

Legitimizing African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in general education would be a significant mistake. It would set a low educational standard for Black children and condition them to believe they do not need to strive for academic excellence. They might instead expect to be accommodated because of their race. Standard English is the established benchmark for assessing language proficiency among English speakers in American schools, including Black American children.

Arguments for accommodating AAVE in schools often center on the claim that Black children struggle with assessments due to a cultural barrier created by the use of standard English. This claim implies that speaking a different dialect inherently leads to academic failure, which is not true. Asian and Caribbean students, who may also speak dialects of English, generally perform well academically.

The reality is that many Black children struggle academically due to factors such as limited access to quality education, poverty, and systemic inequities. These factors, not their dialect, are the primary obstacles to their academic success. The 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that 86% of Black children in Virginia were functionally illiterate. This lack of literacy, not a cultural barrier, is the primary reason for their struggles on assessments.

When considering whether to accommodate AAVE in schools, it's crucial to remember the purpose of general education. The primary goal is to prepare students for successful adulthood and participation in the workforce. This requires a foundational understanding of core subjects like arithmetic, reading, writing, and standard English.

How will accommodating AAVE help Black children achieve these goals? If they are allowed to continue speaking primarily in their dialect, they will be ill-prepared for the demands of the real world. AAVE, while a valid form of communication within specific communities, is not widely understood or accepted in professional settings. The world is becoming increasingly globalized. To compete effectively in the job market and higher education, Black children need to be proficient in standard English. It serves as a common language that facilitates communication and collaboration across diverse backgrounds.

Some argue that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to speak English and that all dialects are equally valid. While acknowledging the richness and diversity of language, it's crucial to recognize the importance of standard English as a tool for social and economic mobility. Focusing solely on accommodating AAVE may inadvertently hinder Black students' academic progress and limit their future opportunities. Instead of lowering expectations, we should strive to equip all students with the necessary skills to succeed in a globalized world. This includes mastering standard English while also valuing and celebrating linguistic diversity.