The Ebonics Controversy and the Education of African American Children


Reviewed by
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In December 1996, the Oakland, California Board of Education passed what has become known as the Ebonics resolution, calling for the recognition of Ebonics as a language and “mandating that effective instructional strategies be utilized to ensure that every child has the opportunity to achieve English language proficiency” (p. 156). In passing this resolution, the Oakland School Board sought to address the scholastic underachievement of African American students, who comprise 53% of the student population, and to improve the instruction of Standard American English by use of the Standard English Proficiency Program (SEP). The resolution and the Ebonics issue have received much coverage (often misleading, inaccurate, and racist) and have generated heated debate in the public media, on the Internet, in professional organizations and journals, and among people all over the U.S. and abroad. In The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children, edited by Theresa Power and Lisa Delpit, African American educators, linguists, writers, activists, classroom teachers, and students define, frame, and discuss the Ebonics controversy with reason, passion, and beauty. This book eloquently and convincingly argues that the Ebonics controversy goes beyond linguistics. It is a debate about culture, power, identity, and control. It is a debate about how best to acknowledge and change the reality that our nation’s schools are failing African-American students. It is a debate that will never end until our society and our schools provide true access and opportunity to African Americans. (p. xiv)

The Real Ebonics Debate contains a variety of types of selections: articles, interviews, poetry, reprints of news articles, public documents such as resolutions, and personal essays. The book also includes an annotated list of resources, a glossary of terms often used in the public debate, notes and references, and an annotated list of contributors.

The selections are divided into five sections: (a) “Introductions,” with articles by each of the editors; (b) “What is Ebonics?” with six selections defining and dispelling myths about Ebonics; (c) “Classroom implications,” with eight selections giving practical advice and areas of concern; (d) “The Oakland Resolution,” with related resolutions, public statements, policies, legal precedents, and reactions; and (e) “Personal Essays,” with two selections. The editors often preface selections with short quotations from such well-known African Americans as Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Carter Godwin Woodson, Joycelyn Elders, and Langston Hughes, as well as quotations from teachers and students. These illustrate the vitality of Ebonics, in addition to addressing issues of power, culture, and identity. The Real Ebonics Debate reminds me of a collage where certain pieces stand out because of their images or bright colors and others blend into the background and seem nondescript. Yet each piece contributes to the whole to create a powerful image and message. Similarly, The Real Ebonics Debate has selections of varying quality, of varying interest to different readers, and of varying styles. Yet taken together the pieces in the book create a powerful collage emphasizing the importance of language education and highlighting the fact that language education is closely tied to race, class, and politics.

Part of the collage is providing a historical perspective. Controversies over Black English/Ebonics, how it relates to Standard English, and how to educate African American children are not new. We are reminded of these facts by such selections as James Baldwin’s famous 1979 essay “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” and Geneva Smitherman’s essay “What Go Round Come Round: King in Perspective,” which outlines the 1979 “Black English case” in Michigan. In fact, the term Ebonics is over 25 years old. Smitherman, in her article “Black English/Ebonics: What it Be Like?” informs us that the term Ebonics was coined by a group of Black scholars at a conference on “Language and the Urban Child” in 1973 “as a new way of talking bout the language of African slave descendants” (p. 29). In addition, African Americans, with distinct Ebonics styles, have been recognized for their rhetorical skills, musical abilities, and literary talents: Orators such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, and Reverend Jesse Jackson; and writers such as James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison. The value of using texts and music by African Americans in classrooms is emphasized in selections such as one by Terry Meier, 

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