The Rights And Wrongs Of Black English Essay, Research Paper

The Rights & Wrongs Of Black English

What is Black English? Is it a dialect or is it a lazy form of speaking Standard English? The fact is that no matter what we think of Black English, it is spoken by millions of African American children. Until just recently there were no studies done on Black English. Black English was just considered an improper and a lazy form of Standard English spoken by only Black people. Due to the lack of knowledge about the history of the dialect, many children have and still are suffering the consequences of the stereotypes of the dialect. The primary consequence of this lack of knowledge is that most African American children do poorly in school because schools refuse to acknowledge that most Black children s first language at home is Black English, also known as Ebonics. If American schools can take the time to teach foreign children the grammar and pronunciation of Standard English, why can t schools take the time to teach American Black children the differences between Black English and Standard? Providing these children with information of how Black English came about, teaching them that black English is not improper, and most important, teaching them to have pride of their African heritage will boost their self-esteem.

In the essay The History of the Voice, Edward Kamau Brathwaite explains that when African slaves were brought over to the Caribbean, they were not allowed to speak in their native languages. The English, the French, and the Dutch only allowed their language to be spoken in public. This caused what Brathwaite call a submergence of this imported language (6-8). This submergence of langue is what became Black English. Black English is a mixture of English, French, Dutch, and African dialects. A similar submergcian of languages happened in America. Slaves had to submerge their African languages because they needed a common form of communication with each other and their masters. Children need to be given historical information of their language, so that they will understand the reason for the differences in the pronunciation and grammar between Black English and Standard English. African Americans are no longer slaves, and they should not be forced to eliminate Black English as their first language, instead they should be taught Standard English as a second language.

Along with teaching the children the history, children need to be taught that the way they speak is not improper; it is just different than Standard English. Many of these children are teased about the way they speak. Dorothy Z. Seymour points out this in her the essay Black Children, Black Speech, by saying, Teachers sometimes make the situation worse with their attitudes towards Black English (152). The attitudes towards Black English are that these children speak bad English; this means they have lazy pronunciation, and poor grammar. (Seymour 152) Almost anyone knows that telling a child that they are wrong or that there is something wrong with the way they talk, walk, or eat is cause for lower self-esteem. The thing is that these children will carry these negative remarks to their teenage years and most may even carry it to their adult years. Instead of making life difficult for these children, teachers should try to educate themselves about what Black English is. If teachers educate themselves, they would discover that there are differences between improper Standard English and Black dialect. Seymour explains that unlike improper English, Black English, like any other dialect, has constructed set of speech patterns, sounds, structure and vocabulary. (152) Teachers would also learn that unlike improper English, Black English is clear as pointed out by June Jordan in her the essay Nobody Mean More to Me Than You And the Future Life of Willie Jordan (130). Black English is thought of unclear because the dialect uses a minimal number of words per idea (Jordan 130). Perhaps if teachers would study these differences between Black and Standard English, they would be capable of dealing with the specific problems that Black English speaking children are faced with when they learn to read and write Standard English. This capability would help the children because they would no longer be told that the way they speak is bad or improper, but they will be told the differences between Black English and Standard English. Learning these differences gives the child a distinction between the two forms of English, which will make the children believe in their intelligence bring up their self-esteem and willingness to learn Standard English.

Last, but most important, Black children need to be given a sense of pride of their African heritage. These children need know that they should not have to omit Black English from their lives because it is an import part of their heritage June Jordan states that Black English is like an endangered species and that we should expect it be extinguished taking with it the pride and self-identity of the African heritage. (123) The extinction of Black English would be like going back to the slavery days when Africans were forced to omit any African pride from their lives. By allowing the extinction of Black English, these children might as well have been adopted. Like adopted children, they will feel like they are missing a piece of their past and grow up searching to for the missing pieces. They will try to find where they came from, why they have difficulty with the language, and what their self-identity is. On the other hand, if America instead of omitting Black English would acknowledge it as dialect, Black children would feel that America accepts Black heritage and its history. This acceptance would no longer make the children feel rejected by society and would increase their motivation of learn the skills to become productive individuals.

It is time to leave the slavery days to what they are: the past. It is time to allow African Americans the right to be proud of their heritage, by giving them the knowledge and understanding they require to adapt what is their second language Standard English. Children must be taught with compassion and understanding, not by humiliation, which makes them ashamed of their culture.

Works Cited

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. The History of the Voice. London: New Beacon, 1984.

Jordan, June. Nobody Mean More to Me Than You And the Future Life of Willie

Jordan. On Call: Political Essays. Boston: Southend Press, 1985. 123-139.

Seymour, Dorothy. Black Children, Black Speech. Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark, eds. Language Awareness Essay for College Writers. 7th ed. New

York: St. Martin s, 1997. 151-158.