Intangible Heritage of Standard English Learners: The “Invisible” Subgroup in the United States of America? Implications for Closing the Achievement Gap

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Abstract
Standard English Learners (SELs) are ethnic minority native speakers of English whose mastery of the “standard English language” used in the curriculum of schools is limited due to their use of ethnic-specific nonstandard dialect. Research in language development highlights language as a tool that allows the individual access to basic civil rights and opportunities in the area of politics, economics, and education. A correlation exists between proficiency in the use of Standard English and academic achievement, thereby highlighting the importance of validating the intangible language heritage that these students bring to the school environment while they are schooled in the use of Standard English.

Keywords
Standard English Learners, intangible heritage, black history, black studies, African American history, African American studies, education, language, achievement gap

Introduction
The persistent glaring gap in the achievement levels among the student subgroups in the U.S. K-12 public schools that is apparent in standardized tests data has been expertly documented over many years by research organizations such as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and Child Trends. NCES (2009) reported that the scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) administered in 2009 show White and Asian/Pacific Islander fourth- and eighth-grade students with average reading and mathematics scores ranging from 24 to 40 points significantly higher than African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians.

In 2007, the NAEP scores show White and Asian/Pacific Islander 4th and 8th grade students with average reading and mathematics scores ranging from 24 to 40 points significantly higher than African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians.

The same achievement trend is seen from NAEP scores administered from 1996 to 2000 to a sample of 8th and 12th grade students in Mathematics and Science, and from 1998 to 2002 in Reading which establish that African American and Hispanic students perform significantly lower in these subjects (Braswell et al., 2001; Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003; O’Sullivan, Lauko, Grigg, Qian, & Zhang, 2003).

Standard English Learners (SELs) are ethnic native speakers of English whose mastery of the Standard English language used in the curriculum of schools is limited due to their use of ethnic specific nonstandard dialect (LeMoine, 1999). Language is a means of communication which allows individuals access to basic civil rights in the area of politics, economics, and education. Inability to use mainstream language proficiently is, therefore, a deterrent to an individual’s full access to political, economical, and educational opportunities (Ricento & Burnaby, 1998). There are African American SELs, American Indian SELs, Hawaiian American SELs, and Mexican American SELs. These students were born in the United States and grew up speaking English as their first and sometimes only language, thereby distinguishing SELs from English Language Learners (ELLs) who were usually not born in the United States and grew up speaking another language other than English as their first language.
Aud et al. (2010) in *The Condition of Education 2010*, illustrate that the population of White students in the nation’s K-12 public schools has steadily declined. The White population in 2008 dropped to 55.5% from its 1988’s 68.3% and its 1972’s 78%. Over the same period, the Hispanic student population rose to 21.7% in 2008 from 11% in 1988. Hispanic student population, since 1986, has gradually increased more than that of the African Americans which it exceeded in 2002 and yearly after. The African American student population rose to its highest level of 17.2% in 1998 from 16.5% in 1988. However, the African American population dropped to 15.5% in 2008. Only 7.4% of public school enrollment in 2008 was a combination of Asian (3.7%), Pacific Islanders (0.2%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (0.9%) students, and (2.6%) students of more than one race. Minority students increased from 22% in 1972% to 45% in 2008.

Policy makers at the national, state, and local district levels have examined and implemented several policies, regulations, and practices that are designed to assist ELLs in U.S. classrooms. However, very little prominence, especially at the national level, has been given to the specific academic needs of SELs. According to LeMoine (1999), SELs can attain mainstream literacy through practices similar to second language acquisition. It would be shrewd for policy makers to include all viable strategies in their examination and implementation of several policies, regulations, and practices that are designed to bridge or eliminate the achievement gap that exists among the various student subgroups by addressing the identified factors that lead to the gap and also by adopting educational practices such as culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy that include language and literacy proficiency.

**The Milieu of SELs**

Each of the SELs in the United States—African American SELs, American Indian SELs, Hawaiian American SELs, and Mexican American SELs—come from a rich cultural background. The African American SELs’ experience spans from their ancestry in Africa through slavery to contemporary times in the area of arts, politics, and education. The experience of the African American SELs is the focus of this article.

**Education Policies**

Policy makers at the national, state, and local district levels have examined and implemented several policies, regulations, and practices that are designed to bridge or eliminate the achievement gap that exists among the various student subgroups. Several education policies that have impacted African American SELs are discussed in this section. The state and local Jim Crow laws in the United States, which mandated segregation in all public facilities and public transportation with a “separate but equal” status for Black Americans and members of other non-White racial groups was enacted between 1876 and 1965. In 1896, the *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation under the doctrine of “separate but equal” in public accommodations established separate facilities for Blacks and Whites in schools, restrooms, drinking fountains, public transportation, witness stands in courtrooms, and every possible facility. “Separate but equal” (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896) remained a standard doctrine in U.S. law until it was overturned by the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision affirmed that state laws that established separate public schools for Black and White students denied Black children equal educational opportunities and were a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. The Warren Court’s unanimous (9-0) decision on May 17, 1954 stated that separate educational buildings and services are not equal (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). This decision brought about educational and social reforms such as desegregation and integration of schools and the civil rights movement.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA) reauthorized and reformed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. NCLBA was passed in the United States House of Representatives on May 23, 2001, in the Senate on June 14, 2001 and signed into law on January 8, 2002 by President George W. Bush. NCLBA posed significant challenges for states because it set deadlines for states to expand the scope and frequency of student testing, revamp their accountability systems, and guarantee that every teacher is qualified in their subject area. It required states to make demonstrable annual progress in raising the percentage of students proficient in reading and mathematics every year from grades 3 to 8. All students are expected to meet or exceed minimum proficiency standards, as defined by each state by the 2013-2014 school year, thereby narrowing the test-score gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The achievement information is disaggregated by subgroups (race/ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic level, gender, migrant status, ELLs; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As a result of these requirements, the schools with a large population of SELs have difficulty meeting the NCLB mandate because of low test scores that places these schools on program improvement status.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling on June 28, 2007, eradicating the integration of schools based on students’ race is considered a setback to the *Brown v. Board of Education*’s (1954) ruling and the efforts to achieve diverse classrooms and communities. The *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* five-to-four decision struck down voluntary school desegregation programs in Seattle and Louisville, with the majority stating that initiatives that explicitly take a student’s race into account in school-assignment plans are unconstitutional (Squires, 2007).
The Race to the Top federal grant program is the most recent adopted policy impacting SELs. To receive funds from the Race to the Top grant program initiated by the Obama administration in July 2009, states must have realistic plans to conduct school reform in four areas by using strategies that will produce college- and workplace-ready students who can compete globally, using data to measure student academic growth and drive instruction, employing effective teachers and administrators, and revamping the schools with low achievement scores (Race to the Top Fund; U.S. Department of Education, 2010a).

The ESEA was initially adopted in 1965 and last updated in 2002 by President Bush’s NCLBA. The Obama administration issued its blueprint for revising the ESEA on March 13, 2010. One of the sections which addresses the needs of diverse learners aims to improve programs and instruction for English Learners, to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met by both ESEA and Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA), and to sustain the grant programs for Native American students, homeless students, migrant students, neglected or delinquent students, rural districts, and districts impacted by the activities of the federal government (ESEA Reauthorization: A Blueprint for Reform; U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). There was no specific mention of SELs in the blueprint.

**Language and Literacy**

There are several variations of English dialects spoken in the United States based on the culture, region, and/or ethnicity of the speakers such as the African American English (AAE), a unique historical, cultural, linguistic system spoken by many African Americans which has been described sometimes as Ebonics and Black English. According to Fogel and Ehri (2006), AAE differs from Standard American English on a variety of phonological, lexical, syntactic, stylistic, and usage dimensions. Linguistic researchers (Burling 1973; Fasold, 1969; Fryburg, 1974) and the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) in its January 1997 resolution on Ebonics (LSA, 1997) determined that AAE is a highly developed and structurally valid linguistic system that differs in many ways from Standard American English but is in no way deficient to it.

One school of thought is concerned that speaking non-SE fosters low achievement of culturally diverse populations (Feldman, Stone, & Renderer, 1990) because the linguistic features of English they learn at home is different from those used in school. Another school of thought (Goodman, Buck, & Barnitz, 1997; Smitherman, 2000) contends that it is the teachers’ lack of knowledge about dialect and their negative attitudes that impede student learning because research indicates that teachers tend to rate AAE-speaking students as less intelligent, less confident, and less likely to succeed than their SE-speaking classmates. Despite the existence of this research, many African American students experience in various classrooms, discreetly in most cases and explicitly in others, that the language of their forefathers, their families, and their communities is bad language, street language, and the speech of the ignorant and/or uneducated (Hollie, 2001).

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogical Strategies**

To address the language concern, culturally relevant pedagogical strategies are advocated to be used in classrooms, especially in schools with predominant SELs. According to Gay (2000),

> Culturally responsive teaching involves using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming. Culturally responsive pedagogy is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative and emancipatory. (pp. 29-35)

School districts around the nation are implementing a variety of initiatives designed to bridge the achievement gap among student subgroups. The Los Angeles Unified School District’s (LAUSD) Board of Education in its Action Plan adopted in June 2001 recommended the continued implementation of its Academic English Mastery Program (AEMP) that enhances SELs academic language acquisition in all schools (An Action Plan, 2001). In an experimental study conducted by the LAUSD, AEMP students performed better than the control group students in their writing on the specially designed Language Assessment Measure for African American SELs. AEMP is designed to permeate the district’s curriculum with research-based pedagogical strategies that produce the acquisition of Standard American English in both its oral and written forms without devaluing the home language and culture of the students to have an enriching literacy classroom experience and better academic achievement. The six pedagogical AEMP methods are to (a) develop teachers’ knowledge, understanding, and positive attitude toward SELs and the nonstandard languages they use; (b) include linguistic knowledge about nonstandard language into instruction; (c) use second language acquisition methodologies to bolster the acquisition of school language and literacy; (d) utilize a balanced approach to literacy acquisition that integrates phonics; (e) design instruction around the learning styles and strengths of SELs; and (f) infuse the history and culture of SELs in the curriculum (AEMP, 1999).

The LAUSD Board’s July 2007 “Hope on the Horizon” resolutions reaffirmed its commitment to the AEMP and prompted then LAUSD Superintendent Brewer to hold in December 2007 the Achieving A+ Summit where state and national experts came up with recommendations to improve SELs instruction in LAUSD. The recommendations were to
incorporate culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy in all district initiatives, programs, and plans; to provide measurable superior professional development on successful pedagogy for educating SELs; to carry out “best practices” for teaching core content curricula to SELs in all grade levels; to define the responsibilities of central office, local districts, schools, principals, and teachers for increasing the achievement of SELs; and to implement policy that will increase the knowledge of educators on creating successful and caring learning environments for SELs (AEMP, 2010).

Many SELs come from home environments where being read to is not part of their early literacy experience. Research indicates that young children who are read to before formal schooling are ushered into an understanding of the relationships between oral and written language that is critical to literacy acquisition. For SELs who have not had exposure to books before school, classrooms must become the venue for building this critical relationship between oral language and print. Literacy is an extension of natural language learning and school literacy experiences must be built around the language of the child and draw on the experiences of students for learning to be meaningful and relevant (Fogel & Ehri, 2006).

**SELS “Invisibility” Implications on the Black Educational Civil Rights Agenda**

ELLs are recognized as a distinct subgroup separate from their ethnicity in standardized test results whereas SELs are not. As a result, a concerted effort has been made through the enactment of policies and legislations geared toward providing targeted assistance and accommodations for ELLs that had not been done at the same level for SELs. The implications of the invisibility and lack of recognition of SELs as a distinct subgroup in U.S. K-12 public schools on the “Black Educational Civil Rights Agenda” are evident.

The four focus areas of the Black Educational Civil Rights Agenda are to (a) promote educational policies and practices that advance rather than impede educational excellence, (b) improve high school graduation rates for all African American students, (c) improve educational outcomes equally for both African American male and female students, and (d) provide support for parents and families of underachieving African American students (Black Educational Civil Rights Agenda, 2007).

It is clear from recent Supreme Court decisions that many policy makers believe that providing SELS with interventions will be realized without a nationwide, widespread, concerted, and purposeful plan. Most White Americans are under the impression that all students are receiving equal access to educational opportunities according to Orfield and Yun (1999). It is imperative, therefore to understand and immediately address the challenges facing SELs, which create inequalities to educational opportunities. It is highly inequitable to hold all students to the increased rigorous testing prerequisites for high school graduation and for college entrance when it is evident that equitable preparation for these tests has not been provided to all students in spite of race, socioeconomic status, and language. Not vigorously creating, implementing, and sustaining policies that address the unique needs of SELs lead to unequal schools in predominately low income minority neighborhoods whose students’ test scores are often low. These students from low performing schools will continue to be punished if the realities of their plight are not taken into consideration by educational policy decisions (Orfield & Yun, 1999). It will be difficult to achieve these four focus areas without adequate and rigorous intervention.

**Implications for Closing the Achievement Gap**

The National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability recognizes language in addition to class, ethnicity, and gender as one of the different social divisions of which students belong to. The group also believes that as academic ability is a developed ability, there should be interventions from the homes, schools, and communities that will lead to the affirmative development of academic ability to close the achievement gap among the various subgroups (Bennett et al. 2004).

According to Jordan and Nettles (1999), the ability to read proficiently is a fundamental skill that affects the learning experiences and school performance of children and adolescents. Students, whose performance on reading tests pinpoint them as proficient readers, would more likely perform well in other subjects, such as math and science (Carnine & Carnine, 2004; Jordan & Nettles, 1999). The Math and Science Partnership program, a nationwide intervention program run by the National Science Foundation, partners higher education faculty from science, technology, engineering, and math disciplines with K-12 teachers. The higher education faculty provides professional development and mentoring to math and science teachers to deepen their content knowledge in their field of expertise with the goal of better preparing students in these subjects. The results from Math and Science Partnership projects that target specific improvements in the math and/or science programs show gains for Hispanic and African American students between 2003 and 2006. However, there is still a wide gap between the scores of White students and their African American and Hispanic counterparts. These results are drawn from schools whose projects target specific improvements in their math and/or science programs. The data used are student scores on state proficiency tests in math and science collected over three different school years (Zacharias & Hamos, 2008).

Ludwig (1999) stated that reading achievement is also a predictor of a student’s likelihood to graduate from high
school and to attend college. There is a graduation gap among the student groups with White and Asian students graduating at a higher percentage than their African American and Latino classmates. The Editorial Projects in Education Research Center found that only 53.7% of African American ninth graders in 2003 eventually graduated from high school in 2007 versus 76.6% of White students (“Huge Racial Disparities Persist,” 2010). Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad (1993) found that reading skills also influence students’ well-being as adults because illiterate adults find it difficult to function in society as many basic decision-making skills require reading proficiency. Solid reading skills guard against unemployment in early adulthood because people who cannot complete an application due to limited reading or writing skills are expected to have problems finding a job (Casp, Wright, Moffit, & Silva, 1998).

Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between concentrated poverty and many forms of educational inequality, including low test scores. In Table 1, Black and Latino students, on average, attend schools with more than twice as many poor classmates as White students. Latinos have the highest average percentage of impoverished classmates at 46%, compared with 19% for Whites.

Child Trends (2010) indicate that NAEP scores show a trend of lower reading scores on average by students, from low income families, eligible for free- and reduced-price lunches than students who were not eligible. In 2009, students eligible for free-and reduced-price lunches performed 26 points lower in the 4th grade and 24 points lower in the 8th grade. In 2005, 12th-grade students eligible for free-and reduced-price lunches performed 19 points lower.

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing (ACT) assessment, the two standardized tests used by colleges to determine college admission, also show a wide gap between the scores of White and Black students. The 2010 mean score on the mathematical and critical reading sections of the SAT for the African American high school seniors was 857, whereas that of White students was 207 points higher at 1064. The gap between the White and African American students’ mean score on the mathematical and critical reading sections of the SAT has increased from 188 to 207 between 1988 and 2010 (“The Persisting Racial Gap,” 2010). This wide gap is also apparent in the SAT II subject test scores with White students scoring much higher (“The Widening Racial Scoring Gap,” 2009). The ACT scores also show similar wide gaps. The 3-year average score of African American students from 2007 to 2010, on a scale of 1 to 36 is 16.9, whereas the 2010 score of White students is 22.3 (“Number of Blacks Taking the ACT,” 2010).

It is apparent, therefore, that it is important to seek and implement strategies that will bridge and ultimately eliminate the conspicuous gap between the student groups, including the recognition of SELs as a distinct subgroup with unique academic needs, especially in the way that SE is taught to SELs.

### Conclusions

The existing research shows that a wide achievement gap exists among various U.S. K-12 subgroups. SELs should be regarded as a distinct subgroup whose specific language heritage should be acknowledged and taken into consideration during literacy instruction. Doing so would also have a great impact on how achievement scores are analyzed and should hopefully lead to more concerted efforts by policy makers to provide targeted assistance that will improve the academic achievement of SELs thereby helping to close the widening achievement gap that exists between White students and their ethnic minority counterparts with the exception of Asian students. Practitioners and researchers in the public education arena need to continue to highlight the plight of SELs which will eventually garner the attention of the policy makers and prompt them to enact policies that will bring the needed change in the educational experience of SELs. Examples of such policies are the development of nationwide measuring assessment that will identify SELs, requiring that teachers receive both preservice and ongoing training on the unique cultural and linguistic heritage of SELs, and nationwide implementation of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogical strategies in K-12 schools and in teacher preparation institutions.

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**Table 1. Percentage Poor in Schools Attended by the Average White, Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American Student, 1996-1997**

| Percentage poor | White | Black | Latino | Asian | Native American |
|-----------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-----------------|
|                 | 18.7  | 42.7  | 46.0   | 29.3  | 30.9            |

Source: 1996-1997 NCES Common Core of Data Public School Universe. Percentage poor signifies the proportion of students receiving free or reduced price lunches because of low income.
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