.[8] Feeling judged or scrutinized by peers and others as "too Black to be gifted" or "not Black enough" can affect Black gifted students throughout their educational journey.

Strong family and community connections are critical for helping Black gifted students remain resilient, tenacious, and strong in spirit as they navigate educational climates that are not always fully welcoming to or inclusive of high-achieving students of color. Davis's book, *Bright, Talented, and Black: A Guide for Families of Black Gifted Learners*, provides guidance and resources to help parents and caregivers advocate for their Black gifted students.

Conclusion

The language of Black students, families, and communities is an invaluable cultural and educational resource. With insight into how your child uses language, combined with the resources we have provided here, you have the knowledge and skill to be the advocate we need to help bring about the linguistic justice that all Black students deserve. □

For the endnotes, see go.aft.org/n7f.