Common Core State Standards, The Mocombeian Strategy, Reading Room Curriculum, and a Mismatch of Linguistic Structure and Social Class Function

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Abstract
The black-white test score gap is an empirical problematic that dates back to the 1940s. On many standardized tests the mean scores of black students on average are typically at least 1 standard deviation below the mean scores of white students. For the most part, the test scores indicate that on average black American students have more limited skills in processing information from articles, books, tables, charts, and graphs compared to their white and Asian counterparts. In response to this achievement gap of black American students vis-à-vis whites and Asians, Paul C. Mocombe developed his Mocombeian Strategy and Reading Room Curriculum, which posit a comprehensive mentoring program of educated black professionals and the restructuring of the linguistic structure of black American inner-city students via phonetic and language arts instructions, as the solutions to resolving the gap.

The two approaches are based on Mocombe’s hypothesis that the academic underachievement of black American students vis-à-vis their white and Asian counterparts is grounded in what he refers to as “a mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function.” This work explores the theoretical, practical, and pedagogical relationships between Mocombe’s “mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function hypothesis,” The Mocombeian Strategy, and Reading Room Curriculum (published as Mocombe’s Reading Room Series) as it stands in relation to the common core state standards (CCSS). The article concludes that like Mocombe’s Reading Room Series Curriculum, the CCSS, with its emphasis on language arts and literacy education, will aid black or African-American students in closing the academic achievement gap early on in their academic careers. However, later on as they matriculate through school they will further underachieve because of their social class functions or roles as athletes, entertainers, thugs, etc., in the American postindustrial economy.

Key words: Ideological domination; Linguistic structure; Mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function; Capitalism; Underclass; Social structure; African Americans

INTRODUCTION
The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were initiated and voluntarily developed in 2009 by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA) (Wiley & Rolstad, 2014). The standards are the most recent efforts by business leaders, school administrators, and politicians to create national education standards in the United States. Given the ideological nature of the American school system organized to recursively reproduce its capitalist society, the CCSS are a set of academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA), which outline what a K-12 grade student in the United States of America should know and be able to do at the end of each grade level in order to graduate high school, prepare to succeed in entry-level careers, introductory academic college courses, and workforce training programs in America’s
post-industrial society. Prior to the CCSS standards, each state developed their own standards based on content knowledge of subject areas.

The CCSS standards, which are benchmarked to the standards of high-performing states in the US and countries around the world, emphasize college and career readiness via English language arts, literacy, and mathematics. That is to say, the standards do not provide curriculum materials to educators. Instead, the emphasis is on the mastery of mathematics and English language arts knowledge to prepare students to participate in America’s postindustrial, technical, and service economy. The mastery of the latter must in turn be used to teach literacy in other content areas, i.e., science, social studies, etc. In other words, English language arts instruction must be implemented as praxis so that students can better be prepared to read a balance of fiction and literary non-fiction texts in social studies, science, career-technical, and other subject matters critically. As such, the emphasis for educators in other subject matters outside of mathematics and English language arts is teaching their content via reading. To date, 46 states and the District of Columbia have since adopted and begun to implement the CCSS in their schools. Two multi-state consortia, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced), are developing new assessments that are aligned to the CCSS standards. The new assessments will be implemented nationwide in 2014-2015 (Wiley & Rolstad, 2014).

The CCSS standards are not new. That is the relationship between educational standards, capitalism, pedagogy, and curriculum in America’s postindustrial economy is not new. Paul C. Mocombe (2001, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2013), working on the issue of education as an ideological apparatus for capitalist bourgeois domination and the black/white academic achievement gap, was one of the first scholars to suggest the English language arts and literacy component of the standards. According to Mocombe, given the transition of the American economy to postindustrial organization of labor that emphasize service industries, the pedagogy of American schools stress literacy, process approaches to learning, multicultural education, and cooperative group work (Sennett, 1998; Mocombe, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2013; Mocombe & Tomlin, 2013). Within such a pedagogical framework, Mocombe further argues, black Americans are at a disadvantage because they underachieve vis-à-vis their white counterparts because of a mismatch between their linguistic structure, Black English Vernacular, and its social class function in the American postindustrial economy. To offset this mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function problematic, in 1999 Paul C. Mocombe, as part of his doctoral work, developed The Mocombeian Strategy and Reading Room Curriculum for the Russell Life Skills and Reading Foundation, Inc., an after school reading and mentoring program located in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The latter, Reading Room Curriculum, is a reading curriculum of seven books, published as Mocombe’s Reading Room Series, developed by Mocombe based on the theoretical cognitive linguistic assumptions of Noam Chomsky (Mocombe, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2013). This work explores the theoretical, practical, and pedagogical relationships between Mocombe’s “mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function hypothesis,” The Mocombeian Strategy, and Reading Room Curriculum (published as Mocombe’s Reading Room Series) as it stands in relation to the common core state standards (CCSS). The article concludes that like Mocombe’s Reading Room Series Curriculum, the CCSS, with its emphasis on language arts and literacy education, will aid black or African-American students in closing the academic achievement gap early on in their academic careers. However, later on as they matriculate through school they will further underachieve because of their social class functions or roles as athletes, entertainers, thugs, etc., in the American postindustrial economy. This latter problematic is overlooked by initiators of the CCSS. In other words, like Mocombe’s Reading Room Series Curriculum, with its emphasis on language arts and literacy, the CCSS, if implemented properly, will assist black American students in closing the academic achievement gap early on in their academic careers. However, based on Mocombe’s social class function hypothesis, it will be ill-equipped to resolve the gap beyond middle and high school because of the class structural differentiation education reproduces, i.e., college-educated professionals and non-college-educated workers, and the predominant social class roles, i.e., athletes, entertainers, thugs, etc., of blacks in the American economy.

1. THEORY

Whereas the CCSS were adopted to both help match American school curriculum with the organization of labor and close the achievement gap between themselves and high performing postindustrial countries, Mocombe’s Mocombeian strategy and Reading Room curriculum were developed to help close the black-white test score gap (Mocombe & Tomlin, 2010, 2013). In response to the achievement gap of black students’ vis-à-vis whites and Asians, Paul C. Mocombe developed his Mocombeian Strategy and Reading Room Curriculum, which posit a comprehensive mentoring program of educated black professionals and the restructuring of the linguistic structure of black American inner-city students via phonetic and language arts instructions, as the solutions to resolving the gap. The two approaches are based on Mocombe’s hypothesis that the underachievement of black American students vis-à-vis their white and Asian counterparts is not based on identity politics or a lack of
opportunities (Opportunity gap hypothesis of Prudence Carter). But is grounded in what he refers to as “a mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function” (Mocombe, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012; Mocombe & Tomlin, 2010, 2013), which is an epiphenomenon of class division and capitalist relations of production. Essentially, Mocombe attempts to structure the language and social class behavior of African-Americans in order to fit with the language and organization of labor of the society as the CCSS attempts to do for all students contemporarily. Mocombe and the CCSS move away from the identity politics of postmodernism/post-structuralism, John Ogbu’s burden of acting white hypothesis, and the liberal emphasis on the so-called called opportunity gap to emphasize a more psychological and labor approach to the problem of student academic achievement. However, whereas Mocombe highlights the ideological nature of the process, which will widen the academic achievement gap regardless of the standards prescribed, the CCSS does not do so explicitly and as such will be ineffective in closing the gap as blacks matriculate in school.

2. THE MOCOMBEIAN STRATEGY AND READING ROOM CURRICULUM

To correct this mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function and help close the achievement gap, in 1999, as part of his doctoral work, Mocombe developed The Mocombeian Strategy and Reading Room Curriculum for the Russell Life Skills and Reading Foundation, Inc., an after school reading and mentoring program located in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The latter, Reading Room Curriculum, is a reading curriculum of seven books, published as Mocombe’s Reading Room Series, developed by Paul C. Mocombe based on the theoretical cognitive linguistic assumptions of Noam Chomsky. Against the behaviorist approach to the acquisition of language, Noam Chomsky’s cognitive linguistics, “generative grammar,” suggests that language is an innate tool hardwired in the brain that helps human beings experience the world and communicate with others. The syntax of a language becomes the means of encountering, experiencing, and being-in-the-world for human beings. By assuming, as William Labov building on the theoretical linguistics of Chomsky posits in his seminal work Language in the Inner-cities, BEV/AAEV of inner-city black American students to be a distinct linguistic system with its own surface structure, i.e., generative grammar, through which black Americans encounter, experience, comprehend, and make sense of the world, Mocombe concluded that African or black American students should be assessed and taught as though they are ESOL (English Speakers of other Languages) students when they initially enter school. In other words, Mocombe suggests, because young black Americans grow up knowing and speaking a distinct linguistic system (BEV/AAEV) with its own syntax, lexicon, phonetics, semantics, etc., generative grammar in Chomskyian terms, which is distinct from that of Standard English (SE), when African American or black American students enter school, teachers should attempt to restructure their linguistic structure from BEV/AAEV to SE, by teaching them reading via phonics and language arts, the rules/syntax of Standard English, and using reading passages as practice so as to demonstrate their mastery of the new language system. In other words, teach them the rules of Standard English with a heavy emphasis on phonics, language arts, and use reading passages as practice to demonstrate that they can comprehend in, and have acquired the mastery of the second language, in this case, Standard English. Mocombe’s Reading Room Series books of the curriculum attempt to do just that restructure the deep and surface structure of speakers of BEV/AAEV to that of SE through the phonics, language arts, and reading activities of the workbooks so as to increase their comprehension levels on standardized tests.

Essentially, Mocombe’s Reading Room Curriculum offers an analytical phonetic approach to teaching black American students reading, over a whole language approach, in order to match their linguistic structure with that of the Standard English utilized on Standardized tests to assess their academic abilities. This analytical phonetic approach to teaching reading and comprehension diametrically opposes the whole language model of Ken Goodman (1967). In the whole language approach to reading, which grew out of Ken Goodman’s (1967) attempt to apply Chomsky’s generative grammar hypothesis regarding language acquisition to reading, the assumption is that reading, like language, is an innate ability that can be improved upon without placing much effort on phonics, spelling, and learning the grammar rules of a language outside of its pragmatic usage. As such, whole language approaches, i.e., culturally-diverse literature, integrating literacy into other areas of the curriculum (math, science, etc.), frequent reading, reading out loud, and embedded phonetic learning, to reading and understanding is usually juxtaposed against analytical phonetics, language arts, and spelling approaches to reading, writing, and understanding. That is, in teaching students how to read in the whole language model, the emphasis is on meaning and strategy instruction to develop knowledge of language including the graphophonic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of it that the students bring with them to and in the learning process. Language is viewed as an innate complete meaning-making system, which students improve upon in context beginning in their early socialization with their parents and other young people. Be that as it may, reading involves the entire components of a language system, and students because
they already know it innately rely more so on taught strategies, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic cues that make it possible to understand a passage meaningfully. Essentially, students when they read guess meaning and understanding based on their grasp of the phonetic, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic cues of a language system, which they know innately, to comprehend.

Conversely, an analytical phonetic approach to reading, although based on behaviorist assumptions that view the brain as a blank slate, emphasizes learning the syntactical, grammatical, semantical, and phonetic parts of a language system in order to put them together to grasp meaning and understanding within a language system. In other words, whereas the latter, phonetic approach to reading, approaches reading through the building of a language system in the neocortex of the brain in order to teach students reading and language skills, whole language approaches reading and language holistically and attempts to understand its parts contextually and via cues taught and learned. That is, whole language assumes that the syntax of a language is already pre-programmed in the neocortex of the brain, and contextual reading is simply a way of exercising and developing language skills and readability. *Mocombe’s Reading Room* curriculum builds on the former, phonetics and language arts, and utilize some of the techniques and tools, reading aloud, culturally diverse reading passages, etc., of whole language to assess mastery of the rules of the language system. In other words, Mocombe suggests teaching reading to black American students through the building of the language system of Standard English, through its phonetic, semantic, and syntactic rules, in order to restructure the linguistic structure of inner-city black American youth, as though they are foreign speakers of the language, in order to increase their comprehension when they take standardized tests.

Mocombe’s theoretical assumption behind the intent of the Reading Room curriculum workbooks is to combat the mismatch of linguistic structure hypothesis he views as the initial basis for the black/white achievement gap (Mocombe, 2007, 2009, 2010). The Reading Room Series books attempt to restructure the linguistic structure of black American students through a phonetic and syntactic approach to teaching reading in order to increase their comprehension levels when they take standardized tests written in Standard English. To date, the curriculum has a ninety percent proficiency rate for black American students on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Reading Test (FCAT), which is the state of Florida’s comprehensive Test in reading, math, and science administered to all students from the third to tenth grade (Mocombe, 2005; Mocombe & Tomlin, 2010). Since 2003 the state’s average proficiency rate for black students centers around thirty-six percent vis-à-vis an average proficiency rate of sixty to sixty-four percent for white students (See Tables 1, 2, and 3).

### Table 1

**Statewide Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) Reading Students at Achievement Level 3 and Above Grades 3-10 Disparity in Percent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>59 percent</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
<td>35 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>60 percent</td>
<td>28 percent</td>
<td>38 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>63 percent</td>
<td>30 percent</td>
<td>40 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>63 percent</td>
<td>32 percent</td>
<td>42 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>65 percent</td>
<td>35 percent</td>
<td>46 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted From Florida Department of Education (2005).

### Table 2

**Statewide Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) 2001-2005 Reading Results by Content**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Number of Words/Phrases Possible</th>
<th>Mean Points Earned By Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Points Possible</td>
<td>Predominately white students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted From Florida Department of Education (2005).

### Table 3

**Statewide Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) Reading Achievement Level 3 and Above Elementary, Middle, and High School Disparity in Percent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>Blacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades (grades 3, 4, 5)</td>
<td>Grades (grades 3, 4, 5)</td>
<td>Grades (grades 6, 7, 8)</td>
<td>Grades (grades 6, 7, 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted From Florida Department of Education (2007).

Coupled with the reading room curriculum, Mocombe also offers the *Mocombeian Strategy* as a pedagogical tool to combat the black/white achievement gap. *The Mocombeian Strategy* (2005), published under the title of the same name, suggests that if the education and professionalization of black American students via education is the modus operandi of American society as opposed to the capitalist emphasis on class, status, economic gain, and upward social mobility, school systems should also invest, in conjunction with the Reading Room Curriculum, in a comprehensive mentoring program that pairs black American students (especially
black boys), throughout their academic careers, with educated professionals in the fields of science, mathematics, medicine, teaching, and other professions that require an education. In other words, by having Standard English speaking educated black American professionals as social role models for young black American students throughout their academic careers, school systems will be able to combat the affects of the social roles associated with the social class functions of the black American underclass and BEV/AAEV in the society. The logic behind this approach is grounded in Mocombe’s theoretical assumption that later on in their academic careers black American students academically underachieve because of what he refers to as a mismatch of linguistic social class function, which is tied to the aforementioned mismatch of linguistic structure construct.

For Mocombe two dominant black American social class language games, for the most part, dominate the American capitalist social landscape, a Standard English-speaking black middle class of educated professionals, and an African American English-speaking underclass of workers and unemployed blacks living in the inner-cities of America. Whereas, status, economic gain, and upward social mobility for the Standard English-speaking black middle class are for the most part measured via their class, status, economic gain, and upward social mobility obtained through education and professions that require schooling. Class, status, economic gain, and upward social mobility amongst the “black American underclass,” who speak BEV/AAEV, is not measured by status and professions obtained through education as is the case of black and white American bourgeois middle class standards. On the contrary, the streets, prison culture, athletics, music, and other professional activities not “associated” with educational attainment serve as the means to social class, status, economic gain, and upward economic social mobility in the US’s postindustrial society. Thus effort in school in general suffers, and as a result test scores and grades progressively get lower as black American adolescent youth place more effort in achieving economic gain, status, and upward social mobility via the social functions and roles, i.e., gangstas, athletics, entertainment, and hip-hop culture, tied to the BEV/AAEV linguistic structure and social function of the black underclass, over ones tied to the Standard English linguistic structure and function of the black and white middle class. Contemporarily, the former social class language game, the black underclass, has become the bearers of ideological and linguistic domination in black America and the world-over via their over-representation in the media industrial complex of corporate capital. The Mocombeian Strategy suggests combating this impact of the linguistic structure and social class function of the black underclass through a comprehensive mentoring program that pairs educated professionals with young black American students (black boys in particular) who are more likely to look to young rappers, street personalities, athletes, and entertainers as social role models over their more educated counterparts. The Mocombeian Strategy and Reading Room Curriculum, published as Mocombe’s Reading Room Series, Mocombe suggests, together are two effective practical and pedagogical tools that can be implemented through after-school programs and school systems to help close the black/white academic achievement gap in the American capitalist social structure of racial-class inequality. The CCSS, with its emphasis on language arts and literacy education, parallel Mocombe’s Reading Room Series. However, its failure to take into account the over-represented social class roles of blacks as athletes, entertainers, thugs, etc., in the American economy will render its efforts ineffective.

CONCLUSION

The Common Core State Standards, like Paul C. Mocombe’s Mocombeian strategy, reading room curriculum, and a mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function hypothesis, derives from the relationship between education as an ideological state apparatus and its emphasis on reproducing identities within the American capitalist relations of production. As such, both models, with their emphasis on language arts and literacy education, attempt to synthesize Street’s (1984, 1993, 1995, 1999) autonomous and ideological models to the study of literacy. Street’s classification scheme highlights the major differences in the field of literacy studies. As Wiley and Rolstad (2014) point out, “the autonomous orientation concentrates on formal mental properties of decoding and encoding text, and comprehending vocabulary, without consideration of how these processes are embedded within socio-cultural contexts. The success of the learner in becoming literate is studied from the perspective of individual psychological development” (pg. 39). Conversely, “[r]ather than focusing on individual psychological development, an alternative [(ideological orientation)] perspective shifts emphasis to literacy practices as being embedded in social contexts and power relations” (pg. 39). Whereas, Wiley and Rolstad, go on to argue that the CCSS with its emphasis on English language arts and literacy instruction emphasize the autonomous orientation. We disagree. That is, by the CCSS emphasizing the relationship between their standards and college and career orientations the ideological model, i.e., for reproducing the American postindustrial capitalist relations of production at the expense of other social practices or organization of society, the ideological orientation is also, implicitly, emphasized. As such, like Mcombe the CCSS synthesize both orientations. That is, a universal understanding of the cognitive development of the individual, irrespective of
race, class, gender, etc., is adopted to teach mathematics and English language arts and literacy standards (the latter for Mocombe) to students in order to reproduce the capitalist postindustrial social structure of class inequality via college preparedness and career oriented technical work. Whereas, Mocombe highlights the continual class differentiation and social class roles, as it pertains to blacks, within which this process is taking place and reproducing, the CCSS does not do so explicitly. Mocombe overtly highlights the fact that he seeks to reproduce black practical consciousness along the ideological lines of the educated black bourgeoisie at the expense of the practical consciousness of the black underclass, which is expending as blacks place more emphasis on succeeding via athletics, the streets, and the entertainment industry over education in America’s postindustrial economy. The CCSS does not explicitly highlight the fact that their standards are ideological in nature, i.e., to reproduce the capitalist social structure of class inequality. Instead it highlights the positivist discourse of mathematics and literacy as the nature of reality as such within which the organization of labor and work takes place, while overlooking the class and role differentiations that abound as a result of the postindustrial capitalist social structure of class inequality.

REFERENCES


