TITLE: Reading Deficits in African American Children: Understanding the Role of Poverty and Cultural Dialects

ABSTRACT

Reading failure in African American (AA) children is a longstanding, high impact public health concern of enormous societal importance. The 25-30 point reading gap between AA and Caucasian American children as measured on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) has remained virtually unchanged for the last decade. The majority (84%) of AA fourth grade students read at or below "basic" levels in the 2011 NAEP sample, while only 16% of AA children were considered proficient or advanced readers (NCES, 2011). Despite the level of reading difficulty seen in this population, alarmingly few AA children are receiving special education services for reading disabilities (RD) and even fewer are identified as having specific learning disabilities (LD). Irrespective of the methods used to determine disproportionality, AA children are overrepresented in special education in general, and in the emotional/behavior disorders and mild intellectual disability categories, specifically. However, AA children are underrepresented in the LD category (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2007).

In our project we hypothesize that the interaction between known variables (related to language and cognitive ability) and cultural dialect will be most informative for understanding RD in AA children, regardless of poverty status. The cultural dialect used by AA children, called African American English (AAE) is the most studied dialect of American English. AAE is used by most, but not all, African Americans. In this project, dialectal variation is viewed not as a deficit but as a language difference that affects reading acquisition in ways that need to be better understood. We propose to use three complementary, converging methods to improve our understanding of these complex relationships: (1) we will characterize the cognitive, and language skills, and dialect use of a large cross-sequential longitudinal sample of AA in 1st-5th grades; (2) we will use statistical modeling (hierarchal linear modeling and latent class analysis) to identify and confirm the constitutional basis of RD in this population; and, (3) we will use reading- and dialect-matched groups and computational modeling to explore the impact of dialectal variation on specific reading-related skills and processes, including word reading and sentence level comprehension abilities.

A cross-sequential longitudinal design will be used to examine factors that contribute to developmental changes in word reading and reading comprehension among AA children in grades 1-5. AA children (n = 480) will be recruited in grades 1 through 4 and assessed during years 1 and 2, allowing an examination of risk factors while children are acquiring both word reading and reading comprehension skills. In order to establish the necessary sample sizes, we estimated sample size for treatment effects using a moderate effect size on the reading outcome measures. The research will be completed in the metropolitan Atlanta area, where a very large, heterogeneous AA population resides. We will use neighborhood census and school report card data to recruit children from schools that serve low-income and middle-income households. We anticipate both dialect-specific and reading-specific effects. As a group we expect skilled readers will perform better than struggling readers on all tasks and dialect scores will interact with other risk factors to affect reading. There will likely be variation between
children, families, schools and school resources (Bauer, 2007). We will assess variation between families and schools using surveys of school personnel and parent interviews.