

This chapter explores the experiences of students who speak non-mainstream dialects within an education system primarily designed for speakers of Standard American English. Experts also examine how a lack of understanding of Black Language and culture can lead to the misdiagnosis of speech and language disorders, as well as behavioral misunderstandings that result in unfair consequences for these students.



KEY CONCEPTS



The Ebonics Controversy The Ebonics controversy—also known as the Ebonics debate—began in December 1996, when the Oakland (CA) School Board passed a resolution recognizing African American English (AAE) as a language. The resolution proposed using AAE in classrooms as a bridge to help students learn Standard English. The decision drew national attention, much of it negative, and sparked widespread debate among educators, linguists, policymakers, and the public.

More information about the Ebonics program and the surrounding controversy can be found in the “Extra Stuff” and “Additional Resources” sections.

Communication Disorder The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) defines a communication disorder as “an impairment in the ability to receive, send, process, and comprehend concepts or verbal, nonverbal and graphic symbol systems.”

School-to-Prison Pipeline This term emerged within education circles to highlight how school discipline policies disproportionately impact students of color, often pushing them toward involvement with the criminal justice system.

Culturally Sensitive Education Also known as culturally responsive teaching, this approach emphasizes valuing and incorporating students’ cultural backgrounds to create an inclusive, respectful, and equitable learning environment.

“Where American educational policy is failing is that it doesn’t know enough about the relationship between culture and education and achievement, and there is this tendency to think that one-size-fits-all works in a country of 330 million people with, you know, tens and tens of millions of school-age kids.”

- Prudence Carter, sociologist



“We have an overrepresentation of Black and brown youth in special education and it connects to the school-to-prison pipeline. And so once we begin to track them into the special education system when they don’t belong there, we affect their intrinsic motivation to academically succeed.”

- Shameka Stanford, Speech-language pathologist

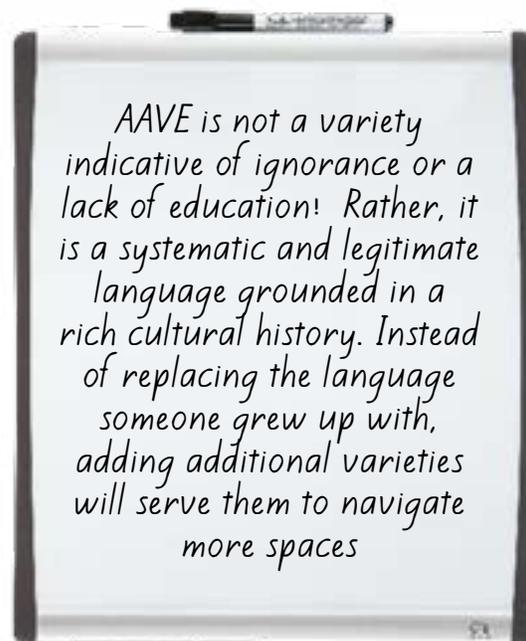


COMMON MISCONCEPTION

people may think



the truth is



LINGUISTIC CONSENSUS: Black Language has a rich history and culture. Speakers can add other varieties to their repertoire without having to “lose” or replace it.

EXTRA STUFF



Early in the Education segment, we see a short clip from a 1997 C-SPAN hearing on the topic of “Ebonics.” Psychologist [Dr. Robert Williams](#), one of many who testified before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee (which oversees education funding), shares childhood memories of how teachers and counselors made assumptions about him based on the way he spoke—assumptions that shaped the course of his education.

Although many language experts offered insights at that hearing and throughout the broader Ebonics controversy, misunderstandings about the topic still persist in the media and among the general public. The full hearing is available on [C-SPAN’s website](#).

The first film in our Talking Black in America series explores the Ebonics controversy in more depth—you can watch that segment of the film [here](#).

Language Difference or Language Disorder?

In the film, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) explore how a lack of understanding about language continues to negatively impact students’ educational experiences today. One example they highlight is the misidentification of young children who speak African American (ctnd)



English. These children are sometimes referred for special services—such as speech and language therapy—that they do not actually need.

To address this issue, we created a [short documentary](#) explaining why the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) is committed to educating its SLPs on the crucial distinction between a language difference (such as speaking a dialect that differs from Standard American English) and a language disorder, which may warrant therapeutic intervention.

For further insight from an SLP, check out [this article](#).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Do you feel like you speak differently at home or with friends than the way you speak in class?
2. Have you (or someone you've known) hesitated to speak up in class because of not wanting others to hear the way you speak?

POST-VIEWING

1. Recall in the video when the young girl was having her language choices tested by a speech therapist. What biases might be present in a test like this? What are the potential lasting consequences for a student who undergoes this type of testing?
2. Are there contexts in which you code shift, or change your speaking style? Where and when?
3. Do you think that having different language styles in the classroom is beneficial? Would it be better to have one style, used by all people? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of an instance in popular media where African American English was used? How about books you've read for school? How were the speakers of African American English portrayed?

Additional Resources

[Black English and "Proper" English: The impact of language-based racism](#) from the Reading Partners Website

[African American English Articulation Differences and Language Characteristics](#) - Tips to Increase Effectiveness for Speech Language Pathologists

From Kappan Online, a publication about K-12 education: [Lessons from the media's coverage of the 1996 Ebonics controversy](#)