

## Reading Performance and Dialectal Variation

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Learning to read is at once the most fundamental and the most significant literacy skill acquired by school-age children. There is extensive evidence suggesting that children who read well experience academic success, and those who do not read well fare poorly academically. This latter group of poor readers has also been identified as contributing significantly to the overall numbers of school dropouts, single parents, juvenile delinquents, and imprisoned adults (Maguin, Loeber, & LeMahieu, 1993; Nettles & Perna, 1997; Singham, 1998). In addition, children who do not acquire functional levels of literacy constitute a significant percentage of the undereducated and underemployed adults in the United States (Koretz, 1987; Singham, 1998; Smith, 1984; U.S. Department of Commerce & U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). Slavin, Karweit, Wasik, Madden, and Dolan (1994) reported that the likelihood of a child graduating from high school can be reliably predicted by his or her reading skill level at the end of third grade.

A recent report by the National Research Council's Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) identified several variables that place children at high risk for reading difficulties. Children who are poor, African American or Hispanic, and educated in urban schools are at great risk for poor reading outcomes. By implication, children who are not members of these large and growing minority groups, who are middle to upper income, and are educated in suburban schools have good reading outcomes, comparatively (Snow et al., 1998). These demographic disparities have been the sub-

ject of much discussion and concern, but currently are not as well understood as they need to be.

The reading difficulties experienced by African American children in particular are of longstanding concern and have received considerable attention in the literature. The extant literature is replete with studies and essays detailing the gap in achievement between African American children and their White peers (Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Bankston & Caldas, 1997; Baratz-Snowden, 1987; Delpit, 1995; Entwisle & Alexander, 1988; Fishback & Baskin, 1991; Singham, 1998; University of Michigan, 1989). This achievement gap reportedly appears prior to entry into kindergarten and persists into adulthood (Jencks & Phillips, 1998b). As a consequence of the attention and the variety of explanations explored, the nature and magnitude of the problem have been well articulated. However, the gap in reading achievement, mathematics, and science that exists between African American children and their White peers persists, with little progress made toward resolution in the past decade (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 1997). It will be important for future work in this area to focus on providing solutions that can be acted upon by the classroom teachers charged with teaching African American children to read.

This chapter provides a review of the literature on reading and achievement difficulties experienced by African American children. It is impossible to separate the reading problems experienced by these children from the widely referenced "Black-White achievement gap" that exists between African American and White students. The interrelationships between reading difficulties and overall achievement outcomes is undeniable. A brief overview of the factors that have been implicated as critical influences is presented, with specific attention to the possible relationship of dialectal variations to the reading problem. Finally, important future directions for research on language and reading with this population are discussed.

### **DISCREPANCIES IN READING PERFORMANCE**

The Black-White achievement gap is not new. One of the earliest documented reports of the disparity between the reading abilities of African American children and their White peers was recorded in 1910 as a part of a report to the general assembly in the state of Georgia (Fishback & Baskin, 1991). This early report described a "literacy gap" between African American and White children characterized primarily by difficulty in learning to read, and overall underachievement of African American students. Although the gap has narrowed somewhat over the past 8 decades,

it continues to be a matter of concern among educators today. In its most recent annual report, *The Condition of Education*, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) charted trends in reading proficiency by age (9, 13, and 17 years old) and race (White, African American, and Hispanic) from 1971 to 1994 as measured by the NAEP (1997). The NAEP report indicated that the reading performance of African American students was significantly higher in 1994 than in 1971. Between 1971 and 1988 the scores of African American students on many standardized tests improved at a pace that was much faster than that of their White peers. However, this positive performance trajectory was not sustained into the 1990s for African American 13- and 17-year-old students, and the reading performance of 9-year-olds has plateaued since the late 1980s. The scores for 13- and 17-year-old students declined significantly in the late 1980s, with an upward trend apparent by the mid-1990s. These scores have not regained the peak levels achieved in the 1980s (NAEP, 1997; Nettles & Perna, 1997).

After many years of steady progress, the reasons for this decline and subsequent increase in reading performance remain unclear. In 1987, Baratz-Snowden cautioned that the upward trends in achievement reported by the NAEP and other longitudinal surveys would not be sustained without dramatic changes in the educational opportunities for African American children. She suggested that several variables that characterize the life circumstances of urban African American children, especially high rates of poverty and its correlates (e.g., single female heads of households and teenage parenting), were increasing and would have a negative impact on the long-term achievement gains of African American students. Baratz-Snowden predicted further that a decline in overall achievement for African Americans would occur unless targeted interventions were established to reverse these negative social trends. Although these factors alone have not proven to be the cause of this decline, Grissmer, Flanagan, and Williamson (1998) suggested that socioeconomic and educational gains resulting from the civil rights movement likely contributed significantly to the gains reported in the 1980s. Unfortunately, in the 1990s, African American children are still two to three times as likely to be raised in poverty as their White peers (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Duncan, 1996; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997; Nettles & Perna, 1997), and by implication the hardships represented by an impoverished environment may be reflected in their poor academic performance.

The increases in academic performance in the 1980s reported by the NAEP have been widely presented as evidence that progress is being made toward closing the literacy/achievement gap. However, Baratz-Snowden (1987) appropriately noted that these gains have been modest at best and that the rate of change suggests an alarmingly low probability

of closing the gap before the mid 21st century. Specifically, even with these gains in performance the 1996 median score on the NAEP for African American students in reading, science, and math remains disturbing at the 20th to 25th percentile compared to White students who participated in the assessment (Grissmer et al., 1998).

### Contributing Factors

Six broad factors have been presented as critical influences on the poor reading and overall academic performance of African American children, as follows:

- Factor 1: Unequal opportunities historically because of racial segregation.
- Factor 2: Low socioeconomic status (SES) and its correlates, specifically income and level of education of the primary caregiver.
- Factor 3: Low cognitive skills.
- Factor 4: Poor home literacy environments.
- Factor 5: Low teacher expectations.
- Factor 6: Interference of African American English (AAE) dialect in the reading process.

No single one of these factors has been determined to entirely explain the literacy gap, but each is widely accepted as important for understanding the gap. The sixth factor, dialect interference, is discussed at length following a brief discussion of the other five factors. The section on future research needs focuses on the interactions between dialect and reading as well.

**Factor 1: Unequal Opportunities.** Prior to its inception in the 1960s and 1970s, desegregation of the nation's public schools was widely expected to be one of the most important, positive influences on the reading achievement of African American children. Accordingly, the gap in reading scores that had come to characterize the performances of African American children when compared to their White peers was expected to disappear when equal opportunities for obtaining a quality education were achieved through public school desegregation.

We now know that desegregation of public school classrooms has failed to close the gap in the reading skills of African American children and their White peers. Racial differences in reading skills are evident even in desegregated schools, and the racial mix of a school does not appear to have a sustainable impact on the reading scores of African American children (Jencks & Phillips, 1998b; Phillips, Crouse, & Ralph, 1998). In an interesting statistical reanalysis of the data presented in 1910 by the Georgia Department of Education, Margo (1987) manipulated variables asso-

ciated with unequal educational access such as poor or absent textbooks in an effort to neutralize the impact of segregated education. He found that equalizing these school inputs would have eliminated only 40% to 50% of the considerable gap in achievement between African American and White students. Subsequent investigations have supported this finding. These investigations indicate that only one third to one half of the variance in academic achievement can be explained by factoring in desegregation (Fishback & Baskin, 1991; Orazem, 1987). Although this is a considerable percentage of the variance, it leaves a significant portion of the variance unexplained. Theoretically, desegregation represented equal access to educational resources. In reality, segregation was not the only barrier to obtaining equal opportunities, and desegregation as a single solution was not sufficient to erase the achievement gap.

**Factor 2: Socioeconomic Status.** Children from low-SES backgrounds are at high risk for academic failure. Low-SES children perform below established norms in literacy on national, state, and school assessments, and these performance differences increase as they progress to later grades in school (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Entwisle et al., 1997). African American children are impoverished at more than two to three times the rate of their White peers (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1996; Entwisle et al., 1997; Nettles & Perna, 1997). Since African American children are disproportionately represented among the nation's poor, poverty is an oft-cited explanation for poor reading performance and the related academic difficulties encountered in this population.

In an investigation of 2nd, 4th, and 6th-grade readers who were low-income, Chall et al. (1990) reported a disturbing trend in the development of reading. Specifically, the reading skills of their low-income subjects evidenced marked deceleration with increasing grades. Around 4th grade, when schools shift away from teaching the basic skills of reading and expect students to use reading to acquire new knowledge, a rapid deceleration in reading performance began and continued through the 11th grade, the upper grade level examined in this investigation. Others have observed this phenomenon as well. Nettles and Perna (1997) presented similar findings in their report on the educational status of African American preschool, elementary, and secondary school children. They determined that with each increasing grade the performance of African American children who are low-income drifts further away from the performance of their middle-SES peers. By implication, at 4th grade, when reading becomes the vehicle for learning new information, performance in subject areas such as math, science, and social studies that depend on the strength of a student's reading skills for mastery are adversely affected as well. Indeed, in our own research program at the University of Michi-

gan we compared the math and science scores of a sample of 55 middle- and low-SES African American 1st and 3rd graders to their reading scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT). The MAT is a nationally used standardized assessment instrument that is administered to all children in Metropolitan Detroit beginning in 1st grade. A logistic regression analysis revealed that for these normally developing subjects, 47% of the unique variance in math and 17% of the unique variance in science could be explained by the students' reading levels.<sup>1</sup>

Although SES is frequently represented as a difference in income status, when income alone is used as a predictor variable for language and/or reading it seldom yields informative results. It is the social status factors that covary with poverty that have been determined to be most informative, and of these factors educational level of a child's parents or primary caregiver often has proved most revealing (Fazio, Naremore, & Connell, 1996; Margo, 1987; Washington & Craig, 1999). This variable continues to be implicated as one that critically differentiates children who are poor readers from those who will be good readers (Chall et al., 1990), and those with poor or good vocabulary skills compared to age-mates (Washington & Craig, 1999). Vocabulary skills, both receptive and expressive, have been identified as important component skills for good readers.

Although SES and its covariates are important for understanding differences in literacy rates for children of all races, further examination of data obtained from African American children reveals that African American children who are middle SES are experiencing measurable academic and reading difficulty as well. Middle-SES African American children exhibit higher rates of reading success than African American children from low-income homes, but a significantly higher rate of reading failure than White children from comparable socioeconomic backgrounds (Singham, 1998). Singham examined the performance of African American children in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a middle- to upper-middle-class suburb of Cleveland. He concluded that despite the resources available to all of the children in this community, African American children from middle-SES homes performed considerably below their White peers on standardized reading tests. Regardless of income, African Americans historically are overrepresented in the bottom tail of composite test score distributions and underrepresented in the upper tail (Hedges & Nowell, 1998). The underachievement of African American children from middle-SES homes has been most difficult to explain. If SES was the predominant variable impacting the reading performance of African American children, by virtue of their middle-SES status and the assumption of increased resources and higher parental education associated with that status, mid-

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<sup>1</sup>MAT Math/Reading:  $F(46) = 27.54, p = .000$ ; MAT Science/Reading:  $F(46) = 3.98, p < .05$ .

dle-SES children should be performing at comparable levels with their White peers. Why are African American children from middle-SES homes not faring better? This will be an important question to address for future reading research with African American children.

**Factor 3: Low Cognition.** The overrepresentation of African Americans in the lower tails of standardized distributions and underrepresentation in the higher tails characterizes not only academic testing but extends to tests of cognition as well. These disparities in performance by race have decreased over time in the lower tail, but not in the upper tail of cognitive or academic distributions (Hedges & Nowell, 1998). Unfortunately, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) and others have used these performance differences on normative distributions to argue that African Americans are genetically predisposed to be less intelligent than their White counterparts. According to this viewpoint, the low-average and below-average performance that has been described for African American students should be expected and accepted. The human costs of this viewpoint are that our attempts to impact the SES, educational, and environmental contexts of our African American students will be perceived as futile and will not even be attempted.

Acceptance of the now infamous claim of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) rests on the assumption that instruments designed to measure IQ are culturally appropriate, and that they provide a valid index of an individual's innate ability. After decades of empirical testing, most African Americans and Whites discount the racial differences identified through cognitive testing as a reflection of the racial or cultural bias inherent in these instruments (Jencks, 1997). Furthermore, most generally agree that IQ tests measure learned rather than innate abilities (Jencks, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Nisbett, 1998), making an individual's performance vulnerable to environmental and cultural influences. Thus, it is now widely accepted that cognitive inferiority is not the basis of performance differences for African American children, and most current cognitive scores underestimate the IQs of African American children.

**Factor 4: Home Literacy Environment.** Is there a mismatch between the practices of the school and those of the African American community that contributes in some significant way to the difficulties encountered when teaching African American children to read? It is widely agreed that the home literacy environment contributes significantly to the poor reading outcomes of African American children, yet its specific contribution has not been measured adequately. Allen and Boykin (1992) cited differences in SES combined with cultural differences as the most significant contributors to this mismatch. They claimed that differences in the socio-cultural belief systems of African American families creates a cultural dis-

continuity between the school and the child's culture that significantly impacts performance, and that this was especially true for children from low-SES homes. Nichols (1977) asserted that African American families and schools ascribed differential value to reading, affecting the personal motivation of the African American child learning to read.

The value placed on reading in African American homes has been indexed most often using parent surveys that seek information regarding the number of books present in the home and the frequency with which the caregiver reads to a child. Using this methodology to investigate the home literacy environment as a possible predictor variable for reading achievement, Chall et al. (1990) determined that two of the strongest predictors of both reading and vocabulary knowledge were the literacy environment in the home and the mother's educational level. African American children who had more books and were read to at home performed better on reading assessments than those children who had few books and were not read to at all or were read to infrequently (Chall et al.).

Most authors agree that the home literacy environment is important for understanding and impacting the reading performance of any child. However, research with African American families is complicated by the failure to distinguish between cultural values and practices. Clearly, a parent's wish for his or her child to perform well in school is not a value that is exclusive to any one community. The desire to have children experience academic success and attain reading proficiency can be assumed to be shared values by most parents in both the African American and White communities. What we cannot assume is that these shared values are manifested as shared practices. For example, the frequency of book reading experiences and the availability of a large number of books in the home represent practices that have been demonstrated to reflect the value placed on the development of reading skills in middle-class, White homes. Book reading time and number of books may not be valid indicators for African American families. In the families participating in our research program at the University of Michigan, for example, we have noted that our African American parents tend to purchase educational toys and aids such as flash cards and workbooks in order to encourage development of literacy skills in their young children. This anecdotal observation suggests that perhaps the literacy focus in these families would not be accurately captured by counting the numbers of books purchased or read. Literacy practices that represent culturally appropriate indicators of the value placed on reading achievement in African American families need to be addressed.

**Factor 5: Low Teacher Expectations.** The current Secretary of Education (Riley, 1999) assailed the "tyranny of low teacher expectations" when discussing low student achievement in America's schools. Although he was not



talking about African American children in particular; low teacher expectations have been implicated in the literature repeatedly as an important influence on the poor reading skills of African American children. Chall et al. (1990) identified the "extent of challenge" presented by the teacher for his or her African American students to be the most potent variable influencing vocabulary gain and comprehension in children learning to read. Entwisle and Alexander (1988) investigated the role of teacher expectations on African American student performance and found that students for whom teachers have high expectations are held to stricter standards, called on more, and more often pressed for answers, thus improving classroom performance. Students for whom expectations are low are subjected to more managerial behaviors, contributing little to improvement in performance. Ferguson (1998) presented evidence that teachers' beliefs about student ability affected African American students more than they affected Whites.

There have been many explanations offered concerning child- or teacher-centered variables that might elicit low expectations for African American students by their classroom teachers. These variables include some that have been discussed in the preceding sections, namely, the student's SES and perceived cognitive ability. One of the most frequently cited variables, however, is the student's use of a cultural dialect that differs from Standard Classroom English (SCE).

Most African American children speak African American English to some extent, regardless of SES (Washington & Craig, 1994, 1998). Goodman and Buck (1973) described AAE as a low-status dialect that puts African American children at risk for reading failure because of rejection of the dialect by teachers. Markham (1984) cited informed teachers with positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity as an essential component of successful literacy instruction. The tendency on the part of teachers to correct dialectal miscues in reading more frequently than nondialectal miscues has been documented repeatedly and cited as evidence of low teacher acceptance of dialectal variations (Barnitz, 1980; Cunningham, 1976-1977; Goodman & Buck, 1973; Markham, 1984). For example, Cunningham reported that during oral reading, teachers corrected dialectal miscues 78% of the time. In contrast, nondialectal miscues were corrected only 27% of the time. When asked to explain when correction was offered versus when it was not, these teachers indicated that miscues resulting in changes in meaning and those that were deemed grammatically unacceptable were targeted. The AAE features used by the children during oral reading exercises seldom resulted in meaning changes from the text read. By implication, grammatical unacceptability was the primary reason for correction. It is the belief of many teachers and researchers that the use of AAE interferes with both reading and writing instruction, but, as discussed in the next section, empirical support for this view is mixed.

**Factor 6: Dialect Interference.** Historically, discussions of the relationship between AAE and reading skill development closely paralleled those presented in the early literature on AAE dialect. Early linguists investigating the characteristics and use of AAE engaged in considerable debate about the integrity of the dialect. Proponents of the *deficit hypothesis* considered AAE a deficient form of Standard American English (SAE) that oversimplified the grammatical rules of English, resulting in incorrect productions (Bereiter, 1966). Conversely, linguists supporting the *difference hypothesis* contended that AAE was a systematic, rule-governed variation of English that was rich in both form and content (Fasold & Wolfram, 1970; Labov, 1970, 1972; Wolfram, 1971; Wolfram & Fasold, 1974). Ultimately, the difference hypothesis received the most empirical support, was accepted widely, and governs our thinking currently about AAE.

Parallel discussions about AAE were taking place in the reading literature as educators sought to understand the source of the reading difficulties documented for African American children. In this early work, the question most frequently explored was whether AAE provided the strong oral foundation necessary to support reading, or whether it was a deficient form of English that did not support learning to read. Cunningham (1976–1977) succinctly presented three prevailing views that characterized most investigations in the late 1960s and 1970s, and the implications of each, as follows:

1. AAE is a deficient form of English that provides an inadequate language base for development of written language skills. Thus, it is important to teach SAE to African American children.
2. AAE is linguistically different from SAE. The difficulty encountered with reading is due to a mismatch between oral language and the language of instruction, making a union of the two desirable.
3. AAE is a low-status dialect, and teacher attitudes toward the dialect negatively impact reading development. Changes in teacher attitude would have a profound effect on efforts to teach African American children to read.

Mounting evidence in the linguistic literature of the systematic nature of the dialect and the rules governing its use, combined with reading studies designed to establish linguistic competence (Torrey, 1983), quickly silenced those who supported the view that use of AAE provided insufficient language structure to support reading. An alternative explanation that gained widespread acceptance and continues to be implicated was the concept of *dialect interference*.

Goodman (1965) and Baratz (1969) hypothesized that there would be a direct relationship between dialect divergence and reading success. They suggested that AAE speakers presented with SAE text were faced

with an additional transformation involving translation from one language system to the other that interfered with reading comprehension and fluency. Subsequent investigations of the role of dialect were inconclusive, however, with some supporting the dialect interference hypothesis and others challenging its validity. These investigations focused primarily on the influence of the phonological and morphosyntactic features of AAE on reading comprehension or production.

Melmed (1970) and Rystrom (1973–1974) examined selected phonological features of AAE for their effect on the comprehension of words containing these features represented in SAE phonology. Both investigations determined that comprehension was unaffected by the presence of AAE phonological variations. Hart, Guthrie, and Winfield (1980) also determined that AAE phonology did not interfere significantly with their first-grade subjects' ability to learn sound-symbol correspondences. These low-income children performed comparably to their White peers on this phonemic task. Other studies focused on the phonology of AAE have also failed to find significant evidence of dialect interference in reading (Gemake, 1981; Harber, 1977).

Investigations of the influence of morphosyntactic features of AAE and reading have found significant influences. Bartel and Axelrod (1973) investigated the relationship between low reading achievement and the extent of use of AAE syntax and morphology in African American ninth graders. The participants were asked to read aloud a series of sentences from the Gray Oral Reading Tests (Wiederholt & Bryant, 1992), which were audiorecorded and analyzed for the presence of AAE features. The findings of this investigation indicated that participants who used the most dialect during reading also had the lowest reading levels, supporting the dialect interference hypothesis. Steffensen, Reynolds, McClure, and Guthrie (1982) examined the performance of African American third, sixth, and ninth graders on reading comprehension tasks using cloze procedures. They determined that their AAE-speaking subjects produced significantly more verb errors compared to SAE speakers and concluded that differences in AAE verb morphology interfered with comprehension of verb forms in SAE. Ames, Rosen, and Olson (1971) and Baratz (1969) reported similar findings in studies of oral reading with low-SES African American children, concluding that the interference of the dialect significantly reduced overall reading skills in their subjects.

Notable exceptions to these findings of dialect interference in reading include Nolen (1972), who reported that the reading performance of 156 African American second- and fourth-grade children who were speakers of AAE did not seem to be affected by their use of AAE. Even when reading materials were presented in AAE rather than SAE the performance of these subjects was unaffected. The White children in the control group read sig-

nificantly better than the African American children overall, but Nolen concluded that dialect did not appear to contribute to this outcome. These findings have been supported by others (Simons & Johnson, 1974; Troutman & Falk, 1982). Further, in a reexamination of Goodman's (1965) original dialect interference hypothesis, Goodman and Buck (1973) performed a miscue analysis on passages read aloud by AAE-speaking children assigned to a high- and a low-proficiency reading group. They concluded that there was no cause-and-effect relationship between increased dialect involvement and low reading proficiency. Students in the low-proficiency group as well as those in the high-proficiency group both tended to do some dialect shifting in their miscues. Goodman and Buck hypothesized that it was in fact the rejection of the dialect by teachers that interfered with the natural process of learning to read and undermined the confidence of the reader, rather than direct interference of the dialect in the reading process. Dummett (1984) also supported this nonlinguistic factor as the most likely explanation for the reading problem experienced by African American children.

Overall, the role of dialectal variations remains unclear. Many studies have focused primarily on the phonological features of AAE because of their perceived importance for attaining phonological awareness skills. Although they are far from conclusive, most of these studies agree that the phonological variations that characterize AAE probably contribute very little to the reading problem. This outcome is not surprising. Phonological awareness is centrally a metalinguistic skill, whereas the phonological features of AAE are motor patterning rules. Articulation differences such as those represented by many regional dialects across the United States have not been implicated in reading deficits, so the phonological features of AAE may be of minor import to the reading difficulties experienced by African American children.

The impact of the morphological and syntactic features of AAE seems less clear. Current discussions of reading skill development continue to suggest that dialect affects reading in African American children in some way, even if it is not well understood (Delpit, 1995). Most would agree with Goodman and Buck (1973) that there is no direct cause-effect relationship between reading deficits and AAE, but that the child's linguistic differences seem to have some measurable influence on the attainment of reading proficiency.

It is notable that most of the studies investigating the relationship of AAE and reading were written more than 15 years ago, with the majority appearing in the 1970s. Although no clear answer emerged from these studies, the question of the contribution of linguistic diversity to reading problems was essentially abandoned as researchers explored explanations in other domains. Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1992) suggested that researchers became impatient with the search for sociolinguistic explanations because no direct cause-and-effect link was apparent. Like the other factors pre-

sented in the preceding sections, dialectal variation likely contributes to the variance in reading performance, but does not provide a single, clear-cut explanation for the difficulty with reading experienced by African American children. Perhaps more than any of the other factors, investigations of dialect interference have raised as many questions about its influence as have been answered. The remaining questions and paucity of answers suggest that this line of research is worthy of continued pursuit.

### FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As we enter a new millennium and the perceived "reading crisis" continues, discussions of reading as a largely linguistic task driven by the strength of a child's oral language skills, including vocabulary, sentence structure, and word knowledge, have increased (Chall et al., 1990; Snow, 1995; Snow et al., 1998). The time is right to reexamine the link between the African American child's linguistic and reading skills. Research examining the achievement gap appears to be the subject of renewed interest (Delpit, 1995; Jencks & Phillips, 1998a; Singham, 1998). Many important questions have been left unanswered and should be revisited. Furthermore, it will be important that attempts to answer these research questions be informed by past studies, avoiding some of their methodological shortcomings.

The major questions that seem to warrant further exploration are as follows:

1. Do the morphosyntactic characteristics of AAE contribute to reading difficulties for African American children? If so, How? When? and Which ones?

The possible contribution of morphosyntactic features of AAE to the reading problem is an open question. AAE apparently affects all domains of language including semantics, pragmatics, and phonology, but those that affect word formation and grammatical relationships have been of special interest for understanding literacy because of their potential to impact reading outcomes. However, the extent to which these features are influential is still unclear. In addition, if these dialectal variations do impact reading it is equally unclear at what point in the reading process that dialect becomes important. For example, in our own research program we calculated the density of dialect<sup>2</sup> used by 50 African American children at Time 1 (preschool or

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<sup>2</sup>*Dialect density* was defined as the number of dialect tokens produced in a 50 C-unit corpus divided by the total number of words produced. Language samples were collected during a free-play interaction involving the child and an African American female examiner (Craig, Washington, & Thompson-Porter, 1998).

kindergarten) and Time 2 (fourth grade) and compared it to reading ability in third and fourth grades as measured by the MAT. The preliminary data suggest that the density of dialect used during preschool and kindergarten was a strong predictor of reading outcomes at third and fourth grades. These data suggest that examining dialect use in African American children during the emergent and pre-emergent stages of reading may be informative. Finally, we (Washington & Craig, 1994, 1998) found differential use of dialect features by young children such that some features (zero copula/auxiliary and subject-verb agreement) were used by most children regardless of income status, whereas others were used infrequently. It is possible that not all child AAE features have the potential to interfere with reading, but only a circumscribed set really matters. If future research can determine which features are most likely to impact reading outcomes, reading instruction and reading outcomes may be improved.

2. What additional factors contribute uniquely to low reading performance in African American children?

Unlike AAE, which uniquely characterizes African American children, many of the factors identified as potential barriers to reading development would influence reading outcomes in any child regardless of ethnic background. For example, poverty, home literacy environment, parental education, and teacher expectations for performance are important influences on achievement for all children. It is not clear how or why these variables impact the African American child in ways that are different from children of other races. Research indicates that the reading skills of low-SES African American children are significantly lower than for low-SES White children, yet it is not clear why this is true. Ferguson (1998) reported that low teacher expectations affect the performance of African American children more than White children. Why? Is there some critical interaction of factors that uniquely characterizes African American children learning to read that is not present for other children? Or alternatively, are there variables that have not been examined that are unique to African American children and that when combined with these identified variables interfere with reading development?

3. Why aren't middle-SES African American children reading better than they are?

Singham (1998) and others have expressed concern about the reading skills of middle-SES African American children, whose average reading performance reportedly is comparable to that of low-SES White children and significantly below the level of their middle-SES White peers. The

reading problems experienced by middle-SES children seem important to understand in any attempt to identify barriers to reading that may be unique to African American children. The confounding effects of poverty, low parental education, and reading levels are presumably absent in this population. Despite the resources available to these children, however, they often struggle with learning to read and frequently do not attain reading proficiency at the rate or levels of their middle-SES White counterparts. Although the outcomes for low-SES African American children may not be generalizable to middle-SES children, the reverse may not be true. If factors exist that influence reading outcomes for African American children that are specific to this ethnic group, then identifying these factors for middle-SES children, whose performance will not be influenced by poverty and its covariates, should be informative for understanding the barriers to reading proficiency for all African American children.

Obtaining answers to these three broad questions should provide important new information about reading skill development in African American children. As we pursue these questions, however, it will be important to avoid the methodological shortcomings of some of the early work on this topic. Several major methodological concerns are identified and discussed briefly next.

1. The full set of AAE features have not been the focus of systematic inquiry.

Specific AAE features may affect reading whereas others may not be important for reading achievement. The extant literature includes research focused on only a small set of AAE features, with decidedly mixed results. Perhaps more important, these studies were conducted at a time when we knew very little about the use of AAE by children, necessitating the use of adult forms of the dialect to study children. Only recently have the AAE forms used by children been understood. Children generally use the same types of AAE as adults, but the use of these features differs by age, and the surface structure realizations of these features may be different than the adult's usage (Washington & Craig, 1994, 1998). For example, in our child corpus, remote past *been* ("I been knowin' how to do that") was not apparent until approximately 7 years of age, and double modals took the form of double copulas and auxiliaries, "I'm am" or "I'm is" rather than "might could," as has been identified for adults. The absence of developmental information for earlier investigations may not have allowed these forms to be identified as dialectal in nature. Instead they may have been discounted as ungrammatical.

In addition, the child's ability to code-switch from the use of AAE to SAE is neglected in the reading literature. Children decrease AAE pro-

duction in school contexts across the early elementary grades. Research designs need to ensure that statistics comparing dialect production and reading aloud are not really tapping failure to develop code-switching skills and reading aloud. For example, Bartel and Axelrod (1973) interpreted negative correspondences between use of AAE when reading aloud and reading skill levels as support for the dialect interference hypothesis. As their subjects were ninth graders, this correspondence may have mirrored the students' skills at code-switching or failure to develop code-switching skills, rather than anything basic about the dialectal forms themselves. The impact of code-switching on reading skill development in African American children seems important to consider.

2. Low SES and AAE are confounded in the literature.

With few exceptions the results of most studies focused on reading skills and use of AAE have examined performances of low-SES African American children. The results of these investigations have been generalized to the entire population, regardless of socioeconomic background. There is a paucity of research focusing specifically on middle-SES African American children despite indications that these children are at risk for reading failure and use AAE to a lesser extent than low-SES peers. It is possible that knowledge gained about children from one SES group will be informative for understanding the other, but until that has been demonstrated empirically it will be important to study these two groups separately. It will be important also to confirm for low-SES children the poverty covariates that exert the most influence on reading development and how to manage them in the classroom.

3. The contribution of reading test bias has not been widely explored.

Although a small number of studies have suggested that reading tests may be biased for use with African American children (Jencks & Phillips, 1998b; Hamill & Wiederholt, 1971), test bias has been largely overlooked as at least a partial possible explanation for the magnitude of the gap in performance on standardized tests between these children and their White peers. This is somewhat surprising as many other standardized testing instruments, including college admissions, cognitive, and language tests, have been identified as biased for use with African American children and youths (Baratz-Snowden, 1987; Jencks, 1998; Washington, 1996; Washington & Craig, 1999). The bias identified for cognitive and language tests seems particularly relevant, as cognition and language are both major component skills of reading. As administration of standardized group assessments becomes routine at both the national and state lev-



els, establishing the validity of these instruments for use with African American children will be particularly important. Performance on these instruments is being used to decide everything from classroom placements to readiness for high school graduation. If these instruments are simply highlighting performance differences by race rather than tapping true reading competence, the reading abilities of many African American children will be underestimated. The consequences of this underestimation may be significant. Jencks (1998) appropriately noted that the gap in reading test scores cannot be explained entirely by test bias, however. The skill differences identified on these tests are very real and affect the academic performance of many African American children.

4. The tasks used in many reading studies do not seem to be clear tests of reading competence and may disadvantage African American students.

Miscue analysis is used frequently in studies of dialect interference to examine the degree to which use of AAE interferes with oral reading of SAE text. Participants are asked to read a passage aloud while the examiner identifies reading "errors" that can be characterized as dialectal in nature. The frequency of occurrence or proportion of these "miscues" in the reading sample is used to estimate the relative degree to which dialect interferes with reading. Burke, Pflaum, and Knafle (1982) found that scoring AAE productions as miscues resulted in significant underestimation of African American children's reading abilities. This methodology seems particularly inappropriate in its characterization of dialect-based differences from print as miscues, which in this literature seems simply to be a euphemism for errors.

In studies of oral language we have found that it is possible to identify language impairments by assessing an African American child's nondialectal productions, avoiding altogether the potential influences of dialect until we better understand the rules governing dialect production in children (Craig, 1996; Seymour, Bland-Stewart, & Green, 1998). It also seems preferable for reading assessments to explore those assessments that avoid dialectal variations at this point in our understanding.

Additionally, reading studies do not discuss the potential confound presented by using verbal output to represent the child's reading abilities. If the African American child is "translating" from AAE to SAE during reading as Goodman (1965) and Baratz (1969) suggested, then reading aloud seems to require an additional transformation that is not required for silent reading, potentially confounding the outcomes. It is with this final transformation that the child's ability to code-switch from the use of AAE to SAE in oral language seems critical. Experience in our research pro-

gram suggests that most children the ages of the participants in many of these studies (e.g., fourth and sixth graders) have begun to code-switch in conversational contexts with an examiner. For children who have difficulty reading, the stress represented by reading may be compounded by the cognitive and linguistic demands to code-switch while reading aloud. Currently, we do not know enough about code-switching processes in young children to assess their potential impact on attempts to read aloud. This will be an important line of inquiry to pursue.

### SUMMARY

In many ways, the course of reading research involving African American children continues to parallel studies of oral language with this population. In particular, the importance of assessing the potential impact of dialectal variations on assessment and achievement outcomes for African American children is critical for studies of both written and oral language. Both genres will benefit considerably from increased knowledge of dialectal processes such as code-switching, knowledge of the developmental course of the dialect, and information concerning the culture-specific influences of social status variables such as gender, SES, caregiver education, and environmental inputs. In addition, outcomes in both language and reading suggest interpretive caution is necessary when using standardized tests.

Reading skills have their roots in language skill development. Future reading research would be positively informed if knowledge gained about oral language skills could be transferred to the study of reading. In concert, language research would benefit if the impact of language on academic skills such as reading were routinely considered when devising assessment and/or intervention alternatives for African American children.

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