A Deeper Level of Diversity: Linguistic and Cultural Recognition for the "New" Black Student in NYC, the Barbadian Example

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Introduction

The multilinguistic and cultural fabric of our country has been expanding since the first group of immigrants set foot on United States soil. In recent years, this expansion has taken place at such a rapid pace that educators have struggled to keep up with the prolific growth. As a result, some linguistic minorities have been hastily grouped together or altogether ignored in educational language planning policies.

When the term "language minority" is used in US educational policy circles, it is often understood to mean those whose first language is not English. Consequently, the educational needs of linguistic minorities who do not speak Standard *American* English as a first language unfortunately get shoveled into a larger demographic grouping, thus disregarding the cultural and linguistic standards that are intrinsically specific to those groups. By recognizing that "members of a speech community share also a general set of beliefs about appropriate language practices […] assigning values and prestige to various aspects of the language varieties used in it" (Spolsky, 2004, p. 14), language policymakers and educators are obliged to meet the needs of all students whose first language is not Standard American English.

The use of English in Barbadian culture serves as an excellent instructive example of a casualty of such well-meaning but broad-stroke, dismissive approaches to language planning and policy in New York City education. Since the well-publicized 1996 debacle when Oakland Unified School District educational policy planners sought to include "Ebonics" in the list of officially-recognized foreign languages, Black dialects of English have experienced dwindling recognition in policy circles. Though acknowledged, there are no official New York City Department of Education standards regarding "Black English." Moreover, before, during and subsequent to the controversy, Black dialects of English that are not American have been largely unrecognized. Though the issue of Black English (a linguistic policy term for "African-American English" dialect) is increasingly making its way back to the forefront in New York City Public School language planning meetings (particularly in response to the current NYC school reform movement), this "Black English" nomenclature suggests that English belongs to America alone, and that Black English is the primary linguistic vehicle for all English speaking Blacks living in the United

States. This assumption is simply not true and blatantly discounts the depth and linguistic richness of the African diaspora.

Using Barbadian immigrants and first-generation Barbadian students as the illustrative basis for this exploratory paper, I seek to build a case for more research and cultural recognition within educational policy planning circles for Anglophone Caribbean students and other groups that do not speak Standard American English as a first language. Some have attempted to counteract this trend by adopting the linguistic category of "Caribbean," a term that acknowledges the linguistic and cultural differences between Black American culture and Caribbean culture but fails to take into account the cultural and linguistic differences *among* Anglophone Caribbean nations. Anglophone Caribbean immigrants and first-generation students often find that their specific languages and cultures are not adequately recognized within this "Caribbean" cultural and linguistic construct. The effects of these linguistic policy oversights, though often hypothesized about, have not been adequately studied. A greater understanding of these linguistic differences will lead to a greater appreciation for the diversity of the entire African diaspora, including the Caribbean, fostering a sense of history, global connectivity and esteem for all students of color, leading to a markedly enhanced and relevant educational experience.

Background

Barbadians are considered part of a recent wave of new immigrants to the United States, particularly in New York City. English West Indian migration to the United States has come in three distinct waves (Kasinitz, 1992). A large group of West Indians immigrated to the United States in the first three decades of the century, a smaller group came in the wake of the end of the depression in the mid-1960s, and the largest wave started in 1966 and continues to this day (Winer & Jack, 1997). The 1965 amendment to the US Immigration and Nationality Act not only exemplified a radical shift in US immigration policy, but essentially dismantled most of the stringent policies restricting West Indian immigration to the US. The amendment decreed that immigrant selection was to be conducted on a first-come, first-serve basis, and the previous practice of selecting immigrants based on national origins was abolished. The 1965 amendment was applied to countries of the Eastern hemisphere, including Barbados.

This major change in US immigration policy changed the physical, linguistic and cultural profile of new immigrants and had a particularly profound effect on English speaking Caribbean immigrants. Islands that had recently received independence, such as Barbados in 1966, were no longer bound by the quotas imposed on dependent countries. As a result, the largest Barbadian immigration boom began in 1966 and continues to this day.

However, the immigration patterns of Barbados are somewhat unusual in that the situation of the mother country is stable. Barbados has one of the highest literacy rates and standards of living in the world and is currently listed by the United Nations Development Programme as the number one developing country in the world. However, the lure of American opportunity appealed to

many Barbadians, and the overwhelming majority of them settled in New York City. New York City, particularly Brooklyn, with its multicultural flavor, well-entrenched Barbadian community, and glittering presentation of the ever-dangling carrot of opportunity, maintains its status as the preferred home-away-from-home for new Barbadian immigrants.

As the numbers of Southern American Blacks that relocated to New York dwindled due to improved opportunities in their own cities, the numbers of Caribbean immigrants conversely increased. Of the 700,000 legal immigrants who came to New York between 1982 and 1989, five Caribbean countries--Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, and Barbados--accounted for nearly a third. Today Caribbean immigrants and their descendants outnumber US born Blacks in both Brooklyn and Queens, and are fast becoming a majority of Blacks citywide (Millman, 1995).

The influx of hundreds of thousands of Caribbean immigrant students into New York City public schools and, subsequently, first generation American students of Caribbean parentage, demands that a change be made in policies addressing the needs of the "new Black student." However, the tentative steps such as "multicultural potlucks" and cursory references to accomplished Caribbean scholars and leaders that have been taken are incongruous with the rapidly growing numbers of students who claim Caribbean ancestry.

As the number of people of Caribbean descent in the United States continued to grow, the sub-groups residing under the Caribbean umbrella began to form community-based organizations specific to their particular islands to promote their language and culture. These organizations took on many forms, including home-based financial investment organizations, social clubs, and a myriad of other informal groups.

For example, community-based Bajan (a colloquial, self-defining term for Barbadian and Barbadian dialect) groups provided, among other things, relocation support for new immigrants, home ownership and schooling advice, and most importantly, a space for cultural and linguistic reaffirmation. In spite of assimilationist educational policies, Bajan language and culture remains strong not only among immigrants but also their children, who carry American passports alongside their intimate knowledge of Bajan language and culture. Very rarely does one meet a Bajan or Bajan-American who is not highly proficient in the Bajan language and culture. This proficiency is the result of a strong pride and value placed on the culture by family through the language, reinforced by these organizations.

However, despite the strong formal and informal structures of attachment to the Bajan language and culture, educators are hard-pressed to find the educational parallel in New York City public schools. There are no policies that recognize, address and celebrate different Caribbean cultures. There are few, if any, references made to Bajan accomplishment (or any Caribbean accomplishment) and achievement during Black History Month. The invisibility is remarkable, particularly when compared with the size of the immigrant groups. There is a failure to recognize the Bajan language for its nuances and its ability

to provide a linguistic map of survival from Africa to Barbados to New York City. This oversight serves to widen the disconnect between the inclusive educational rhetoric and the exclusive reality of the experience of the Black student whose culture is not "American."

Language Issues

An examination of the linguistic patterns of Bajan reveals a mixture of the language of the British colonizer; the cadence of the African speech and *griot* story-telling techniques; and the lilts and brogues of Irish and Scottish indentured servants. Words from a variety of West African dialects are still regularly used in colloquial speech. For example, the term *Ecky Becky* is a Bajan phrase used to describe a poor, white person. Bajan lore suggests that the term originated in the 1600s in Nigeria, when a poor, white Frenchman named Ecqué Bequé sought to inhabit an Ibo village. His attempted settlement caused an uproar and provoked fear among the local Ibos. When it was discovered that Ecqué Bequé did not have the capital or agency to take over the village, he was dismissed and roundly ridiculed. As a result, poor whites that are perceived to lack power are called *Ecky Becky* in Bajan, which is a Nigerian Ibo pronunciation of this Frenchman's name. Interestingly, the term *Béké* is also frequently used in many Caribbean Francophone countries to refer to local white populations (Williams, 2004). This dual Anglo-Franco-usage of *Becky/Béké* not only strongly supports the assertion that the term has an African genesis, but more importantly, highlights an intra-continental linguistic connection between the British and French colonized African countries that is still vividly reflected in the languages of the diaspora to this day.

There are many examples of this kind, which not only highlight the connections of the Bajan dialect to its African linguistic predecessors, but also tell the life and survival stories of the African ancestors. To disregard the significance of the Bajan language makes short shrift of the entire Afrocentric experience and endangers its collective post-colonial and diasporic history. By failing to acknowledge the linguistic differences between the people of the African diaspora, educators and policy planners also fail to acknowledge the breadth and depth of the entire US experience, which is not only a disservice to Black students of non-American lineage, but also to every student sitting in an American classroom. Linguistic recognition and sensitivity is a basic tenet of human rights and a core component of effective civic education.

Although some discursive strides have been made in the language planning and policy fields, particularly with the work of Kaplan and Baldauf focusing on the bifurcation between language *policy* and language *practice* (1997), the NYC classroom experience is not reflective of this shift. Current literature in the field acknowledges the areas of overlap between the various Anglophone Caribbean dialects, but specificities remain unexplored. There is a dearth of research in this area, even within Barbadian academic circles.

Janina Fenigsen offers one of the few comprehensive exegeses of the Bajan dialect. In her 1999 article, "A 'Broke-Up' Mirror: Representing Bajan in Print," she offers a standardized linguistic structure of Bajan, an investigation

into the diglossic distinctions between written and spoken Bajan, and the political implications of the linguistic representations of Bajan. She states that an observation of *when* and *where* Bajan is used can be an important signifier and reinforcement of Bajan as a lesser form of English. She further argues that the construct of Bajan as a lower form of English has an oppressive political implication:

> [government officials and policy makers] construct Bajan as an estranged language of marginal speakers, and legitimizes and reinforces that variety's subordinate position below English, the official language of the island… (p. 3)

She concludes that Bajan has been forced into a "representational straightjacket" (p. 3) through an exaggeration of its formal features and its non-place in Standard English (American, British, or otherwise). I will offer that this representational straightjacket forces Bajan language into subordination to Standard English, and tacitly implies that, culturally and otherwise, Bajans are subordinate to Standard English speakers.

This permitted invisibility of the Bajan language and culture runs counter to recent educational reform efforts devoted to equity. Therefore, in order to remain consistent with the current thrust of educational reform, Bajan, and other languages like it must at least be acknowledged in education policy circles, particularly in schools with large Bajan or Caribbean student populations.

Research Agenda and Preliminary Findings

A qualitative, ethnographic study examining the retention of Bajan language and culture could serve to provide educational policymakers and practitioners with a deeper understanding of these complex issues. As most Bajan cultural and linguistic institutions are informal, this would require an anthropological approach to not only determine how the language is being maintained, but also to assess how language plays a part in legitimizing and perpetuating the culture. A secondary research focus would seek to assess the educational needs of this growing population and Bajan perception of language maintenance in New York City public schools. Through such research, a more thorough understanding of the needs of the Bajan community could be obtained, and potentially generalized to other immigrant populations in New York City, where appropriate. The external validity of the results would be contingent upon applying the findings to other similar situations/cases.

I am currently undertaking a preliminary research study to investigate the role of informal spaces in the retention of language and culture within the Bajan community. The six-week study consists of observation and weekly interviews of a group of Bajan men who belong to an informal club. The study takes nascent steps into the linguistic spaces of the Bajan community, and findings may provide an introductory understanding of the underpinnings of cultural and linguistic preservation.

Initial findings suggest that the connections between the Bajan community and formalized spaces, such as workplace and school, are weak due to the informants' perceptions that Bajan language and culture remain invisible in NYC institutional settings. Participants acknowledged that Bajan takes a subordinate position to *both* Standard British and Standard American English, but felt powerless to do anything about it in the US. One of the sentiments expressed was that, although the informants lived and worked in NYC (in some cases for 20-plus years), participants did not feel part of American culture, and as a result socialized very infrequently with their American counterparts. Intra-Caribbean social mixing was reported to be infrequent in the lives of these men, although the commonalities within the Caribbean cultures were definitely acknowledged. In addition, the participants in the study made use of Bajan media--*The Nation*, a Barbadian newspaper, was the primary source of Bajan diasporic news, and Bajan radio programs were a common point of discussion among the participants.

American English was not seen as the "gold standard;" in fact, it was British English that was considered to be "proper" English. One participant reported that his son had written the word "cheque" on a school assignment, which was marked incorrectly for spelling. According to the informant, when he approached the teacher, she explained that check was spelled "c-h-e-c-k" and that he was wrong and "should learn English." It is possible that this teacher had limited knowledge of different English dialects, pointing to the importance of teacher training programs that acknowledge difference and encourage linguistic sensitivity. Such experiences strengthen the Bajan assumption that their variety of English is considered inferior in the United States. It would be interesting to observe whether the teacher in this anecdote would have had the same reaction if the student who had written "cheque" had been white. Although it is not explored here, race plays a significant role in linguistic agency.

Despite the well-organized and supported Bajan informal community at the focus of this preliminary investigation, the informants perceived little need to formalize these structures through the creation of official community centers or CBOs. The unofficial status and importance of the informal community resonated so strongly with the residents, that making it official would only serve to make a statement to mainstream society, a society in which Bajans feel they have not been invited to play a major role. The findings here suggest that there is a fair amount of self-segregation because the formal spaces for cultural and linguistic self-expression are largely absent for Bajans in the US. In response to this, the study's informants choose to culturally and socially segregate and feel no real connection with African-American or mainstream society.

Perhaps, through further study, the dynamics of the Bajan community would be better understood by educational planners and subsequent policies would better respond to the needs and the contributions of the Bajan community. As long as educators continue to deem languages, like Bajan, invisible, and fail to recognize their historical and current importance, it can be expected that these languages and cultures will remain marginalized. This situation would not only be detrimental to Bajans and other linguistic minorities,

but would eventually erode the principles of equality and democratic ideals of the US.

Additional research about the interrelated dynamics and informal structures of the Bajan immigrant community in New York City could provide a more informed context for educational planners when creating initiatives and programs addressing the needs of the growing West Indian student population. Without this kind of research, it would be difficult for educational planners to create school environments and curricula that are reflective of the needs, expectations, and desires of the community that they purport to serve. As recent educational reform efforts have proven, lack of community input and relevance to community needs is a strong correlate to failing schools. Community relevance and participation cannot be obtained without learning about the linguistic, social, and cultural mores of that community.

It would benefit the New York City community to recognize the achievements and diversity of all of its ethnicities and cultures. Black History Month celebrations should encompass *all* Blacks of the African diaspora. Diversity should not only connote race, it should encourage celebration of the diasporic languages and dialects, and how these relate to a history of survival of Blacks and their cultures all over the world. These measures should not be relegated to schools in Black neighborhoods; they should be implemented citywide. As we embrace a more global perspective in education, we should better equip ourselves, as educators and policy-makers, to be able to rise to the challenge of creating a deeper and more meaningful level of diversity for every Black student in New York City.

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