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The Mythology of Black English

By Samuel L. Banks

The focus of this commentary is the systematic and pervasive failure to educate Black children and youths in the nation's public schools because of (1) an overwhelming absence of belief in their educability and (2) the resuscitation of the specious and diversionary issue of "Black English."

In terms of the first point, lamentably, it is a part of our documented history that our nation has demonstrated a consistent and palpable record which affirms, as reflected in the old separate but unequal doctrine and the current absence of adequate human and monetary resources, an egregious lack of support for Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans and the poor. Blacks, America's largest racial minority, have borne the educational exclusion and denial.

It should be noted, however, that Eastern and Southern European immigrants who came to the United States in the 1880s and the 1920s also encountered fierce resistance and hostility. A comment of Oscar Handlin is probing and revealing germane to this point:

Learned men had told them they were hardly human at all; their head shapes were different, their bodily structure faulty, the weight of their brains deficient. If they were Italians, they were not really like the Italians who had a claim to the mantle of Rome; if they were Greeks, they were not genuine Greeks descended from the Hellenes. (The Uprooted, Oscar Handlin, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1951) pp. 294-295.)

The most severe criticism and traducement, however, were directed toward other ethnic groups. Black Americans were subjected to the most vitriolic and caustic attacks. John Sharp Williams, a

southern congressman, declared in 1898:

You could shipwreck 10,000 illiterate white Americans on a desert island, and in three weeks, they would have a fairly good government, conceived and administered upon fairly democratic lines. You could shipwreck 10,000 negroes (sic), every one of whom was a graduate of Harvard University, and in less than three years, they would have retrograded governmentally; half of the men would have been killed, and the other half would have two wives a piece. (From Slavery to Freedom, John Hope Franklin, (New York: Vantage Books, 1969), p. 58.)

The attacks would continue with intensity. Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina would proclaim:

We have done our best (i.e., disfranchisement and subjugation). We have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate the last one of them (i.e., Black voters). We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them. We are not ashamed of it. (Black Protest, Joanne Grant, Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1968), p. 24.)

The essence of the noxious and denigrative views of Williams and Tillman and others supported the view of the Black American as a "suborder" of human life. Although early white immigrant groups, too, experienced rejection and denial, it should be indicated that by the third generation their grandchildren were entrenched solidly in the socio-economic mainstream of American life. Black Americans, after more than 20 generations in this country, are largely excluded from the socio-economic center of American life because of persistent and endemic institutional racism.

The nation's 16,000 school districts, serving 46 million children and youths, have failed to demonstrate a fundamental and inclusive belief in the educability of Black children and youths. Academic excellence, serious intellec-

tual inquiry and a passion for high achievement will not become a reality in large urban school districts populated primarily by Blacks and the poor until a concerted and relentless effort is made to set in place an educational milieu supportive of the educability of all students. Human and monetary resources, too, must be put in place to accomplish this long overdue goal.

The Illusion of Black English

The employment of the stratagem of "Black English" is supportive of the historical exclusion and denial of Black children and youths. The truth is that there is no such animal as "Black English." In fact, in the United States, there are two basic forms of English: standard and nonstandard. To be sure, there are other variations of the two basic forms of English as reflected in regionalism and/or provincialism or a patois peculiar to a particular subculture. Dialectical differences would fall within the purview of nonstandard English.

"Black English," as I have indicated, is a false and diversionary issue. The central and overriding issue is the process of acquiring the academic-vocational and social skills and understanding necessary for survival in a white majority-controlled technical society. Those who romanticize the value of "Black English" or other dialectical proclivities are talking about somebody else's children; not their own.

A year ago, the universally acclaimed author James Baldwin provided a pungent, penetrating and provocative apologia in support of "Black English." (New York Times, July 29, 1979.) Baldwin, notwithstanding his enormous contribution to civil and human rights, did not become world renowned and wealthy through the medium of "Black English." His adroit and flawless use of standard English has earned him international acclaim.

A recent Federal court decision in Ann Arbor, Michigan, focusing on "Black English" has been the occasion for widespread confusion. United States District Judge Charles Joiner held that "The unconscious but evident attitude of the teachers toward the home language causes psychological barriers to learning." Accordingly, he ordered the Ann Arbor School District to take specific steps to assist teachers in identifying children who spoke "Black English" in order that standard English might be taught more effectively. Judge Joiner did not order the teaching of Black English.

What, then, are the fundamental characteristics of "Black English." The essential elements, briefly stated, involve the use of third-person singular verbs without adding the "s" or "z" sounds. Examples include: "he fly," "he think," "she run," "she sink." Additionally, the dropping of "l" or "r" sounds, the elimination of final consonants and the use of the "f" sound for the "th" and other dialectical variations (viz., "I be sick," "he be tired," etc.)

The utilization of these dialectical devices in schools and the larger society constitutes a blueprint for educational disaster. The reason for these dialectical propensities, as suggested in the earlier part of this commentary, is an historical ethos that excluded and denied equality of opportunity to all Americans. The language (i.e., standard English) of the majority is the route to power and vertical mobility. A major study by Christopher Jencks et al., *Who Gets Ahead: The Determinants of Economic Success in America*, lends strong support to this point. Black and non-white children and youths must be taught by teachers and administrators who believe in their educability and ability, with equal opportunity, to function effectively in the larger white society.

The Road Ahead: Recommendations

The following recommendations are

offered as a means of fostering and sustaining success in school and the broader community for Black children and youths:

Insistence by parents, churches, civic, fraternal and community groups on the highest level of instruction for all children and youths.

Development by schools of a sense of self-worth and a positive identity in all children and youths.

Schools and universities should provide instruction for prospective teachers in regard to dialectical differences within school populations and the larger society.

School districts, particularly in large urban areas, should institute on-going inservice programs for teachers in regard to major dialectical and linguistical differences affecting their school populations.

A broad-based and systematic emphasis, mindful of dialectical differences, on standard English as a means of communication.

Development of instruction strategies that assist teachers in helping students to acquire and utilize linguistic flexibility. The concept of linguistic flexibility may be defined as knowing when and where to use standard or non-standard English.

Provision of believable and effective role models for students.

In summary, genuine provision for high quality education for students of all races represents a reality whose time has come. The mastery and utilization of standard English in school and the marketplace are essential to achieving and maintaining upward mobility. Black students must not only discuss the excitement and joy of learning, but the power of standard language.

The utilization of the false issue of "Black English" in order to effect the transmogrification of the sedulous quest

of Black Americans for educational and socio-economic parity in the American body politic must be stopped. The stakes are too high as we as a nation prepare to confront the challenges and rigors of the 21st century. □

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