

A Vindicationist Perspective on the Role of Ebonics (Black Language) and Other Aspects of Ethnic Studies in the University

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When addressing the topic of dialect in communities of color, it is necessary to consider philosophy, or paradigm. Kuhn (1970) asserted that if a scholar differs from the current philosophy in a particular field, he or she will not be recognized until a new philosophy emerges. The current philosophy/paradigm in American education has been, and to some extent continues to be, the deficiency philosophy, a "blame the victim" perspective (see Caplan & Nelson, 1974, for a description of a research study demonstrating that 82% of research on Black Americans indexed in *Psychological Abstracts* in a given year revealed a bias that interpreted the difficulties of Black Americans in terms of personal shortcomings rather than blaming the system).

DEFICIENCY PHILOSOPHY

The deficiency philosophy supports the view that the genes, language, history, and/or cultures of Black and most other people of color are deficient in some way due to cognitive deficit, inferior genes, childlike intelligence, worthless ethos/worldview, dialect/language simplicity, low self-concepts and attitudes, nonsubstantive ideas, lack of ability to think for themselves, or exotically different, almost nonhuman folkways or learning styles. Examples of each of these aspects of the deficiency philosophy are presented in this article.

The philosophy has had a devastatingly negative effect on educational policy, curricula, and institutions from the lower schools to colleges. Faculty in our multicultural universities need to be aware of the far-reaching negative effects of this philosophy in order to completely eliminate it and acquire a

more positive perspective—the vindicationist philosophy (Drake, 1987). According to Drake (1987), the roots of the deficiency philosophy go back to slavery:

The crucial factor, of course, was the traffic in black bodies, which flourished from the 16th century through part of the 19th century, and the enslavement of black people throughout the Americas. With the end of slavery, colonial imperialism on the continent of Africa shifted the scene of exploitation of African laborers to their home soil and reinforced antiblack ideologies that had emerged during the slavery period (p. 24)

The deficiency philosophy, an “antiblack ideology,” has been used not only to justify the slave trade but to further the exploitation, oppression, and miseducation of Black and other caste-like minorities (Ogbu, 1978). Some examples of deficiency philosophy statements and their consequences for education follow.

Following slavery in the 1870s, when free public schools were first established, to insure that Black education remained largely industrial and manual-labor oriented, Judge R. P. Carpenter of South Carolina said:

The colored population upon the seacoast and upon the rivers, in point of intelligence, is just slightly removed from the animal creation as it is conceivable for man to be. . . . They talk a very outlandish idiom, utterly unknown to me. They are very ignorant, and still have very strong passions, and these bad men lead them just as a man would lead or drive sheep. (cited in Bullock, 1967, p. 75)

And General Armstrong, founder of Hampton Institute, one of the first training schools for Black teachers, described Black people as follows:

He is capable of acquiring knowledge to any degree, and to a certain age, at least, with about the same facility as white children; but lacks the power to assimilate and digest it. The Negro matures sooner than the white, but does not have his steady development of mental strength up to the advanced years. He is a child of the tropics, and the differentiation of races goes deeper than the skin. (cited in Bullock, 1967, p. 6)

These views of Black cognitive deficiency were used to justify the total segregation of the races in the South, solidify the “separate but equal” concept in schooling, invoke legal disfranchisement, shorten terms for Black schools, pay Black teachers less, allocate less money to Black schools, use inferior equipment, and appoint teachers through patronage.

In the 1960s, the deficiency philosophy was articulated as follows:

With no known exception, studies of 3 to 5 year old children from lower socio-economic backgrounds have shown them to be retarded or below average

in every intellectual ability. . . [and] his cognitive uses of language are severely restricted. . . . [T]he disadvantaged child usually does have a language, even though an immature and nonstandard one. (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966, pp. 3, 31)

Programs established in the 1960s as a result of this philosophy were largely geared toward motivation, social adjustment, and lack of emphasis on cognitive or academic concerns.

In the 1960s, another aspect of the deficiency philosophy emerged—cultural deprivation. This theory held that the alleged culture of the “deprived,” “disadvantaged” child—that is, homes with no books for enlightenment, not enough food, and little or no intellectual stimulation—was responsible for the failure of the schools to teach children literacy.

An example of the deficiency philosophy as applied to Native Americans is seen in a compendium on economic development by a joint committee of the U.S. Congress in 1969. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) stated that a lack of education, lack of resource development, inadequate credit, poor housing, health problems, and so on “have their roots in the basic cultural differences between White and Indian” (Talbot, 1981, p. 9). And the Economic Development Administration, in the same report, stated:

Perhaps the greatest single element impeding the development of solutions to the problems facing the American Indian has been the evolution of a reservation subculture which transcends individual tribal lines. This subculture has produced individuals who are apathetic, have low self-images, tend to be failure oriented, and feel that they have little or no control over the future. (Talbot, 1981, p. 9)

Another example of the deficiency philosophy is seen in the following description:

The character . . . of “Sambo,” shiftless, wallowing happily in the dust, was no cruel figment of the imagination, Southern or Northern, but did in truth exist. (Styron, 1963, p. 19)

In the early 1970s, another aspect of the deficiency philosophy emerged, labeled cultural difference. The main contention underlying this philosophy was that Black children are not deficient, just different. Their culture was highly “soulful,” stressing music, art, dancing, and oral literature. Public school programs established as a result of this philosophy centered around multicultural curricula and lack of emphasis on cognitive or academic skills. For example, one proponent of this philosophy stated that “there is some question about the degree to which standard English can be taught to the ghetto child in the classroom at all” (Wolfram & Fasold, 1968, p. 143).

Another educator stated that "It is unreasonable to expect disadvantaged black children to read a variety of English they do not speak. . . . Delay the teaching of standard English until adolescence" (Johnson, 1970, p. 27).

In the 1980s and 1990s, another aspect of the deficiency philosophy is emerging from a number of scholars, some associated with the National Association of Scholars (1989) or the California Association of Scholars (Irving, 1989), which combines the cognitive, cultural, and difference rationales. These scholars assert that (a) minorities have "low esteem and a dependency mentality" (Custred, 1989, p. 31); (b) Black culture contains "barriers to successful advancement in . . . society" (Custred, 1989, p. 28); (c) Black/ethnic culture consists of "African drum rhythms, Indian oral traditions and gymnastics" (Miller, in Irving, 1989, p. A3); (d) there is "no liking of learning among Black and Hispanic children" (Katzman, in Buder, 1990, p. A16); and (e) "Blacks are significantly less intelligent than Whites" (Levin, in Berger, 1990, p. A13).

These scholars consider the presence of minorities or ethnic studies programs in the university as "lowering standards" (Bunzel, 1990), bringing the university "down" (Custred, in Irving, 1989, p. A3), and working to the detriment of central educational concerns (Custred, this issue). These scholars assert that (a) civilizations other than our own civilization (i.e., Western) should not be expanded in the curriculum (Custred, this issue), (b) curricular changes which would include minority contributions would be the "worst manifestations" of American culture (Will, 1989 p. 36), and (c) minority scholars are "fourth- or fifth-rate scholars" (House, in "National Movement," 1988, p. A11).

CONSEQUENCES OF DEFICIENCY PHILOSOPHY

The previous statements are damaging not only because they reveal a vast lack of information about minority cultures and languages but because such ideas can lead to unfortunate decisions on educational policy and curriculum planning and can adversely affect the behavior of teachers and administrators.

An example of behavior resulting from such negative ideas is a statement made by a teacher in a workshop conducted by myself on the issue of the competence of any student to acquire literacy skills: "But my Black students don't have any ideas, concepts, or vocabulary! There's nothing there, so how can I teach them?" The same teacher later described her program—a very limited curriculum for junior college students attempting to acquire literacy skills. The students were to take "experience trips," a technique often used for kindergarten children, and then write paragraphs on the trip (Hoover,

1982; see also Beez, 1968, for an example of limited pace in presentation of material to students labeled “slow”).

Effects on Research

The direction of research is often influenced by “deficiency” assumptions. For example, one researcher examined 12 drawers of file cards in the Library of Congress under the topic “Indians of North America.” Of the 18,000 file cards, only 27 referred to statistics regarding unemployment, health, and other topics related to the survival of the culture. There were, however, 417 cards on Indian legends and pottery (Talbot, 1981), demonstrating what Van Sertima (1983) would call “a long love affair with the primitive” (p. 5). Data were collected primarily on the more “esoteric” areas of culture (i.e., “primitive” religion, “primitive” art, and folklore; Talbot, 1981).

Effects on Test Development

Test specifications and items can also be influenced by “deficiency” philosophies. For example, the specifications for writing items for the Florida Teacher Certification Examination (FTCE)—the professional education subtest—endorse a particular educational philosophy that has never been identified in any of the research on effective teaching of Blacks and other minorities. The philosophy endorsed by the test is a laissez-faire or “anything goes” philosophy of classroom management, whereas the approach to discipline in most successful minority school/programs is a firm one, not brutal but strict enough to insure an environment in which learning can take place. To endorse a philosophy which is in opposition to success in teaching minorities is to sanction this philosophy in the minds of hundreds of teachers (Hoover, 1984).

An example of the outcome of such a philosophy is seen in the following test item (this is a hypothetical example; test item reviewers for the FTCE sign a statement that they will not reveal actual items):

Mrs. Jones teaches a 5th-grade class in a large urban area. Her class is usually well-behaved, but on a particularly chaotic day, Johnny, a high-achieving student, hits another student who has taunted him at lunch because of his clothing. What should Mrs. Jones do?

- a. Send Johnny to the principal
- b. Stop the class and discuss with them the importance of following the rules
- c. Ignore the behavior and pray that it goes away
- d. Have Johnny suspended for the day

In most cases, the specifications determine that answer b is correct. There is usually no answer (i.e., a, c, and d) that suggests that Johnny be disciplined by some system—behavior modification or other technique—to insure the academic atmosphere necessary for teaching and learning to take place (Hoover, 1984).

VINDICATIONIST PHILOSOPHY

A second philosophy, vindicationist, considers Blacks to be as capable of academic achievement as any other students. This model is based on the vindicationist perspective that Drake (1987) endorsed, that is, that we must adopt a positive perspective on people of color. The model is research-based and contends:

1. Students of color have the ability to acquire lower-to-upper-levels of literacy as well as or better than any other students—from preschool to the college level—if taught.
2. Students of color come from cultures that have made vast contributions to world civilization.
3. There are strengths in the current cultures of people of color.
4. There are strong values in the cultures that endorse education, self-esteem, and fearlessness.

Some examples of vindicationist proponents' views and the consequences of those views follow.

Du Bois (1965) wrote:

I am seeking in this book to remind readers in this crisis of civilization, of how critical a part Africa has played in human history, past and present, and how impossible it is to forget this and rightly explain the present plight of mankind.

Du Bois's philosophy led to a life of prodigious scholarship and activism: He wrote 20 books and hundreds of articles; founded *Crisis*, the NAACP journal, and was its editor for 24 years; helped to organize five major Pan-African Congresses; and presented the Atlanta University conferences between 1898 and 1930, the beginning of "modern applied research on the Black experience" (Alkalimat, Bailey, & Associates, 1985, p. 8).

Hilliard (1986), another vindicationist scholar, stated:

Early use was made of proverbs, song and stories. Direct or symbolic lessons were taught through these. . . . Parenthetically, it is interesting that racist psychologists claim that Black people are not capable of "Level II thinking," the

kind of abstract thinking which is reflected in proverbs and analogies. To the contrary, this is our strong suit. It is the mis-match in experiential content between psychologists and African-Americans which causes them to miss the extensive use of proverbs and analogies among us. (p. 144)

Hilliard's philosophy, in the vindicationist tradition, corrects current deficiency philosophy thinking. Hilliard, a professor at Georgia State University, has published more than 50 articles over the past 15 years on the complexity of African and African-American contributions to civilization.

And Van Sertima (1983) stated:

In spite of these oppressive and inhospitable circumstances, there was no total loss of black ingenuity and technological innovation. The thread of African genius began to unravel, like light speeding through spools of the glassfibre lightguides black scientist Northover developed. (p. 6)

Van Sertima's belief system has influenced the development of his two systematically documented books on African contributions to civilization, *Blacks in Science* (1983) and *They Came Before Columbus* (1976). In addition, he is editor of the *Journal of African Civilizations* and is a prominent and eloquent speaker on the brilliance of African people.

Another example of a vindicationist perspective and its consequences for research is seen in Powell and Collier's (this issue) emphasis on cultural diversity for global interdependence. With such a perspective, their emphasis in research is predictable—it is also from a vindicationist perspective. Powell and Collier discovered that Whites often received better grades in communications courses because of subjective factors, such as eye contact, accent, and expressiveness. Rather than blame the victim for his or her level of achievement, Powell and Collier establish lack of objectivity on the part of faculty as a factor.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE VINDICATIONIST PHILOSOPHY

Unlike the deficiency philosophy, the vindicationist philosophy has demonstrated outcomes of educational excellence in addition to the scholarly works described. Proponents of vindication can point to a number of schools, both elementary and secondary, across the country where low-income students of color achieve at and above national norms (Barker, 1990; Hoover, 1978; Hoover, Dabney, & Lewis, 1990; Weber, 1970).

Vindicationist philosophy proponents have produced numerous models of achievement in upper-level literacy at the college level as well. For example, it has been demonstrated that students of color can achieve better than mainstream students on composition tests (Hoover, in press) using a

method (Hoover, 1989b) that focuses on the strengths in Black language (Ebonics) and literature.

In addition to literacy programs, proponents of the excellence model have also made a vibrant contribution to the content of higher educational curriculum by the creation of 250 programs in Black/ethnic studies programs. Born in 1968 following a 6-month-long student strike, the discipline is a serious one, containing much more than Miller's (in Irving, 1989) "African drum rhythms, Indian oral traditions and gymnastics"(p. A3).

The ethnic studies discipline has brought "new knowledge" to higher education and has been called a "new interdiscipline" by Stewart (1983). It has a methodology (Alkalimat & Associates, 1985) and a strong intellectual history (Marable, 1988). As Drake (1988) stated: "An ideal university community would be multi-ethnic with ethnicity permitted some institutional expression and with Black Studies being one of the sanctioned forms" (p. 2).

The new knowledge, well researched, informs us that Africans were the world's first navigators (Van Sertima, 1976), inventors of many written scripts (Van Sertima, 1987), inventors of the first mathematical systems (Van Sertima, 1983), and initiators of many more contributions to civilization (Bernal, 1987).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Faculty teaching in our multicultural universities needs to acquire a vindicationist perspective on people of color to counteract the devastatingly negative effects that the deficiency model has had on educational curriculum, policy, and pace of instruction. This new perspective can be achieved through faculty workshops.

The content of the workshops should be what is called "ethnocultural literacy" (Hoover, 1989a; *Interspectives*, 1989), that is, some knowledge of the language, history, culture, learning styles, effects of racism on the culture, and effective methods of teaching the "caste-like" minorities (Ogbu, 1978) in the United States. These workshops have a vindicationist perspective, focusing on the strengths of the cultures of students of color. For example, rather than stress the simplistic view of Ebonics (Black language) vocabulary as an "ephemeral layer of terms sliding across the surface of the permanent vocabulary," (Custred, 1989, p. 19), the emphasis should be on Dalby's (1972) description of the complexity of Ebonic's lexicon on three levels: direct loan words (e.g., "yam" and "banana"); convergencies (e.g., English "dig" [to excavate] merges with Wolof's "dega" [to understand], resulting in Ebonics's "dig" [to understand]); and loan translations or "calques." In

addition, Holt (1972) described the complex use of "inversion" in the lexicon of Ebonics. And Daniel (1972) discovered that African and African-American proverbial usage, for example, "what goes around comes around," is tied to intelligence and used for a number of purposes—introducing speeches, teaching the young, and preventing altercations.

The faculty workshops should also focus on methods that work in teaching students of color. For example, rather than assuming that "strategies which bring nonstandard speech into the classroom . . . do not offer a real solution" (Custred, 1989, p. 27), the workshops should examine the research and find what is effective for Ebonics speakers. We find that we *can* teach standard English more effectively by referring to Ebonics. For example, 200 Black college students tested above mainstream students on a writing proficiency test administered to all students in freshman composition (Mittleman, 1985), employing a method that used the ethnography of communications (Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 1982).

The ethnography of Black communications (Hoover, in press) expands speech beyond the linguistic code (lexicon, phonology, syntax, and intonation) to include such sociolinguistic concepts as theme, speech acts, worldview, learning style, sociolinguistic rules, and conversational rules. Students were given a 2-week overview of this ethnography, focusing on the most unique characteristics of the language. The students were so motivated by the rule-governed nature of their language (e.g., the reason why there is no third-person-singular "s" on most of their verbs is because there are very few syllables ending in consonants in West African languages) that after the 2 weeks, they were successfully able to complete a very intensive skills program involving drill on standard grammatical patterns, use of motivating themes in literature, and an organizational process (Hoover, 1989b).

The process of attitude change will not be easy to implement. As one faculty member at a California State University campus (Miller, in Irving, 1989) put it, "I would rather spend a year in the paddies planting rice than take faculty sensitivity seminars" (p. A3). But we must all join together to push this new view of vindication and excellence; 31% of campuses now require it (El-Khawas, 1990).

This new information would be beneficial for all people—not just people of color. Greene (1981) discovered that integration had more beneficial effects for White students than Black students; other studies (Poltizer & Hoover, in press; Shook, 1973) have demonstrated that new information—on the contributions of minorities to civilization, on current strengths in the culture, and on successful models of teaching—can improve attitudes and improve instructional effectiveness for faculty and can improve student attitudes as well through required courses (DeLeon, Newton, & Smith, 1990).

In conclusion, Van Sertima's (1987) videotape stated that "the more you know, the bigger you are." We will truly need "big" people—big in humanism, big in empathy, and big in knowledge of the language, history, and culture of people of color—to move our universities from a Eurocentric to a multicultural perspective.

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