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1997

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Recommended Citation for Full Report

Berdan, Robert Ph.D.; Wiley, Terrence Ph.D.; and Lavadenz, Magaly, "California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) Position Statement on Ebonics" (1997). *White Papers and Position Statements*. 1. <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/whitepapersandstatements/1>

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California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) Position Statement on Ebonics

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This position statement by the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) addresses the current controversy regarding the status and role of Ebonics in education. As an organization committed to promoting equitable education and respect for speakers of all languages, CABE joins a host of other educational and professional associations by explicating its position on the Ebonics debate. Given the recent media barrage, misunderstanding, and hastily conceived proposed legislation, CABE believes that it is essential to clarify its position on the issue.

Historical Perspective *General Principles*

- CABE acknowledges and respects the cumulating of nearly half a century of scientific research, the long-standing judgment of other professional associations, and the opinion of the federal courts establishing the structured and rule-governed legitimacy of Ebonics as a bona fide form of human communication.

The legitimacy of Ebonics (variously called African American Vernacular English, Black English, Black Dialect, and African American Language) has long been recognized by many linguists (Turner, 1949; Bailey, 1965/1969; Labov, 1970/1971/1982; Baugh, 1983; Dillard, 1972; Rickford, 1996; Roy, 1987; Smitherman, 1970/1977; Williams, 1991), by professional organizations (Adger, 1996), and by the courts (Labov, 1982; Whiteman, 1980; Wright, 1980). In 1979, a major legal challenge (Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School Children vs. Ann Arbor Board of Education) asserted that the differences between the language of African Americans and the language of school were significant enough to warrant the recognition of Ebonics as a distinct variety of language. The suit was filed because, despite a district integration plan, African American children performed at a significantly lower level than their white peers. The

plaintiffs argued that the school's failure to take into account the language differences of African American students was discriminatory, and the presiding judge concurred (Smitherman, 1981; Wiley, 1996).

- CABE acknowledges the complex, both tragic and affirmative, history behind Ebonics; that the terms "language" and "dialect" have very different and confusing meanings in technical and popular discourse; and that linguists recognize that such distinctions are generally formed on social and political grounds, not on linguistic or historical characteristics,

The perennial attacks on Ebonics as being a substandard dialect are based largely on ignorance of its history and richness as a distinct variety of language (Dandy, 1991; Williams, 1991). Although the majority of African Americans are native speakers of English, their linguistic history is related to their sociopolitical and economic history. That history is substantially different from that of many European-origin speakers of English and from that of speakers of other languages in the United States (Williams, 1975; Roy, 1987). Unlike most European-origin peoples who came to the United States either voluntarily or as political, religious, or economic refugees, the migration of most African-origin peoples was forced. During their enslavement, African Americans were denied access to English literacy through the imposition of compulsory ignorance laws (Weinberg, 1995). Despite these inhumanities, African Americans developed a unique, vital and creative language, strongly influenced by its West African antecedents (Bailey, 1965; Dalby, 1969; Asante, 1972/1990; Bailey, Maynor & Cukor-Avila; Dillard, 1972; and Roy, 1987). Spoken forms of language were ascribed a lower status than higher status written varieties of English (Dandy, 1991; Heath, 1983; Leacock, 1972; and Kochman, 1986).

Linguistic and Cultural Perspectives

- CABE recognizes that social institutions that value families and their impact on children have an affirmative obligation to demonstrate respect and appreciation for the communication of the home.

In contemporary American society what is often characterized as "standard English" has a privileged status. Schools have an obligation to ensure all students from all linguistic backgrounds develop literacy and oral proficiency in standard English. However, the acquisition of standard English ought not lead to the eradication of the form of communication in the home.

Students need to achieve productive competence in the grammar of standard English in order to achieve educational, social and economic mobility in this society. Nevertheless, the acquisition of standard English should be an additive process and need not reject or excise the dialect form of the family and peers. Thus, schools should seek to build on students' knowledge of Ebonics.

- CABE acknowledges that the relationships among race, ethnicity, and language are complex and varied, both for individuals and for communities. However, there is close identification of Ebonics with broad segments of the African American community. Derogatory characterizations as "bad," "broken," "ignorant," or "ungrammatical" in the popular press or in casual conversation strain the social fabric both in schools and in the broader society.

Language prejudice is related to other forms of intolerance and frequently becomes a surrogate for them. In a society as racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse as ours, children and adults need to learn more about the richness of their own languages and varieties of languages (Brooks, 1985; Dandy, 1991;

Heath, 1983; Wiley, 1996; Wolfram, 1994). Teachers have an obligation to model for their students the respect and appreciation for the linguistic diversity of the larger society as they foster in their students appreciation for the conventions of standard English. Implicit and explicit educational practices should be examined to ensure that discriminatory treatment does not result in stigmatization nor inappropriate educational treatment.

- **CABE affirms the responsibility of schools to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs set forth by the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974. This action can be further expanded by the *Lau v. Nichols* and *ML King, Jr. Elementary School v. Ann Arbor Board of Education* (1979) which obligated schools to recognize and accommodate language differences that would otherwise result in meaningless inequitable education.**

Teachers and schools have an obligation to develop an instructional environment where all students, including speakers of Ebonics, are encouraged to participate freely and actively without harassment or ridicule for the way they speak. In classroom discourse, and particularly when the focus of instruction is not on language, effective teachers focus first and positively on the content of what students say, particularly on their logic, creativity, and contribution to the communication.

Control of the conventions of standard English develops over extended time. Schools facilitate that development by engaging students in meaningful literacy experiences, by engaging them in increasingly complex discourse, and by providing them with meaningful contexts that presuppose standard English. In all of these experiences students gain more from recognition for their evolving language than from demeaning their home language.

English Literacy and Ebonics

- **CABE concludes that in contemporary American society, literacy is a basic educational right. Meaningful literacy experiences must be acces-**

sible to children from all linguistic backgrounds as early in their educational experience as possible. English literacy is an important tool and context for the development of standard English.

Whatever the language or dialect that students bring to school, we consider literacy instruction to be a basic human right, and English literacy instruction to be requisite to full social, economic, and political participation in the United States. For educators, this means that literacy instruction cannot be made contingent on a child's ability to conform to school-determined languages and dialects. Pronunciation differences in reading by African American students should not be considered as reading errors. Therefore, children's access to meaningful literacy instruction must not be withheld until such time as they become standard speakers of English. Moreover, literacy involves more than just grammar and pronunciation. Multicultural literacy involves awareness of a broad range of discourse styles and genres and their appropriate uses in specific social contexts.

- **CABE concludes that the recent emphasis on phonics in English literacy instruction must be sensitive to the systematic differences between Ebonics and standard English.**

Initial literacy instruction accepts and builds upon, without diminishing or depreciating, the language skills that children bring to school. At the same time, the materials utilized in reading instruction should be authentic and should realistically reflect students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Schools can affirm linguistic and cultural diversity by demonstrating respect for the ways in which children, families and their communities communicate.

Ebonics and Language Diversity in the Broader Curriculum

- **CABE affirms the need to link an understanding of and appreciation for language diversity to multicultural education and anti-racist education.**

Linguistic diversity is an important and enduring characteristic of contem-

porary America, of its history, and of the world around us. Until recently, the curriculum has been silent on issues of linguistic diversity and its relationship to race and racism, ethnicity and ethnocentrism, and to issues of power, prestige and social dominance. These are all legitimate topics on which the curriculum has too long been silent. Students deserve honest and open discussion of these topics across the curriculum.

Implications for Teacher Training

- **CABE recommends that all teachers in California need expertise and sensitivity to teach positively and productively in classrooms with students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and with differing levels of English proficiency.**

It is essential that teachers possess the knowledge necessary to do their job. Teachers of English who deal with speakers of Ebonics need to be trained so that they know enough about standard English and Ebonics to teach systematically those forms of standard English that are needed by their students. Teaching approaches, methods and techniques need to be developed and implemented that go beyond the techniques employed to teach those who already know the standard dialect and address the students who possess the structurally different forms of Black English (Roy, 1987).

Most teachers experience in their classrooms at least some students from linguistic backgrounds that differ substantially from their own experience. All teachers are encouraged to develop their language abilities as broadly as possible, but it is particularly important that teachers develop the ability to understand and respond appropriately to the diverse forms of English spoken by students in California schools.

Schools and teacher training institutions must select master teachers who will seek to create positive and supportive learning environments for students of all linguistic backgrounds. Teachers with direct responsibility for the development of literacy skills need a working knowledge of Ebonics, its sound system and its unique grammatical characteristics.

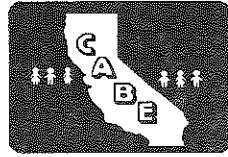
(References on following page)

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CABE POSITIONS OPEN Membership/Communication Services Specialist

CABE seeks a motivated bilingual/biliterate individual committed to bilingual education for the position of membership and communication services specialist. This is a full time position. B.A. or equivalent degree required, experience working with membership organization providing direct services to members, organization development, grant writing and fundraising campaigns. Experience in technology, including web pages and network systems administration. Excellent communication skills. This position requires traveling.

Send letter of intent, resume, and two letter of recommendation to:

Silvina Rubinstein, Executive Director
CABE, 660 S. Figueroa Street, Suite 1040, Los Angeles, CA 90017

Parent/Community Outreach Specialist

CABE seeks a motivated Spanish bilingual/biliterate individual with background in community organization and in-depth understanding of bilingual education issues and programs for the position of Parent/Community Outreach Specialist. This is a full time position. B.A. or equivalent degree required, experience in organization of bilingual communities, knowledgeable about various aspects of bilingual education, including legal aspects and instructional aspects of programs. Excellent communication skills, including experience making presentations to small and large groups of adults in English and Spanish. Desktop publishing experience. Some traveling required.

Send letter of intent, resume, and two letter of recommendation to:

Silvina Rubinstein, Ex. Director
CABE, 660 S. Figueroa Street, Suite 1040, Los Angeles, CA 90017

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