



ADDRESSING ASHA PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

Mia McWilliams, B.S.
Department of Communicative Disorders
Jackson State University, Jackson, MS

What is it to be a black Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP)? It is seeing curricula taught about equality and compassion for African Americans, but not seeing it applied in actuality. It is being perceived as “less of an SLP” when using native vernacular (African American English/AAE) instead of Mainstream American English (MAE) because an SLP’s diction should always resemble that of a white person’s. It is being told by your governing body that “All Lives Matter” in response to a “Black Lives Matter” movement. In a field in which I am already disproportionately represented as an African American woman, it was very disheartening to discover that I did not have the moral or emotional support of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA). Speech-language pathology is my passion. It is my future. I have dedicated myself to a rigorous graduate program as proof. For as long as I have pursued the field, I have always considered the world of speech-language pathology to be one with which I would be perpetually intertwined. Imagine my surprise in the juxtaposition presented before me. Something that I once utilized as a form of identity left me feeling even more unrepresented, unidentified, and alone than ever before. Consider this analogy. There is a specific population of birds that are endangered. As a response, attention has been drawn to this particular population of birds considering the dire circumstances they face; and PETA (the organization designed to protect animals) responds to this attention by saying “all birds matter”. Though the latter statement is true, not all birds are in the compromising position of being endangered. So, the latter statement seems like an apathetic red herring attempt used to deflect from the real matter at hand. That matter being that these birds are dying, and they need to be cared for and protected; and the people responsible need to be held accountable to ensure that this happens. Saying “All Lives Matter” in a situation that was not severely impacting “all lives” deprives ASHA of any real accountability to address the suffering and injustice that is repeatedly being presented to the African American community. This comment is not only insensitive to African American professionals in the field but most importantly the

African American children we serve. African American children must once again be left vulnerable to those who vow to “protect” them. ASHA used an opportunity to pacify African Americans who were hurting to instead afflict further pain. Such ambiguous statements are insensitive, inappropriate, and not becoming of a governing body in addressing such explicit forms of racial inequality. How paradoxical in nature is it that the same entity that refuses to hold one side accountable (out of the lack of desire to deal with repercussions) is the same one that constitutes and upholds the Code of Ethics. It leaves me to ponder which population the “Code of Ethics” truly serves to protect. Emotional detachment on behalf of White people in such incidents exists quite frankly because of the lack of overall impact it has on their reality. This option of “choosing” whether or not to speak against these social injustices is a privilege that white people never seem to be fully cognizant of; one that African Americans will never have. For Whites, speaking out was never a matter of life and death like it was for George Floyd or Breonna Taylor. Though, indeed, Whites may never fully grasp the magnitude of the injustice African Americans face, the very least they can do is step outside of their biases to uphold their moral obligation of ensuring that we feel heard and protected as people who serve under ASHA. This can be achieved by implementing listening sessions to encourage more diverse input as it pertains to pressing societal matters. As well as establishing regularly scheduled workshops (hosted by African Americans) aimed at combating anti-racism in the field. Social media campaigns aimed at promoting African American efforts to combat anti-racism would also be beneficial in bridging the gap between ASHA and the younger African American populations in the field. These practices will help in gradually broadening the perspectives of ASHA’s leaders as well as ensuring that African American voices are heard.

Contact Information:
Mia McWilliams, B.S.
Email: mia.mcwilliams@students.jsums.edu