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## LITERACY SKILLS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS: THE LEGACY OF THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP?

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The gap in achievement between African American students and their white peers has been well-documented (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Phillips, Crose & Ralph, 1998). African American children consistently perform below grade expectations in mathematics, science, reading and writing. Several national, large-scale assessments have been undertaken that provide data confirming the presence of this gap in our nation's public schools. Hedges and Nowell (1998) provide a succinct description of these surveys and the outcomes as they relate to African American students.

Of the many surveys conducted the most frequently referenced is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (U.S. Department of Education, 2000), frequently referred to as "the nation's report card." The NAEP is a longitudinal survey that examines the reading, science and math progress of children aged 9, 13, and 17 nationwide. These data have been available since 1970 for reading, since 1972 for mathematics and since 1968 for science. The NAEP provides important snapshots of student performance over the last three decades, including differences that exist by student subgroups (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

The NAEP data from past years have been described at length by others (Nettles & Perna, 1997; Grissmer, Flanagan & Williamson, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Hedges et al., 1998). Of particular interest has been the presence of a persistent, intractable gap in reading, mathematics and science scores between African American and Latino children and their white peers. In the case of African American children, steady increases in group performance were evident for approximately 10 years, until approximately 20 years ago when performance in all 3 subject areas plateaued. There have been small, statistically insignificant downward and upward shifts of 5-10 points in those 2 decades across all 3 age groups, but no measurable changes since the early-to mid-1980s. Similar plateaus have been reported for white students for the past approximately 8-10 years. Overall the NAEP data suggest that very little progress has been made in our attempts to close the gap in educational achievement levels by ethnicity across major subject areas.

The case of reading has been particularly troublesome. Although educational attainment in all areas has proven difficult for many African American children, failure to attain grade level reading skills has been of greatest concern and consequence. Reading undergirds most learning. By implication, reading failure bears a direct relation-

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ship to student success in most other subject areas. For example, reading skills have been determined to account for a significant percentage of the variance in mathematics achievement of young children and adolescents (Hanich, Jordan, Kaplan & Dick, 2001; Kurdek & Sinclair, 2001; Eamon, 2002).

In an important report on the state of reading in America, the National Research Council (National Research Council, 1998) expressed concern about reading difficulties in general, but in particular for those children who are culturally and linguistically different: Four in ten children overall will reportedly have difficulty learning to read, but "...children from poor families, children of African American and Hispanic descent, and children attending urban schools are at much greater risk of poor reading outcomes than are middle-class, European-American, and suburban children," (p. 27; National Research Council, 1998).

Why do African American children have such poor reading outcomes? There have been many explanations offered; some have been supported empirically while others have not. These explanations have generally fallen into 3 broad categories: child-based, home-based and instruction-based. These categories are not mutually exclusive. Home- and child-based explanations in particular evidence significant overlap. A brief discussion of the child, home, and instructional variables most frequently implicated in the reading failure of African American children is provided in the sections that follow.

### **Child-based Explanations**

Child-based explanations for failure to achieve grade level reading skills frequently focus on sociolinguistic differences evident for African American children compared to their white peers. Frequently cited are the decreased world knowledge, with resultant deficiencies in oral language skills, and the dialectal variations that young, African American children reportedly bring to the classroom experience (Hart & Risley, 1995; Washington & Craig, 2001; Washington, 2001). These differences purportedly result in a "mismatch" between the language and culture of the classroom and the language and culture of the African American child, making the child's transition to the school environment difficult and adversely affecting academic achievement (LeMoine, 2001).

Decreased world knowledge frequently is characterized by poor vocabulary skills and limited expressive language output. These linguistic characteristics most frequently are identified for African American children from impoverished backgrounds. In a longitudinal investigation of the disparity in performance of children from several "typical" American families, Hart and Risley (1995) examined the vocabulary performance of a sample of low income, African American 3-year-olds. The children

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were observed regularly in their homes and their vocabulary development was recorded over time. The authors found that when compared to subjects from middle income backgrounds these low income children had fewer words in their repertoires and added new words at a much slower rate. In 6 months from ages 30-36 months Hart and Risley's middle income subjects added 350 words compared to 168 for the low income subjects. This growth trajectory was persistent, resulting in a widening gap in vocabulary performance between these two groups of children over time. These vocabulary deficits have been reported by others (Washington & Craig, 1999) as well, and are of particular concern because of the critical role of vocabulary depth and breadth in the attainment of reading skills (Carlisle, Fleming & Gudbrandsen, 2000).

The role in reading acquisition of young children's use of African American English (AAE) dialectal variations has been of interest to researchers for more than 3 decades. Despite this longstanding interest there continues to be little agreement about the role of AAE on the development of reading skills. Early studies by investigators such as Goodman (1965) focused on the *interference* of AAE in the development of reading skills. These early papers claimed that the morphosyntactic and phonological differences between AAE and Standard Classroom English (SCE) resulted in a pattern of interference that negatively impacted the African American child's ability to read and comprehend written materials provided in the classroom. Early tests of this *interference hypothesis* provided results that both supported (Bartel & Axelrod, 1973) and rejected (Hart, Guthrie & Winfield, 1980; Gemake, 1981) Goodman's claims. Little progress has been made in our understanding of the role of this important social/ethnic dialect since that time. There is currently renewed interest in determining the role of dialectal variation on reading, however. In contrast to earlier work, researchers have accepted that AAE is a systematic rule-governed language system, and currently are interested in the distinctness of the system and how it might provide support to, as well as increase the difficulty of, learning to read (Silliman, Bahr, Wilkinson & Turner, 2002). This current view of bidialectalism is more compatible with prevailing thinking about bilingualism.

### **Home-based Explanations**

Poverty, low parental education, and home literacy practices are all aspects of the African American child's home environment that have been implicated in the reading problem. The impact of poverty on reading failure transcends racial and ethnic backgrounds. **Low socioeconomic status** (LSES) is a well-established risk factor for learning difficulty (Hart & Risley, 1995; National Research Council, 1998; Chall, 2000). However, the impact of poverty is a particularly significant co-variate for African American children. Census figures indicate that African American children are 2-3 times more likely to be raised in poverty than their white peers (Duncan,

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Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1994; Baumann & Thomas, 1997). Forty-three percent of African American children, compared to 16% of whites, are growing up in poverty (United States Department of Education, 1996). This number increases to 63% for single, female-headed households. These statistics highlight the importance of considering poverty in investigations of African American children's reading. Unfortunately, many early studies have not considered the influence of cultural differences separately from the influences of poverty, unnecessarily confounding the outcomes and unfairly generalizing them to all African American learners. Children who are impoverished frequently enter school lacking the world knowledge and the vocabulary breadth expected by their classroom teachers. These skill deficits can be characterized as experiential and should be approached differently than skill sets influenced by cultural practices or clinical impairments. This kind of differentiation should, theoretically, permit instruction that is appropriate and flexible enough to meet the specific needs of African American children.

**Low parental education** co-varies with poverty and is often identified as influential in the acquisition of reading. These influences are largely considered to be environmental in nature and reflected in the **home literacy practices** of LSES African American families. According to Handel (1999) "the intersection of race, ethnicity, poverty and education has significant correlation with the promotion of literacy," (p. 14). Reading aloud to children has been identified as a critically important influence on later reading skills (Scarborough, 1990) Yet large-scale studies of home literacy practices indicate that less than half of children in poverty are read to everyday compared to 61% of their middle income peers, and that Latino and African American children are read to much less frequently than white children (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2000). These practices are reportedly evident in the lack of familiarity with conventional print reported for children whose parents have a high school education or less, when they enter formal public education. Rather than conventional print, Purcell-Gates (1996) reported that these children's literacy experiences often involve environmental print sources such as store coupons, signs, labels, etc... These are not, however, the literacy contexts that will be encountered or that will be expected when these children enter school, creating a mismatch from the outset.

### **Instruction-based Explanations**

The question of whether the experiences of the child or the instructional practices of the school should be altered in order to improve achievement is controversial and widely debated. Would the low income African American child's transition to the literacy context of the classroom be easier if the teacher started with environmental print and progressed to storybook reading? Building on what the child knows with the goal of using it to teach what the school ultimately wants him/her to know is

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advocated yet seldom practiced (Delpit, 1995). On the contrary, many efforts are currently underway that focus on intervening at younger and younger ages in order to improve readiness by providing experiences that will be compatible with classroom practices long before the child encounters the K – 12 classroom.

Chall (2000) presents clearly the current lively debate about the merits of teacher-centered versus child-centered approaches to instruction. Teacher-centered instruction reportedly involves more explicit, direct teaching while child-centered instruction allows the child to structure his/her learning experiences. These approaches are often fiercely debated along philosophical lines. However, a growing line of research focusing on the relative merits of explicit versus non-explicit instruction for impoverished children has emerged in recent years. These studies suggest that for children who are low achieving more traditional teacher-centered approaches are more effective for developing basic skills (Chall, 1967; Adams, 1990; National Research Council, 1998). These more direct approaches have been recommended specifically for African American children (Delpit, 1995).

Low teacher expectations have been implicated in low African American student achievement as well (Obiakor, 1999). Rist (1970) observed that starting as young as kindergarten, low income children were called on less frequently, received less positive feedback and interacted less with teachers, than their middle income peers regardless of their enthusiasm and motivation. These low expectations continued beyond kindergarten for many of these low income children, and most were not as successful academically as their middle income peers, fulfilling what Rist (1970) referred to as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” for these children. These low expectations are reportedly influenced by both teacher and student variables. Cultural bias by the teacher, significant dialect use by the child, and the child’s income status are apparently significant influences on a teacher’s expectations for African American children. The influence of the teacher’s bias cannot be overlooked as a significant achievement variable.

### Summary

A significant percentage of African American children nationwide can be described as “struggling readers.” Beginning in kindergarten these children evidence difficulty acquiring the skills necessary to become able readers, and this difficulty often persists through subsequent school years. Many variables, including those presented in this paper, likely influence these poor outcomes. It is particularly notable that these reading and general academic difficulties have been recognized for nearly a century (State of Georgia, 1911). This suggests that generations of African Americans have received inadequate educational preparation compared to whites. Now in the twenty-first century, we face increased pressure at a national level to teach every

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child to read at appropriate grade levels. Further, we have significant evidence that the child's family and home environment will be invaluable resources as we undertake this challenge. Children who have difficulty reading frequently have at least one parent or first degree relative who also experiences difficulty reading (Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Fletcher & Escobar, 1990). The history of education in this country, including segregation and other forms of significant educational bias suggests that this may be especially true for African American families. This is the "legacy of the achievement gap."

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