

JUN 13 1994

A STUDY OF THE PROBLEMS OF  
TEACHING READING TO  
THE BLACK DIALECT-SPEAKING CHILD

AN ABSTRACT OF  
A THESIS  
PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
OF  
WESTERN CONNECTICUT STATE COLLEGE

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
MASTER OF SCIENCE

by  
Nancy Leo Puhl  
April 1972

### The Problem

Charles Silberman, James Coleman and many others have pointed out that the lower-class child, especially the lower-class black dialect-speaking child, has not been taught to read standard English in the public schools of America. It is the hypothesis of this paper that black dialect-speaking children can be taught to read and understand standard English if their own language is accepted as valid, systematic, and adequately developed, and if the method of teaching these children to read standard English is based upon linguistic knowledge of the two language systems. The purpose of this paper is to determine, if possible, what method or methods of teaching reading to dialect-speaking black children might be most successful and to suggest appropriate questions for further research and evaluation concerning the problems of the dialect-speaking child learning to read standard English.

### Procedure

This study was conducted through a research of published material relative to the subject that deals with the education of black dialect-speaking children in public elementary schools, the reading difficulties of dialect-speaking children, the viewpoints of educators, linguists, psychologists,

concerning the dialect of black children, and the alternative methods of teaching reading to dialect-speaking children. Research data from controlled studies was also examined. Black and white teachers were interviewed concerning their methods of teaching reading to dialect-speaking children, their opinions about the various methods, and any conclusions derived from experience. School situations involving reading instruction of dialect-speaking black children were observed. Finally, interviews with dialect-speaking children and parents concerning their attitudes and feelings about reading instruction in the public schools of Hartford were conducted.

### Conclusions

Three problem areas are suggested as a result of this study, namely: investigative techniques, descriptive studies of black nonstandard English, and teacher attitudes. In field techniques of investigation, progress has been made in interviewing procedures, but investigators are still not sure what constitutes a sufficient sampling of black dialect. Descriptive studies are still incomplete because many aspects of the various dialects have not been analyzed in detail. Attitudes of teachers to nonstandard English-speaking children are known to be important factors, but very little scientific data is available concerning how specific attitudes influence students in certain ways.

Research suggests that while the difference between

Negro nonstandard English and standard written language is great, children seem to have the capacity to bridge the difference. It cannot be assumed that because a child does not use a certain set of standard constructions in speech, he fails to understand. It seems important for teachers to understand the rules of both language systems so that in the analysis and correction of oral reading distinctions can be made between differences in meaning but not in sound. Research also suggests that the dialect may have little influence on comprehension and recall. These findings point out that investigators of language should take care to use procedures which separate speech production from language comprehension, and that conclusions derived from the study of speech production should not be applied to language comprehension.

Empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis is lacking because black children have not yet been taught standard English in an atmosphere of acceptance, and teachers have not been given linguistic training in the two language systems. Research supporting equal intellectual potential and the role of comprehension in reading suggests that when the young Negro children are provided with their fair opportunity to become involved with the larger society under conditions of equality and acceptance, then intelligence scores, motivational development, and achievement will be within the norms of that society.