



Ebonics Is Good

By Abdul Karim Bangura

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Sneak Preview

EBONICS IS GOOD

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DEDICATION

To The Afrikan, Who Must Endure!

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PREFACE

This book is an expansion of an earlier monograph with the same title published by The African Institution in 1997. It is part and parcel of my humble response to the clarion call of Mwalimu Carter G. Woodson, Mwalimu Frantz Fanon, and Mwalimu Malcolm X, among others, to address our African language question. As the following excerpts from the teachings of these great Africans show, it behooves us to counter the assumption of the ill-informed that Ebonics is “bad” by demonstrating that it is a GOOD language and worthy of respect.

Mwalimu Carter G. Woodson observes in his book, *Miseducation of the Negro*, that (1933:19-22):

In the study of language in school pupils were made to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise rather than directed to study the background of this language as a broken-down African tongue—in short to understand their own linguistic history, which is certainly more important for them than the study of French Phonetics or Historical Spanish Grammar. To the African language as such no attention was given except in case of the preparation of traders, missionaries and public functionaries to exploit the natives. This number of persons thus trained, of course, constituted a small fraction hardly deserving attention.

From literature the African was excluded altogether. He was not supposed to have expressed any thought worth knowing. The philosophy in the African proverbs and in the rich folklore of that continent was ignored to give preference to that developed on the distant shores of the Mediterranean. Most missionary teachers of the freedmen, like most men of our time, had never read the interesting books of travel in Africa, and had never heard of the *Tarikh Es-Soudan*.

In the teaching of fine arts these instructors usually started with Greece by showing how that art was influenced from without, but they omitted the African influence which scientists now regard as significant and dominant in early Hellas. They failed to teach the student the Mediterranean Melting Pot with the Negroes from Africa bringing their wares, their ideas and their blood therein to influence the history of Greece, Carthage, and Rome. Making desire farther to the thought, our teachers either ignored these influences or endeavored to belittle them by working out theories to the contrary.

The bias did not stop at this point, for it invaded the teaching of the professions. Negro law students were told that they belonged to the most criminal element in the country; and an effort was made to justify the procedure in the seats of injustice where law was interpreted as being one thing for the white man and a different thing for the Negro. In constitutional law the spinelessness of the United States Supreme Court in permitting the judicial nullification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments was and still is boldly upheld in our law schools.

In medical schools Negroes were likewise convinced of their inferiority in being reminded of their role as germ carriers. The prevalence of syphilis and tuberculosis among Negroes was especially emphasized without showing that these maladies are more deadly among the Negroes for the reason that they are Caucasian diseases; and since these plagues are new to Negroes, these sufferers have not had time to develop against them the immunity which time has permitted in the Caucasian. Other diseases to which Negroes easily fall prey were mentioned to point out the race as an undesirable element when this condition was due to the Negroes' economic and social status. Little emphasis was placed upon the immunity of the Negro from diseases like yellow fever and influenza which are so disastrous to whites. Yet, the whites were not considered inferior because of this differential resistance to these plagues.

In history, of course, the Negro had no place in this curriculum. He was pictured as a human being of the lower order, unable to subject passion to reason, and therefore useful only when made the hewer of wood and the drawer of water for others. No thought was given to the history of Africa except so far as it had been a field of exploitation for the Caucasian. You might study the history as it was offered in our system from the elementary school throughout the university, and you would never hear Africa mentioned except in the negative. You would never thereby learn that Africans first domesticated the sheep, goat, and cow, developed the idea of trial by jury, produced the first stringed instruments, and gave the world its greatest boon in the discovery of iron. You would never know that prior to the Mohammedan invasion about 1000 A.D. these natives in the heart of Africa had developed powerful kingdoms which were later organized as the Songhay Empire on the order of that of the Roman and boasting of similar grandeur.

Thus, Mwalimu Woodson recommends that (1933:149-151):

We should not close any accredited Negro colleges or universities, but we should reconstruct the whole system. We should not eliminate many of the courses now being offered, but we should secure men of vision to give them from the point of view

of the people to be served. We should not spend less money for the higher education of the Negro, but should redefine higher education as preparation to think and work out a program to serve the lowly rather than to live as an aristocrat.

Such subjects of certitude as mathematics, of course, would continue and so would most of the work in practical languages and sciences. In theology, literature, social science, and education, however, radical reconstruction is necessary. The old worn-out theories as to man's relation to God and his fellow man, the system of thought which has permitted one man to exploit, oppress, and exterminate another and still be regarded as righteous must be discarded for the new thought of men as brethren and the idea of God as the lover of all mankind.

After Negro students have mastered the fundamentals of English, the principles of composition, and the leading facts in the development of its literature, they should not spend all of their time in advanced work on Shakespeare, Chaucer and Anglo-Saxons. They should direct their attention also to the folklore of the African, to the philosophy in his proverbs, to the development of the Negro in the use of modern language, and to the works of Negro writers.

The leading facts of the history of the world should be studied by all, but of what advantage is it to the Negro student of history to devote all of his time to courses bearing on such despots as Alexander the Great, Caesar, and Napoleon, or to the record of those nations whose outstanding achievement has been rapine, plunder, and murder for world power? Why not study the African background from the point of view of anthropology and history, and then take up sociology as it concerns the Negro peasant or proletarian who is suffering from sufficient ills to supply laboratory work for the most advanced students of the social order? Why not take up economics as reflected by the Negroes of today and work out some remedy for their lack of capital, the absence of cooperative enterprise, and the short life of their establishments. Institutions like Harvard, Yale and Columbia are not going to do these things, and educators influenced by them to the extent that they become blind to the Negro will never serve the race efficiently.

To educate the Negro we must find out exactly what his background is, what he is today, what his possibilities are, and how to begin with him as he is and make him a better individual of the kind that he is. Instead of cramming the Negro's mind with what others have shown that they can do, we should develop his latent powers that he may perform in society a part of which others are not capable.

As Mwalimu Frantz Fanon explains in the opening paragraph of his book, *Black Skin White Masks* (1967:17-18),

I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language. That is why I find it necessary to begin with this subject, which should provide us with one of the elements in the colored man's comprehension of the dimension of *the other*. For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other...To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.

And Mwalimu Malcolm X recounts in his *Malcolm X On Afro-American History* (1967:44-46) that:

The slave maker knew that he couldn't make these people slaves until he first made them dumb. And one of the best ways to make a man dumb is to take his tongue, take his language. A man who can't talk, what do they call him? A dummy. Once your language is gone, you are a dummy. You can't communicate with people who are your relatives, you can never have access to information from your family—you just can't communicate.

Also, if you'll notice, the natural tongue that one speaks is referred to as one's mother tongue—mother tongue. And the natural intelligence that a person has before he goes to school is called mother wit. Not father wit—it's called mother wit because everything a child knows before it gets to school, it learns from its mother, not its father. And if it never goes to school, whatever native intelligence it has, it got it primarily from its mother, not its father; so it's called mother wit. And the mother is also the one who teaches the child how to speak its language, so that the natural tongue is called the mother tongue. Whenever you find as many people as we who aren't able to speak any mother tongue, why, that's evidence right there something was done to our mother. Something had to have happened to her.

They had laws in those days that made it mandatory for a Black child to be taken from its mother as fast as that child was born. The mother never had a chance to rear it. The child would be brought up somewhere else away from the mother, so that the mother couldn't teach the child what she knew about itself, about her past, about its heritage. It would have to grow up in complete darkness, knowing nothing about the land it came from or the people that it came from. Not even about its own mother. There was no relationship between the Black child and its mother; it was against the law. And if the master would ever find any of those children who had any knowledge of its mother tongue, that child was put to death. They had to stamp out the language; they did it scientifically. If they found any one of them that could speak it, off went its head, or they would put it to death, they would kill it, in front of the mother, if necessary. This is history; this is how they took your language. You didn't lose it, it

didn't evaporate they took it with a scientific process, because they knew they had to take it to make you dumb, or into the dummy that you and I now are.

I read in some books where it said that some of the slave mothers would try and get tricky. In order to teach their child, who'd be off in another field somewhere, they themselves would be praying and they'd pray in a loud voice, and in their own language. The child in the distant field would hear his mother's voice, and he'd learn how to pray in the same way; and in learning how to pray, he'd pick up on some of the language. And the master found out that this was being done, and immediately he stepped up his efforts to kill all the little children that were benefitting from this. And so it became against the law even for the slave to be caught praying in his tongue, if he knew it. It was against the law. You've heard some of the people say they had to pray with their heads in a bucket. Well, they weren't praying to the Jesus that they're praying to now. The white man will let you call on that Jesus all day long; in fact he'll make it possible for you to call on him. If you were calling on that somebody else, then he'd have more fear of it. Your calling on that somebody else in that other language—that causes him a bit of fear, a bit of freight.

They used to have to steal away to pray. All those songs that the slaves talked, or sang, and called spirituals, had wrapped up in them some of what was happening to them. And when the child realized that it couldn't hear its mother pray anymore, the slaves would come up with a song, "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray," or the song "Motherless Child": "Sometimes, I feel like a motherless child. Father gone, mother gone, motherless child sees a hard time." All of these songs were describing what was happening to us then, in the only way slaves knew how to communicate—in song. They didn't dare say it outright, so they put it in song. They pretended that they were singing about Moses in "Go Down, Moses." They weren't talking about Moses and telling "old Pharaoh to let my people go." They were trying to talk some kind of talk to each other, over the slave master's head. Now you've got a hold of the thing and you're believing in it for real. Yes, I hear you singing "Go down, Moses," and you're still talking about Moses four thousand years ago—you're out of your mind. But those slaves had a whole lot of sense. Everything they sang was designed toward freedom. ...

In making the case that Ebonics is good, the rest of this book is divided into nine chapters. Chapter one introduces the Ebonics issue. Chapter two examines the linguistic reality of African American English. Chapter three looks at the sociolinguistics of African American English. Chapter four focuses on the politico-sociolinguistic reality of African American English. Chapter five discusses the social construction of Ebonics from a Fasoldian perspective. Chapter six is about the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) initiative. Chapter seven presents

the linguistic connections between the African National Anthem (Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika), the Jamaican National Anthem (Jamaica), and the Negro National Anthem (Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing). Chapter eight entails the conclusion and suggestion. And Chapter nine offers a couple of reflections. Together, these chapters demonstrate that a thorough description of African American English (AAE) requires that we locate its total personality within the boundaries of its own self-perception. This means that we must delineate AAE and its view of the world, both visible and invisible, its fundamental habits of thought, and its attitude towards its physical and spiritual existence.

The roots of the African American life concept is holistic: that is, it is based on an integrative world view. All life to the African is total; all human activities are closely interrelated. This has as its underlying principle the sanctity of the person, his/her spirituality and essentiality. This essentialist view of the person confers value to his/her personhood. All else—his/her labor and achievements—flow from this value system. Even personal failure cannot invalidate it.

Indeed, no book can be all things to all readers. My guess is that what follows will strike a responsive chord in some and leave others quite untouched; this is preferable to a wide, but tepid, acceptance.

CHAPTER 1



INTRODUCTION

What an animal kingdom we now find ourselves, where some are more equal than others and vultures and hyenas consider themselves kahunas and could summon the courage to call brave Lions jackals.

—Sami Gandy-Gorgla, 2005

In the wake of the Oakland, California, school board's declaration in December of 1996 that African American English, also known as Ebonics (a term coined from two words, ebony and phonics, by African American psychologist Robert Williams in 1975), is not merely a dialect but a language, rooted in a distinct African American culture, and that students who speak it should not be criticized or harshly corrected, but given special assistance learning standard English. A number of White and African American public figures jumped into the discussion of the issue, about which they were not well informed. As reported in the Washington Post (December 25, 1996, p. A2), U.S. Department of Education secretary Richard W. Riley, speaking on behalf of the Clinton administration, stated that "Elevating 'black English' to the status of a language is not the way to raise standards of achievement in our schools and for our students." The Rev. Jesse L. Jackson said that "I understand the attempt to reach out to these children, but this is an unacceptable surrender border lining on disgrace." On NBC's Meet the Press, Jackson added that "It's teaching down to our children and it must never happen." California governor Pete Wilson (Republican) was no more encouraging of Oakland's experiment than Clinton. Wilson's press secretary, Sean Walsh, asserted that "The mainstreaming of this ridiculous theory (Ebonics) will only serve to hold [disadvantaged children] back." The presupposition of these statements is that African American English is a "bad" language. What I attempt to demonstrate in this book, as I stated earlier, is that African American English is

a GOOD language because it possesses the dual character any other language has: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Accordingly, as Robert Williams defines it in the book he edited and appropriately titled *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folk* (1975), Ebonics refers to “the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represents the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States idioms (usual ways in which words of a particular language are joined together to express thought), patois (a form of language differing generally from the accepted standard), argots (specialized vocabularies and idioms of groups), idiolects (dialects of individuals), and social forces of Black people. Ebonics derives its form from ebony (Black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound) and refers to the study of the language of Black people in all its cultural uniqueness” (1975:vi, the definitions in parentheses are added by me).

Challenging the devaluation of African American English is important because of the devastating consequences that may result from such an action. Language can take a people further and further from themselves to other selves, from their world to other worlds.

The biblical account of the people of Gilead in about 1100 B.C. records that they had killed a number of Ephraimites and then devised a linguistic discrimination test to flush out the remaining enemy in the land. In the book of Judges, we read:

...The men of Gilead said to them, “Are you Ephraimites?” If they answered “no,” they then asked them, “Say the word Shibboleth.” The true Ephraimites responded, “Sibboleth,” for they could not pronounce it right (*Judges* 12:5,6).

Also, as Charles Barron, a citizen of Gullah country and an affiliate of the Dynamics of Leadership, Inc., in New York, reminds us, on June 16, 1976, in Soweto, South Africa, African students organized an uprising to protest the teaching of Afrikaans, the language of the White, racist oppressors, in their schools. For the Afrikaaners, it was so important that their language be taught that they ordered their army to massacre over one thousand African youth. The South African White oppressors, bent on maintaining their demonic system of apartheid in order to dominate for generations to come, forced their language on the African youth.

In addition, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o recounts in one of his outstanding books, *Decolonising the Mind* (1981), one of the most humiliating experiences in colonial Kenya was to be caught speaking Gikũyũ in the vicinity of Thiong’o’s school. The culprit was given corporal punishment—three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks—or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. The teachers caught culprits by giving a button to one student who was supposed to hand it over to whomever was caught speaking his/her mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day would sing the name of the student who had given it to him or her, and the ensuing process would bring out all the culprits of the day. Thus, students were turned into witch-hunters, and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being traitors to their immediate community.

In colonial Africa, the system of education, in addition to its apartheid racial demarcation, had the structure of a pyramid: a broad primary base, a narrowing secondary middle, and an even narrower university apex. Selections from primary into secondary, and from secondary into university, were through rigorous public examinations, in which one had to pass six subjects ranging from math to the physical sciences and a European language. All the papers were written in a European language. Anyone who failed the European language could not pass the exams, no matter how brilliantly she or he had done in the other subjects. One can have distinctions in the physical sciences and math and a simple pass in English, but will not be admitted into a university. Instead, one needs to pass the European language with at least a credit (equivalent to a grade of “B” in the American educational system) to gain admission.

But obviously it was worse, according to Ngégé wa Thiong’o, when the colonial child was exposed to images of his or her world as mirrored in the written languages of the colonizer. In the child’s own impressionable mind, African languages were associated in his/her impressionable mind with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, no intelligence, and barbarism. This was reinforced by the world encountered in the works of such racists as a Rider Haggard or a Nicholas Monsarrat, not to mention the pronouncements of some of the giants of Western intellectual and political establishments, such as Hume (“... the negro is naturally inferior to the whites ...”), Thomas Jefferson (“... the blacks ... are inferior to the whites on the endowments of both body and mind ...”), or Hegel, with his comparison of Africa to a land of childhood still enveloped in the dark mantle of the night, as far as the development of self-conscious history was concerned. Hegel’s statement that there was nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in the African character is representative of the racist images of Africans and Africa such a colonial child was bound to encounter in the literature of the colonial languages. The results could be disastrous, as is the case of African Americans who have always been ostracized (deliberate exclusion of an individual or group from society) for their language.

After the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, nearly the entire world was outraged by the acts, and correctly so, for those acts must be labeled what they are: terrorist acts that have no basis in Islam. And also correctly so, the area of the attack in the heart of New York’s financial district has become a monument for America’s resolve. We must also not forget the history of that financial district. It is an area where thousands of native first Americans and Africans were butchered by European Americans for their selfish gains.

Between 1640 and 1645, the Manhattan, an indigenous people of North America of the Algonquian-Wakashan linguistic group belonging to the Wappinger Confederacy, were brutally wiped out by the Dutch. The Wappinger, who are said to have sold Manhattan to the Dutch for a handful of beads and trinkets (legendarily valued at \$24) on May 24, 1626, objected to the idea that they sold their land, because what they understood they did was accept rental payment for use of a particular portion of Manhattan Island as a trading center, so they could do business with the Dutch. And Peter Minuit, the director of the Dutch colony, born in Wesel, Duchy of

Cleves (present-day Germany), knew fully well that this had not been a sale, but rather a rental. Minit resolved the issue by sending a military expedition up the island to dispense with the Wappinger. The expedition did, so rapidly that Minit's troops felt no one would believe how successful they had been when they went back—so they took the heads of the fighting-age males and the leaders, and carried them back in woven baskets to display as proof that they had butchered the lot. The citizenry was so happy that they gathered around to watch a jolly sporting contest of soccer and football, in which the heads of the slain owners of the land were used as soccer balls or footballs. It is roughly on that place where the foundation of the World Trade Center is situated.

Anyone familiar with Native/First American culture knows that the Wappinger were correct in their linguistic interpretation of the deal. The Dutch simply engaged in linguistic manipulation for their own selfish economic, political and social gains. Selling land is not a Native/First American custom. Land is to be used and allowed to re-fertilize itself by moving elsewhere so as not to destroy it. For the Native/First American, land is owned by the Creator, not man.

The actions of the Dutch killed more than just a people; they also killed the Wappinger language. It is just one example of thousands of native first American language deaths that have been caused by European Americans. Some scholars estimate that at the time of the first European contact, the western hemisphere was inhabited by 40 million people who spoke 1,800 different languages. Another widely accepted estimate suggests that at the time of Columbus, more than 15 million speakers throughout that half of the world used more than 2,000 languages. By the end of the 20th century, as a result of European conquest and settlement in the western hemisphere, perhaps two-thirds of the many indigenous American languages had been killed. Of the native first American languages still in use, more than half are spoken by fewer than 1,000 persons per language; most of the speakers are bilingual. Only a few languages, like Navajo and Cherokee, have more than 50,000 speakers; Navajo, spoken by about 150,000 people, is the most widely used native first American language in the United States. By the end of the 20th century, 175 native American languages were spoken in the United States, but only 20 of these were widely known, and 55 were spoken by only a few elderly members; 100 other languages were somewhere between these extremes.

The same financial district sits on an area where enslaved Africans were butchered and an African burial ground is situated. Wall Street itself got its name from the wall of a protective slave enclosure, which formed the economy of the city, which is now considered the economic head of an empire.

On April 7, 1712, over 20 enslaved Africans, hoping to incite other Africans, gathered in an orchard on Maiden Lane to revolt against British rule. (The British were much more ruthless than the Dutch, passing 36 laws restricting the Africans. This was the first organized slave revolt in New York. During the melee, the house of Peter van Tilburgh was burned, and nine members of his household and neighboring homes were killed. The rebels escaped into the forest, but the governor posted sentries at all spots where the enslaved could leave the island of Manhattan, such as the ferry slip to Brooklyn or the Harlem River Bridge, making it impossible for them to

leave the area. The British found all of them the next day, although six had committed suicide rather than face the torture and execution by the British. Those captured were burned alive over a slow fire for eight to ten hours, dragged through the streets behind a cart, and lashed at every corner as a warning to anyone else who wanted freedom. Twenty-one Africans were brutally executed, including some who had their insides gored out. These enslaved Africans are among those buried in New York City's African Burial Ground at Duane Street.

In October 2003, a group of anthropologists and archeologists determined that one grave contained a young woman who had twisted, snapped wrists and a bullet lodged in her ribs. In another was a man laid to rest with coins on his eyes, an African custom. A third grave site at the colonial-era burial ground had a woman holding a child in her arms. Researchers believe that the burial ground, which was closed in 1794, is part of a larger one that stretches five blocks and is encircled by the State Supreme Court, the federal Courthouse, and City Hall. It is thought that 20,000 Africans are buried there some historians believe this proves that a much larger African population lived in New York during the 18th century than originally estimated.

Scores of artifacts found in the coffins—waist beads, cowrie shells, necklaces, bracelets, and small pieces of pottery—were examined by a team of the nation's top anthropologists and archeologists at Howard University, which conducted the bio-skeletal research of the site. These scientists believe that many of those buried in the grave site were born in Africa rather than in North America. They have matched DNA samples of people from Ghana and the Ivory Coast to some of the remains. Some of the dead suffered from tropical diseases they could have contracted only in the Caribbean or in other warmer climates. At least 18 of the skeletal remains contained teeth that had been filed in the same designs seen only in Africa.

For the scientists, that meant the enslaved Africans were treated badly. The face of the woman with the bullet lodged in her side had been smashed. They also found that at least 70 percent of the adults suffered a condition where the muscles along the neck area are detached. Such a condition is usually seen in weight lifters or people who consistently carry loads too heavy for them.

The ostracism of African Americans by the majority of White Americans has been going on for approximately 400 years. The ostracism has had some long-lasting devastating consequences in terms of what is referred to as *semantic-information distance*—the gap in information and understanding that exists between superior and subordinates, or other groups within an organization, on specified issues (Jablin et al. 1979:1207). The gap in information and understanding between African Americans and Whites continues to exist. It has been handed over from one generation to another and, therefore, has become cultural in a sense. This has led to what communication experts call “definitional physical interdependence.” From the time the Africans were brought to this country as enslaved people, there was little interaction between them and their White masters. So, it was extremely difficult for African Americans to learn Standard American English. This, of course, is the major exigency for Ebonics.

For a language to be both learned and shared, it must be transmitted from one member of a group to another in some ways. This process is normally called socialization, which tends to be

both formal and informal (the informal part of the process being spontaneous). Without socialization, a group's culture could not be transmitted to its new members (Bluedom 1995:501). One views culture broadly as a social heritage that is passed on and modified from one generation to another. A system of agreed-upon meanings that serve as guidelines for behavior in any particular society also encompasses what the group has learned, created, and done to guarantee its biological survival through time (Keto 1991:2). This is another reason African Americans developed Ebonics. As culture and language are interrelated, this was how African Americans developed a subculture and language based on their ostracism.

From a variety of data sources, the effects of the ostracism of African Americans by many White Americans are quite evident. First, African Americans are overrepresented in all disability categories. Second, it is the group most likely to be placed in segregated classrooms or buildings. Finally, the patterns of language learning and usage of African Americans are generally devalued in schools. But as Heath's classic ethnographic study of African American and White children's language learning demonstrates, these children learn spontaneously with their peers how to talk in the imaginative, playful, and performing mode of "talking junk," with the boys becoming particularly competitive in the skill (Harry and Anderson 1994). So, it appears that despite the ostracism, one reality remains: Ebonics will not gradually fade off into the night. It is part of the foundation of African American identity; and whether people want to admit it or not, it is a part of American culture.

Nonetheless, another disturbing implication of this pattern of ostracism is that African Americans are more likely to be educated in separate schools that will prepare them for separate and even more punitive facilities when they leave school than for the real world of work and responsibility. The more separate the educational placement, the more unrealistic and inappropriate the instruction is likely to be, and the less preparation for real life. As Harry and Anderson (1994) point out, if a small fraction (6 percent) teenaged African American males who enter special education programs are likely to return to regular education, the implications for post-school employment, higher education, preparation for jobs that offer opportunities in high-demand technology fields, and ultimately the ability to become a source of support for their families and assume the role of responsible fatherhood are dramatically diminished.

This is a particularly sensitive issue in Oakland where, although 53 percent of the District's 51,000 students are African American, they account for 64 percent of those held back, 71 percent of those in special education programs, and 80 percent of those suspended. Almost 20 percent of these African Americans in grade 12 do not graduate (*USA Today* 1997:12A).

In the Baltimore, whose public school student population is 80 percent African American, 18 percent of all students were placed in special education programs in 1988 (Maryland State Department of Education 1988). The way special education is currently conceptualized, this means that almost one-fifth of the students in that city were designated as disabled for educational purposes. This is clearly counterproductive and suggests that the entire system needs to be reconceptualized (Harry and Anderson 1994).

As *Los Angeles Times* (March 24, 2005) writer Duke Helfand reports, a recent Harvard University study reveals that nearly half of the Latino and African American students who should have graduated from California's high schools in 2002 did not. Statewide, just 57 percent of African Americans and 60 percent of Latinos graduated in 2002, compared with 78 percent of Whites and 84 percent of Asians. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, the situation was even worse, with just 39 percent of Latinos and 47 percent African Americans graduating, compared with 67 percent of Whites and 77 percent of Asians. The study concluded that the public is largely unaware of the true extent of the problem, as the state uses "misleading and inaccurate" methods to report dropout and graduation rates. The California Department of Education reported that 87 percent of students graduated in 2002, but the Harvard researchers pegged the rate at 71 percent.

According to Helfand, the troubling graduation rates in the minority communities is due to the fact that these are places where students are more likely to attend what researchers call "dropout factories." The exodus of thousands of students before 12th grade is exacting significant social and economic costs through higher unemployment, increased crime, and billions of dollars in lost revenue. Jefferson High School principal Norm Morrow is cited as attributing his school's graduation rate partly to a transient student population and overcrowding, which leave little opportunity for personal attention. He is also quoted as saying that "If you don't connect with [students], they are going to drop out."