Education… has but one honorable purpose; that is to train the student to be a proper handler of power. At first power over himself or herself. (John Henrik Clarke, 1991, p. 403)

EBONICS AND EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM THE CARIBBEAN, EUROPE AND THE USA

John R. Rickford

1. Precursors to the Oakland 1996 proposal and the reactions it elicited

In December 1996 the School Board in Oakland, California, responding to one of the recommendations of its Task Force on the Education of African American Students, resolved to recognize Ebonics as the "primary language of African American students" and to take it into account in facilitating "their acquisition and mastery of English language skills." [1] In light of the over-sensationalized media-hyped coverage which followed that resolution, I'd like to begin by quoting from Carrington and Borely (1977), describing a related proposal and the similar controversy it generated in another time and place:

> In July 1975, the Ministry of Education and Culture published a new syllabus for primary schools. The part of the document which has proven to be the most controversial is without doubt the syllabus for the teaching of the Language Arts… .The previous syllabus dated from 1946. The thinking which lay at its base viewed the speech of Trinidadian and Tobagonian children as a form of English which was made imperfect by all-pervasive and persistent errors resulting from slovenly speech habit... .By contrast, the 1975 syllabus asserts the status of the vernacular spoken by children in these islands as a grammatically structured systematic form of speech which is not an inferior form of English. ...

> Within a very short period after the publication of the syllabus, the daily newspapers printed more than a dozen letters (some from prominent citizens) condemning the language arts section of the syllabus. Many of these letters reasserted that the vernacular was badly spoken English; others expressed alarm that the vernacular would be taught in schools and used to the detriment of English competence in the learners. The cfusion over the true intent, actual propositions and suggested procedures in the syllabus, although clearly related to faulty reading of the document, was not confined to the general public. (Carrington and Borely, 1977, p. 65)

What is striking is that the hostile reactions to attempts to recognize the vernacular of Trinidadian and Tobagian children which Carrington and Borely documented in 1977 are virtually identical to the hostile reactions which were generated in response to the Oakland school board's attempts to do likewise two decades later.

Carrington and Borely's (1997) book is actually an intriguing record of the correspondence in local newspapers on the issue, and it is worth quoting from one letter, written by Thora O'Connor, and published in the *Trinidad Guardian* on Sept. 27, 1975, to show how rampant the strength of feeling was against recognition of the vernacular in the schools.

> At what stage will the child be taught to speak correct English? Our children must not be allowed to lower their standards because a few teachers have silly ideas of "relevance" as something pertaining to their own small island.
>
> Relevance means relating to the matter in hand; and the matter in hand is education and education is a language correctly spoken, a knowledge of the history, culture and customs of the whole world...
>
> Our children must learn about their land, but we are a very small part of a very large world, and we must be

> neither ignorant nor insular. (Thora O'Connor, in Carrington and Borely, 1977, p. 4)

However, as evidence of the love/hate, push/pull relationship which many vernacular speakers have towards their language and their culture (see Rickford and Traugott 1985, Smitherman, 1986, pp. 10-14), note that Ms. O'Connor finishes her letter on a "lighter note" which takes pleasure in the very vernacular she had written to condemn:

> On a lighter note, imagine Romeo and Juliet in Trinidad English:
> *Juliet*: Romeo, Romeo, where you is? You here? Go, before me fader lock you neck.
> *Romeo*: Chile, ah gone. But ah ehn fraid you fader cutlass, for you eyes pretty too bad.
> (Thora O'Connor, in Carrington and Borely, 1977, p. 4)

One can find even earlier parallels to the Oakland proposal in the Caribbean. In the 1950s, British linguist Robert Le Page, alarmed by the high failure rates of Jamaican children in an educational system which expected them to operate in Standard English despite the fact that their native vernacular was Jamaican Creole, proposed that Jamaican children be taught in Jamaican Creole rather than Standard English for the first year or two of their schooling. According to Cassidy (1970, p. 208), the reaction to Le Page's proposal was overwhelmingly negative:

> This proposal [Le Page's] was either not taken seriously or was considered shocking. Since it never became official, I can refer only to the reaction expressed in the newspapers. One columnist in particular, Vere Johns in the Kingston *Star,* damned it as a pernicious and insulting idea. In Jamaica, though most of the populace speak Creole, those higher up consider it utterly degraded and associate it with poverty and ignorance. The notion of giving it any degree of school sanction was intolerable; but it was also deeply insulting, as if 'good English' were a foreign language to Jamaicans. This unfavorable

> public reaction, plus what it would have cost to institute any such program, killed the idea ... (Cassidy, 1970, p. 208)

There was a parallel to this too in the United States, in the late 1970s, when negative public reactions to the *Bridge* reading program, which provided a transition between Ebonics and Standard English while teaching African American children to read, killed the program in the experimental stage, despite the enhanced success at reading which Bridge helped the students to achieve. (See below.)

One lesson to be learned from these Caribbean and American precursors to the Oakland Ebonics proposals of 1996 is that any attempt to give vernacular varieties recognition or legitimacy in the schools is likely to be met with massive misunderstanding and vociferous public opposition—reactions negative enough to kill it. But an even more important lesson, I believe, is that we must not assume that negative public opposition is right, and we should not allow it to kill proposals which offer hope for children mired in educational systems which ignore or disparage their voices. In each of the preceding cases, what led to the linguistically and pedagogically innovative proposals was the failure of existing methods, and the rejection of the innovations led to the perpetuation of the status quo, ensuring continuing failure for further generations of vernacular speakers. Informed by the perspectives of at least four decades, we should not let that happen to the children of Oakland in the twenty-first century.

2. The Problem With Existing Approaches (the status quo)

As people laughed at, pontificated about, and poured scorn on the innovations Oakland proposed, there was an underlying assumption that innovation was unnecessary—that existing methods (the status quo) worked

fine. But nothing could be further from the truth. There are tons of statistical evidence that African American children are failing with existing approaches, particularly in reading and the language arts.

The Oakland school board included evidence to this effect as a supplement to its December 1996 resolution. For instance, that although 53% of the 51,706 students in its school district were African American, 71% of all students enrolled in special education were African American, 80% of all suspended students were African American, they had the lowest grade point average (1.80 average) of all students in the district, and 19% of African American students who made it to the 12th grade did not graduate.

Far from engendering sympathy or understanding for the enormity of the educational problems besetting African American students and the Oakland School Board—note that language needs constituted only one of nine recommendations made by its Task Force on African American students—these statistics led to further maligning of the Oakland school district, as though its failures with African American students were unique.

But similar failures are recorded every year in school districts across the country. Consider, for instance, Table 1, which compares the 1989-90 test performances of 3rd and 6th graders in the Palo Alto, California School District (predominantly White, middle and upper middle class) and the adjacent Ravenswood School District (predominantly Black, working and under class), both about one hour's drive South of Oakland. The Palo Alto kids score high both on reading and writing in the third grade (96th and 94th percentiles), and improve to the very top of the scale (the 99th percentile) by the sixth grade. By contrast, the Ravenswood kids score low on tests of reading and writing in the third grade—on the 16th and 21st percentiles respectively—but decline even further, to the 3rd

percentile (meaning only 2% of sixth graders statewide did worse) by the sixth grade.

SCHOOL DISTRICT	READING		WRITING	
	3	6	3	6
Palo Alto, 1989-90 test scores:	337	339	329	335
(Corresponding State rank/percentile)	96	99	94	99
Ravenswood, 1989-90 test scores:	237	215	246	231
(Corresponding State rank/percentile)	16	3	21	3

Table 1: California Assessment Program Scores (1989-90) for Palo

Alto and Ravens-wood (including East Palo Alto) School Districts, San Francisco Bay Area, California.

The statistics in table 1 concur with statistics from other parts of the country in indicating that with every year they remain in the public school system, African American children perform more poorly, relative to mainstream (and particularly White) norms (Steele, 1992, p. 68). For instance, Labov (1995) reported that in 1976, 73% of the kids in a predominantly Black elementary school in Philadelphia scored below the mean on measures of reading and math. But the performance of a predominantly Black senior high school which he considered for comparison was even worse: 95% of the students in that school scored below the mean. In his testimony before the US Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education on January 23, 1997, Michael

Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools (which includes 50 of the nation's largest urban public school districts) reported that in 1994, nine-year old African American students were, on average, 29 points behind their White counterparts in reading proficiency (as measured on a 0-500 point scale). By the age of thirteen, the gap had increased to 31 points. And by the age of 17, the gap was greater still, with African American students a full 37 points behind their White counterparts.[1] Casserly also reported that 1992-93 scores of reading achievement by the 6.0 million inner-city children included in Great City Schools indicate that while the percentage of White students scoring above the norm increased from 60.7% at the elementary level to 65.4% at the senior high level, the percentage of African American students scoring above the norm declined from 31.3% at the elementary level to 26.6% at the senior high level.[2]

Of course, the fact that African American kids do progressively worse the longer they stay in school—or that schools fail in the education of African American kids more miserably with each year they attempt to educate them—is not related to factors of language and dialect alone. The fact that there are comparable statistics for Math is itself evidence of this, and it is clear that there are other factors—more limited facilities, poorer paid and less well-trained teachers, parents with less free time, academic training and money to support the school's efforts—which contribute to the diminished success of the school districts which serve most of the nation's African American (and especially poor African American) students. But it also obvious that the failure of schools to help African American students read and write well is particularly acute, given the centrality of these skills to success in school more generally. And the continued failure of existing methods—which do ***not*** cater to the dialects that children bring to school—suggest that they must bear part of the blame. Data in the next section will support this inference, and

support the kind of innovation which Oakland proposed to implement in 1996.

3. Evidence on the value of approaches which take the vernacular into account.

Almost universally, both within the United States and without, students who speak non-standard or vernacular varieties of a language tend to do relatively poorly in school, especially in reading, writing, and related subjects which require competence in the standard variety. This is not surprising, given the correlations between vernacular usage, socioeconomic status, and quality of schooling around the world. More surprising, however, and of particular relevance to the Oakland School Board's proposal, is the evidence of several studies show that taking the vernacular of students into account can facilitate their mastery of the standard variety, as well as their performance in the curriculum-central skills of reading and writing. I will cite several such studies, beginning with two European cases, and then turning to US cases involving Ebonics. I'll also begin with studies which involve Dialect Readers, and then switch to studies involving Contrastive Analysis and other methods.

3.1 Dialect Readers.

Osterberg (1961) describes a study of his in which an experimental group of dialect speakers (D) in the Piteå district of Sweden who were first taught to read in their non-standard dialect, and then transferred to standard Swedish, while a parallel control group (R) was taught entirely in standard Swedish. After thirty-five weeks, he found that:

> ...the dialect method showed itself superior both when it was a question of reading quickly and of rapidly assimilating matter which comes fairly late in the course. The same applied to reading and reading-

> comprehension. (p. 135) Instruction in dialect has thus resulted in a good general reading technique in both dialect and standard language. This technique was better, that is, quicker and surer, in comparison to R group's. D pupils also understood better what they read. (p. 136)

Bull (1990) discusses a related research project of hers, conducted in Norway between 1980 and 1982. Ten classes of beginning students, including nearly 200 students each about 7 years old, were taught to read and write either in their Norwegian vernaculars (Dialect group) or in the standard language (Control group). After assessing their progress on several measures, she concluded that:

> With respect to reading and reading abilities the results above show that the vernacular children read significantly faster and better than the control subjects. It seems that in particular the less bright children were the ones to benefit from this kind of teaching. They made superior progress improvement during the year compared with the poor readers in the control group. (p. 78)

Bull's proposed explanation for the superior progress of the vernacular children is worth noting:

> The principle of vernacularization of the medium of initial teaching may have made illiterate children more able to analyze their own speech, thus increasing and improving their metalinguistic consciousness and phonological maturity, than the principle of traditional teaching of reading and writing achieved. (p. 78)

The US study most similar to these European studies was described in Simpkins and Simpkins (1981), reporting on an experiment involving the *Bridge* readers which they had created in 1974 together with Grace Holt. The *Bridge* readers, which were published by Houghton Mifflin in 1977, provided reading materials in three varieties: (1) Ebonics or African American Vernacular

English, (2) a transitional variety, intermediate between Ebonics and Standard English, and (3) Mainstream or Standard English. The *Bridge* materials were field tested over a four-month period with 417 students in 21 classes throughout the United States (Chicago, Illinois; Macon County, Alabama; Memphis, Tennessee, and Phoenix, Arizona). A control group of 123 students in six classes was taught using "regularly scheduled remedial reading" techniques. At the end of the four-month period, students' scores on the Iowa test of Basic Skills indicated that students taught by the Bridge method showed an average gain of "*6.2 months for four months of instruction*, compared to only an average gain *of 1.6 months* for students in their regular scheduled classroom reading activities" (p. 238, emphasis in original). These results are displayed graphically in figure 1.

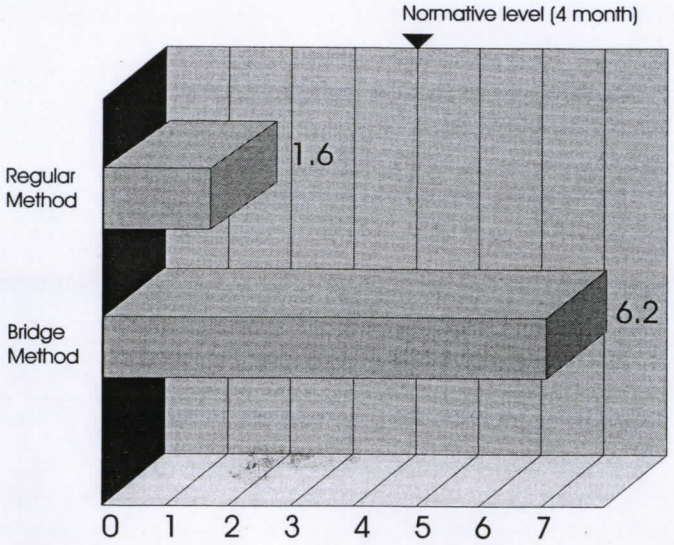

Figure 1: Reading gains using regular versus Bridge methods, grades 7-12. (graphic constructed from data in Simpkins and Simpkins, 1981, p. 238)

It should be noted, parenthetically, that the gain of only 1.6 months for four months of instruction which was

evidenced by the control group is consistent with the evidence we see in Table 1 and elsewhere in the US. that African American inner city children taught by regular methods tend to fall further and further behind mainstream norms with each year that they remain in school. And it should be noted, ruefully, that despite experimental demonstration of the greater success of the *Bridge* readers, some educators were so hostile to the presence of "dialect" in school materials that Houghton Mifflin halted publication of the *Bridge* readers, and this innovative and promising experiment ground to a halt. (See Rickford and Rickford, 1995 for further discussion.)

3.2 Contrastive Analysis and other approaches.

While the preceding studies all suggest that teaching initial reading in the dialect or vernacular variety and then transitioning to the mainstream or standard variety is an effective technique—this was ***not*** what Oakland proposed to do. Oakland proposed a less radical approach, using the Contrastive Analysis techniques of California's "Proficiency in Standard English for Speakers of Black Language" or "Standard English Proficiency" [SEP] program, in which students are explicitly taught the differences between vernacular and standard features, and guided towards proficiency in Standard English through discrimination, identification and translation drills and other exercises (Feigenbaum, 1970). As the SEP Handbook notes:

> It is not a program to teach Black Language... It is not a program for teachers to learn to speak Black dialects. It is, however, a program that recognizes and utilizes existing strengths in oral language from the students' primary culture as a basis for new language learning....To give students more expansive language skills, we engage in a process of enculturation. We add to their language repertoire and tacitly say, "take this, develop it, and go yonder. (SEP Handbook, 199x, Foreword, p. 6)

As an example of what Contrastive Analysis involves, see Table 2 below, which includes extracts from a unit on English possessives in the SEP Handbook.

Instructional Focus: Possessives
(Morpheme /s/ with nouns)

Objective: Given structured drill and practice contrasting the use of possessive nouns, the students will be able to differentiate between standard and nonstandard usage and formulate sentences using the standard form in response to statements or questions.

Materials: 1. Pair of multiple response cards labeled *same* and *different* for each student. 2. Pair of multiple response cards labeled *standard* and *nonstandard.*

Procedures:

1. In order to assess the students' ability in auditory discrimination, the teacher will lead the students in the following drill. Students will respond by displaying a *same* or *different* response card.

Discrimination Drill:

Teacher stimulus	Student Response
This is Joe car	
This is Joe's car	Different
That is Steve's house	

That is Steve's house	Same…

2. Teacher will explain and model the standard form and have students repeat several examples giving additional help where needed.
3. To check for understanding, the teacher will call on individual students to respond to questions and statements similar to those in the following drill. Students will respond in complete sentences, using the standard form.

Translation Drill

Teacher stimulus	Student Response
Jesse truck is red	Jesse's truck is red
Monica school is large	Monica's school is large

Table 2: Extracts from the "Possessives" unit in the Standard English Proficiency (SEP) Handbook, California.

The SEP program, approved for use in California since 1981, is in use in nearly 300 schools and sixteen school districts, including Oakland. What the Oakland school district aimed to do with its 1996 resolution is extend its use from only **some** schools to ***all*** its schools with significant African American student populations. One weakness of the SEP program is that it has never really been systematically evaluated on a statewide level (Yarborough and Flores, 1997). However, Francisca Sanchez, Manager of Elementary Academic Support for the California State Department of Education (and a former Stanford student of mine), told me recently that procedures were put in place this year to allow systematic assessment of the performance and progress of SEP students relative to those taught by more conventional methods.

Parker and Christ (1995) extol the virtues of the Contrastive Analysis approach, claiming that they have used it successfully to help African American students in Tennessee and Chicago at the preschool, elementary, high school and college levels develop bidialectal competence in "Corporate English" and their own vernacular. However, they do not provide hard evidence—with control and experimental groups—of their program's success.

One program which does have quantitative evidence of its success is the ten year old program in DeKalb county, Georgia (just outside Atlanta), pioneered by Kelli Harris-Wright, in which fifth and sixth grade students in eight schools are taught to switch from their "home speech" to "school speech" through explicit training in the sounds and structures of "school speech" and through various exercises. As Cummings (1997, B1) notes, "The program has won a 'center of excellence' designation from the National Council of Teachers of English. Last year, students who had taken the course had improved verbal test scores at every school." According to Harris-Wright (personal communication), students are taught that the non-SE pronunciations and grammatical constructions which they bring to school (from a variety of ethnic groups and economic backgrounds) are different rather than wrong. The instructional component of this bidialectal program is based on contrastive analysis, and students work through the activities from the free and bound morphemic levels up to entire paragraphs where they contrast Ebonics and other varieties with SE. One of the most refreshing aspects of this program, which I had the pleasure of observing first-hand, is its commitment to improving the academic success of its students, as demonstrated in rising scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

Another Contrastive Analysis study which approaches Ebonics as a structured and cohesive system and also includes systematic assessment is that of Taylor (1989), who reported that she tried to improve the Standard English

writing of inner city Aurora University students from Chicago using two different methods. With an experimental group of twenty students, she raised students' metalinguistic awareness of the differences between Ebonics and Standard English through contrastive analysis and tailored pattern practice drills. With a control group, also including twenty students, she did not do this, but simply followed "traditional English department techniques." After eleven weeks of instruction, the experimental group showed a 59% reduction in the use of Ebonics features in their SE writing, while the control group, using traditional methods, showed a slight INCREASE (8.5%) in the use of AAVE features. (See figure 2.) One of Taylor's points, recalling the comments of Bull (1990) above, was that students were often unaware of the precise points on which AAVE and SE differed. Raising their awareness of this difference through Contrastive Analysis helped them to limit AAVE intrusions in their SE usage.

A final study worth mentioning is that of Piestrup (1973), who studied 208 African American first grade children in Oakland, California. Piestrup's is not a Contrastive Analysis study, but it does show the importance of attending to and building on the vernacular of African American students instead of ignoring, constantly correcting, or castigating them for their language.[3] The author showed first of all the typical relationship in which children who used more AAVE features also had lower reading scores. What was more interesting, however, was the relationship between the teachers' teaching style—the way they responded to their pupil's language—and the children's success in reading. Piestrup distinguished six different teaching styles, but I will report only on the two which were correlated with the lowest and the highest reading success. The least successful teachers were those in the "Interrupting" group, who "asked children to repeat words pronounced in dialect many times and interpreted dialect pronunciations as reading errors" (p. iv). They had a

stultifying effect on their students' reading development, reflected not only in lower reading scores, but also in the fact that some children "withdrew from participation in reading, speaking softly and as seldom as possible; others engaged in ritual insult and other forms of verbal play apart from the teacher" (ibid.). By contrast, teachers in the "Black Artful" group "used rhythmic play in instruction and encouraged children to participate by listening to their responses. They attended to vocabulary differences of Black children and seemed to prevent structural conflict by teaching children to listen for Standard English sound distinctions." Not only did children taught by this approach participate enthusiastically in reading classes, they also showed the highest reading scores.

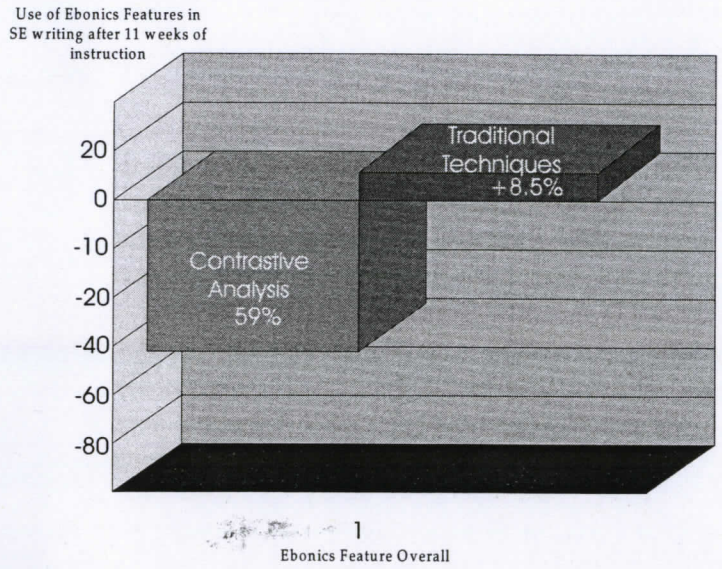

Figure 2: Effect of Contrastive Analysis versus Traditional Techniques on use of Ebonics in English compositions by African American students at Aurora University (Taylor, 1991, p. 149).

4. Summary And Conclusion: Lessons To Be Learned

The most disturbing lesson to be learned from considering the school performance of African American students across the US, particularly on standardized tests of reading and writing, is that existing facilities and conventional methods are failing these children, on a massive scale, and with devastating results. That ***this*** did not become the focus of media coverage and public discussion in the wake of Oakland's Ebonics resolution is frustrating, suggesting that people either did not *understand* the extent of the educational dilemma facing Oakland and other school districts nationwide, or worse, that they did not *care,* content to ignore, malign, laugh at or build prisons for the thousands and thousands whom our schools fail yearly.

Oakland's response to the educational problems faced by African American students was different. Of the several recommendations made by its Task Force on the Education of African American students, only one dealt with language, and that one, as we know, became the focus of national and international attention (mostly negative). But as we have seen from considering precursors to the Oakland situation in Europe, the Caribbean and the USA, Oakland's decision to recognize and build on the vernacular of its students in their Language Arts programs has several good precedents. One means of building on the vernacular involves teaching students to read first in their dialect (Dialect Readers) and then transitioning them to the standard variety, as has been done successfully both in Europe and the USA. Another method is to lead students to a heightened awareness of the systematic differences between the vernacular and the standard through Contrastive Analysis, as has been done, also successfully, outside Chicago and elsewhere in the US. Other methods of taking the vernacular into account also show promise for helping children do better on reading and writing in Standard

English. Note that there is no disagreement between supporters and detractors of Ebonics on this *goal.* All that is at issue is the *means.* The failure of conventional approaches and the success of innovative approaches involving Dialect Readers and Contrastive Analysis should give pause to those who ridiculed Oakland's resolution.

Oakland is quietly implementing its resolution this year, and time will show the wisdom of its innovation. In the meantime, the final lesson for all who recognize the seriousness of the educational crisis facing African American children is the urgent need for us to devote our time, research energy and creativity to understanding, studying, and ultimately reversing it.

Endnotes

*Thanks to Emma Petty for helping with the graphics (figures 1 and 2), and to Angela Rickford for the encouragement and support which made the preparation of this paper possible.

[1]Ebonics is a term coined by Robert Williams and other African American scholars in 1973 to refer to:

> "the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represents the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean and Unites States slave descendants of African origin. It includes the various idioms, patois, argots, idiolects and social dialects of black people," especially those who have been forced to adapt to colonial circumstances. (Williams, 1975, p. vi)
>
> In practice, the term is used more commonly for the vernacular or informal spoken usage of African Americans, which differs in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary from the vernaculars of Whites and other ethnic groups in the United States, even in the South, where the differences are less marked. This variety is often referred to alternatively by linguists as Black English Vernacular (BEV, see Labov 1972) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE, see Rickford and Green, to appear).

2 These data were drawn from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP data from earlier years, dating back to 1971, indicate similar trends.

[3]Note that these standardized tests are normed so that 50% of all students taking them are expected to score above the 50th percentile.

4 One other approach which follows this principle, but has never been systematically implemented or studied in the schools, is that of Labov (1995,57-59), who suggests several ways of bringing the insights of linguistic research to bear on the task of teaching reading to Ebonics speakers, including distinguishing between mistakes in reading and differences in pronunciation, and paying more attention to the ends of words.

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THE OAKLAND EXPERIENCE

Carrie M. Jefferson

Carrie M. Jefferson is professor of English at the College of Alameda in Alameda, California. She was also a teacher on special assignment with the Oakland Unified School District before and during the Ebonics controversy. Clinton Crawford had the opportunity to interview Professor Jefferson about her involvement in what became a nationwide explosive debate on Ebonics. The following is an excerpt from that conversation.

Who initiated the proposal to address Ebonics in the Oakland Public schools?

The Oakland Unified School District's Standard English Program (SEP) members, perhaps, more than any other group, contributed most directly to the African American Task Force which was responsible for the recommendations that ultimately ignited the Ebonics debate. A fact, frequently overlooked, or perhaps unknown, is that there were some important recommendations presented to the Oakland Board of Education.

Please enumerate some of those recommendations for us.

1. The OUSD Board shall adopt a policy that recognizes that African-American children speak a language other than English in the home.

2. (a) OUSD shall administer a language assessment test