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Abbin' Ain't Raw: Ebonics in the Classroom

by Rebecca S. Murphy

While taking a survey on Ebonics in a Bloomington High School classroom, three Black students giggled and tried to think of all the Ebonics that they spoke. One student included me in their brainstorming, asking if I knew any of the words that they were coming up with. He laughed because I did not know any of the words. He included with his survey this list for my own education.

All of the students acknowledged the existence of Ebonics and that speaking it has both advantages and disadvantages in society. Their sense of humor made the issue personal to me and made me realize that some sort of resolution needs to be reached soon. If a resolution is not achieved, then an entire generation of students, including these kids, will be at a disadvantage when they try to make their mark on the world. The issue of ebonics in the classroom is a highly charged one that needs to be addressed with sensitivity and open minds. However, there is a clear direction that educators need to turn to – students must be prepared for

Ebonics is the term used to describe the unique speech patterns commonly associated with the Black population of the United States of America. The term comes from a blend of the words “ebony” and “phonics.” Much of the discussion concerning Ebonics arises from the difficulty in labeling Ebonics as a dialect, simple slang, or a language. There are three determining factors that differentiate classes of speech patterns: vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Most sources eliminate the possibility that Ebonics could be simply slang, since slang concerns mainly vocabulary and is likely to change drastically within short periods of time. Thus, the controversy fluctuates between language and dialect. According to Steven Fox, language is defined as “... a pattern of words, spoken or written, that is mutually understandable by a group of people and not understandable by persons outside that group” (238). A dialect, however, is “... a subgroup within a language” (Fox 238). People who speak different languages cannot understand each other while people who speak different dialects generally can understand each other. Yet, this still does not clear up the conflict surrounding Ebonics. Many people argue that Ebonics is a language because other English-speakers cannot understand it; although it is generally agreed that those who speak Ebonics can understand Standard English and its dialects. Others argue that the differences in grammar patterns only designate that Ebonics is a different dialect, much like a Southern “y’all” designates a dialect. I personally think of Ebonics as a dialect, because I believe that it is intelligible by other English-speakers, with time and slight effort.

Regardless of how it is labeled, Ebonics is different from other English dialects because it is associated with a particular race and class of people. Other dialects such as those found in the South or Appalachia are regional and apply to almost everyone from that region. Ebonics, on the other hand, is unique to the Black, working class, lower class and poor population of America, and has become associated with the images evoked by the aforementioned factors. Images such as “... poverty, crime, unemployment, substandard housing” (Fox 239) and most importantly, a lack of a decent education. Although these images are often misrepresentations of the actual lives of working class and lower class blacks, the stigma of the stereotype still harms all of those involved.

When connected with education, Ebonics becomes particularly important. In many cases, students come to teachers with no knowledge of Standard English, which is generally considered to be the universal dialect. These students have grown up in environments where only

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Ebonics is spoken. Teachers of all subjects must then decide or have the decision made for them whether to teach Standard English to their students and insist upon its use in their classrooms or to allow students to continue speaking Ebonics.

For many educators and parents, Ebonics is a form of speech unique to Black people and is an integral part of their cultural heritage. Therefore, students should be encouraged to embrace their cultural heritage by speaking Ebonics both at home and at school. Additionally, these adults believe that students should not be forced to speak Standard English because this suppresses the use of Ebonics which could lead to the political and social oppression of a minority's means of expression. As one student at Bloomington High School states, Ebonics is a way "... of showing our individuality." Many teachers, then, choose not to teach Standard English to children because it quells the cultural heritage of the students. Moreover, in some cases, administration has forced teachers not to correct their students for the same idealistic reasons, as well as from the fear of backlash from parents and community leaders. Some community members have responded to a proposal for a "zero tolerance" campaign against bad grammar in Prince George's County, Maryland with sentiments such as: "the proposal is an attack on black students, who make up 73% of the student body"(Henry 10D).

Educators also make passive choices in regards to Ebonics. In order to avoid making a decision that could draw fire from any angle, educators choose not to address the issue at all and simply to continue teaching the same lessons while watching more and more children fail because they cannot understand the dialect in which the educational canon is written. Worse, these students are also unable to communicate their thoughts clearly and are then graded down. These educators often mean well but cannot understand why their students who do speak English are doing so poorly. Others may believe "... the position that some people take - implied if not stated by media coverage of Oakland [school district]'s actions - that students who use Ebonics cannot learn [Standard English]" (239). Others believe that students who speak Ebonics, usually Black, poor, working class students, are already caught in a system that dooms them to failure so they might as well be taught only the bare necessities they will need for the destitute life they will most likely live. These educators usually believe that those students who are motivated to break the cycle of poverty are also motivated to learn Standard English on their own.

However, both of the aforementioned actions – active

preservation and passive allowance of the use of Ebonics in the classroom – are eventually harmful to the students who speak Ebonics. It is a widely accepted notion that “... without language proficiency a person cannot expect to succeed in the adult world”(Fox 237). The first obstacle in the adult world that mastery of only Ebonics causes is in education. Mark Gura asserts that students who must face school knowing only Ebonics must “... struggle with a daunting body of information that they are ill-equipped to master” (87). A student at Bloomington High School agrees. When she was asked “Should you have to speak Standard English in school?” she replied, “In rough classes, yes.” If students do not have the communication skills to function in school, they will certainly have a difficult time simply keeping up with the work, much less succeeding.

If a student overcomes the obstacle of school without fluency in Standard English and manages to graduate, the job market does not hold many bright opportunities for her. Society views people who speak Ebonics as less educated than those with other accepted dialects. Regardless of whether this is right or wrong, it is true. An employer will not hire someone to represent a company – in any manner – who appears uneducated. A graduate who is unable to function in Standard English will generally only be considered for lower-level jobs, which are usually positions that do not offer the high wages and advancement opportunities that others do. Regardless of how much a person actually knows, how well he interacts with others, or how developed his leadership abilities, he will most likely end up stuck in an unsatisfying, low-paying job.

Teachers have a responsibility to prepare their students for success in whatever field they might possibly want to go into. It is the teacher’s job to open as many doors for students’ futures as possible. If teachers do not insist that students learn and speak Standard English, they are closing doors and eliminating options early in a child’s career. Still, teachers should not disregard Ebonics as part of a legitimate cultural heritage. It is a vital part of many students’ identity and should not be denied and eliminated. Rather, teachers should teach students about the appropriate uses of both languages. In fact, fluency in both dialects can be a distinct advantage for graduates over those who can only speak Standard English.

Although the issue will be debated for years to come, the inevitable solution is available now. Students must be given the opportunity to learn skills to help them succeed in life. In fact, teachers must actively teach students these skills. Not to do so because of fear of

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offending someone or obliterating someone's cultural heritage, or through a nihilistic sense of inescapable failure is unacceptable. "... People of all races express the belief that, if young people can escape the language, they might also escape the poverty and the other problems that seem to go with it"(Fox 239). An open dialogue – such as I had with my students when I was giving out a survey – between the teacher and her students about this issue can help to facilitate Ebonic's sometimes-frustrating addition to the traditional curriculum. All students deserve a chance to break the cycle of failure without giving up their heritage. Teaching a respect for Ebonics while at the same time additionally teaching Standard English is essential to maintaining one's heritage while making one's self open to opportunities.

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