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MOVING TOWARD CULTURALLY SUSTAINING LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION THAT RESISTS WHITE LANGUAGE SUPREMACY

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ABSTRACT

In this manuscript, we argue that language is central to students' cultural identities and, therefore, should be validated in middle school classrooms. Additionally, we problematize the idea of "standard" languages and analyze how existing language hierarchies marginalize Students of Color through White language supremacy. White language supremacy can be defined as a belief in the superiority of Standard American English. In pedagogy, it manifests as teachers rejecting students' preferred or home languages and dialects, forcing them to adopt the languaging practices of the dominant culture. Most importantly, we provide practical strategies for teachers who aim to enact culturally sustaining language instruction that resists White language supremacy.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and Schools to Watch Focus: Social Equity, Developmental Responsiveness, Academic Excellence

"So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language"
(Anzaldúa, 1987)

As Anzaldúa's quote intimates, language is an important part of students' cultural identities. Through it, people can uniquely make meaning, express themselves, and show solidarity with others in their cultural groups. Taken together, language practices can reveal multiple facets of one's cultural identity, including race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, socioeconomic status, language, and other socially constructed identity markers. Though each category can be studied in isolation, we believe the most balanced and just identity analyses are intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, because language and ethnicity are oftentimes linked, we intentionally analyze the ways Students of Color employ their languages and language varieties, such as Latinx students who speak Spanish. Middle school is thus a distinct period of identity negotiation, as students wrestle through how they see themselves, how others see them, and self-author who they want to be. This identity negotiation is often further complicated for Students of Color, since most of middle level education focuses on the developmental nature of adolescence; purely or principally developmental views on the middle school experience then eclipse issues of power, privilege, and race (Lee & Veagle, 2010), as these issues are either missing from the discussion in middle level education (Harrison, 2017) or addressed in a superficial level (Gay, 1994). The result is colorblind teaching practices (Caldera, 2018) that disregard students' cultures instead of employing pedagogies that sustain students' cultures (Paris & Alim, 2017). Many times when viewed through a predominately developmental perspective, Students of Color are positioned

negatively as lacking, since their identities do not align to a the developmental norm (Burns & Hall, 2012). Subsequently, when teachers only take a developmental perspective when considering adolescent identity and language development, they unknowingly become complicit in further marginalizing Students of Color in this critical developmental stage (Hurd, Harrison, Brinegar, & Kennedy, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to provide practical solutions to middle school teachers who seek culturally sustaining language instruction practices that affirm and extend the home or preferred languages of Students of Color; thereby resisting what Inoue (2019) termed White language supremacy. White language supremacy describes beliefs and practices requiring that all students, regardless of their language backgrounds, be indoctrinated with White languaging practices, or what is known as Standard American English (Inoue, 2019). White language supremacy thus reflects an intolerance for diverse languaging practices in favor of a single standard enforced upon all students uniformly (Inoue, 2019). Providing teachers with actual strategies is imperative to eradicating the underachievement of Students of Color that stems from persistent discrimination over many generations (Cummins, 2014).

As teacher educators who are Women of Color and who have worked with Students of Color, we simultaneously feel well versed and morally compelled to share our professional teaching, research, and personal experiences on this potentially life-changing topic. In the next section, we provide



background knowledge on three topics that are integral to understanding the construction of White language supremacy: white normativity in schools, language standardization, and the language practices of African American and Latinx students. Following the background, we offer a way forward for critical educators.

WHITE NORMATIVITY IN SCHOOLS

Despite the growing racial diversity of students in U.S. schools, the teaching workforce has remained primarily White. For the last two decades, the percentage of White teachers has hovered around 80% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; United States Department of Education, 2016). In contrast, five out of ten public school students, or 54%, are Students of Color (United States Census Bureau, 2018). This difference in demographics is significant since identities are often related to worldviews and beliefs in teacher decision-making (Ajayi, 2011; Obechain, Balkute, Vaughn, & White, 2016). Thus, a difference in these identities has clear classroom implications: when Students of Color attend schools, they bring many rich and varied cultures that are minoritized in favor of the dominant culture. This is because schools are reflections of a society (Lewis & Moje, 2003) that views White culture as neutral, appropriate, or the default (Paris & Alim, 2017). Consequently, Students of Color must negotiate their often dueling identities: that of majority or U.S. society and that of being a Person of Color (DeBois, 1903; Kendi, 2019). Because this dominant culture is also internalized, this minoritization happens even when Students of Color are the majority in a school setting. The dominant culture and its values are that pervasive, as evidenced by teachers, curriculum, materials, values, and language practices.

Furthermore, White normativity persists even with Teachers of Color. Despite the supposed cultural synchronicity between teachers of color and Students of Color, it should not be assumed that Teachers of Color are effective “merely by virtue of their race/ethnicity” (Villegas & Irvine, 2010, p. 187). They, too, can stifle the academic achievement of Students of Color when their pedagogical practices reflect the dominant culture’s beliefs, values, and worldviews (Perez Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006). Although well intentioned, many teachers, even Teachers of Color, are ill equipped to enact pedagogical practices that sustain the cultures of Students of Color, resulting in incongruence between students’ cultural norms and the norms of the dominant culture.

LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATION

This White language supremacy then leads to what linguists call the myth of Standard American English (SAE*). That is, this idealized view (Crowley, 2003) of academic English as the correct, perfect, and furthermore standard English. It is thought to be accentless and the standard to which an educated populace should ascribe (Lippi-Green, 2012). In

actuality, there is much dialectical variation between speakers of any language, evidenced in their word choice, syntax patterns, and pronunciation differences. On the surface, the goals for standardized language practices seem reasonable: often the argument is to increase intelligibility and efficiency in communication. While this is an understandable goal, on examination the intelligibility and efficiency argument become more complex because what is considered intelligible and efficient communication is often contextual, depending on group norms. For instance, Altheria, in using Southern Black English with her family, might ask, “What you want for breakfast?” and Ale in talking to her bilingual students in an informal moment might say “¿Tu lonche? No ‘sta. ¿Chequeaste tu locker?” Thus, what is considered effective communication is subjective, dependent on the groups with which you interact.

We have become keenly aware that when people judge the effectiveness of a message in a given language, it serves as a proxy for the person and their legitimacy (Babino & Stewart, 2019). When we judge a message, we judge a person and whether they are a member of the in-group. In the examples above, Altheria’s communication could be considered grammatically incorrect as it lacks the word “do” according to SAE*. In Ale’s example, the use of the informal words “lonche” for lunch and abbreviation of “sta” for “está” could be viewed as incorrect according to standard Spanish. Furthermore, the use of code switching at the word-level, by inserting “locker” instead of “casillero,” also disrupts a standardized language ideology of linguistic purism (Martinez, Hikida, & Duran, 2015). In this case, not only could Altheria and Ale’s messages be viewed as sub-standard, but also their linguistic capabilities as teachers. From these utterances, one might wonder if they know “proper English or Spanish,” can effectively teach in English or Spanish, and moreover be effective teachers. Yet, to the family members, students, and others in their communities, these utterances and the variations of speech are understandable, familiar, and purposeful.

Through our connections between the literature and our professional examples, we aim to elucidate the subjective nature of language and its damaging impact on students, especially Students of Color (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Although Students of Color of all ethnicities are marginalized by White language supremacy, we focus on the language practices of African American and Latinx students because of the close connections to our personal identities and professional experiences. Though not the focus of this manuscript, we recognize the gross language abuses suffered by Indigenous peoples that are also worthy of examination (see McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). In the next two sections, we explain how White language supremacy creates equity issues for African American and Latinx students because of educators’ lack of appreciation for unique language practices.

LANGUAGE PRACTICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINX STUDENTS

Many African American students speak a dialect known by one of the following culturally appropriate terms (Bland-Stewart, 2005): Black English (1996), African American English (AAE) (2011), and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (1999). Jones (2011) found that 70% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that many students speak AAE in traditional classrooms. In a study on teachers' beliefs about AAE, (Gupta, 2010) found the majority of survey respondents did not believe that AAE is an adequate language system. On the contrary, African American English is not a "made-up language without validity or rules," (Jones, 2011, p. 119) but rather is "a unique historical, cultural, linguistic system," (Gupta, 2010, p. 152) "with its own set of grammatical, phonological, and morphological rules" (Cunningham, 2017, p. 91). Still, because of linguistic preferences that favor SAE*, some teachers view AAE as inferior, leading them to initiate Black children "into the world of hypercorrection, insecurity, and 'linguistic self-hatred'" (Sledd, 1969, p. 1309). We echo Gorski's (2010) assertion that students need to understand the differences between SAE* and AAE but not see AAE as bad or a deficit form of English.

Some Latinx students experience the same. As a result of the diaspora, in the U.S. Latinx students may speak a number of languages (English, Spanish, or both) and language varieties (Chicano English, Spanglish, etc.). When students combine characteristics from both Spanish and English it is sometimes referred to as Spanglish, TexMex, code-switching, and/or translanguaging (Sayer, 2013). With the exception of the last term, each of these terms have negative connotations and are perceived as being sub-standard and impure. The result is that many students are stigmatized for both their Spanish and English varieties whether or not they are foreign born (Rosa, 2014). Just like with AAE, the hybridized language practices of many Latinx are inherently as linguistically legitimate as those of standard languages (Wardhaugh, 1998), are closely linked to their identities (Norton, 2013), and present myriad forms of creative expression and meaning-making in the classroom (García, 2017).

A WAY FORWARD

Though we acknowledge the limitations of developmental theories when applied to Students of Color, Erikson's (1959) theory of adolescents' identity development combined with what we know about the marginalization of African American and Latinx students yield important insights for middle grades teachers. Middle grades teachers are uniquely positioned to help students navigate the co-construction of their language(s) and identities, since adolescent students are in what Erikson describes as a stage of identity versus confusion (Erikson, 1959). Students in this stage attempt to develop a strong sense of self and identity, which may be particularly

perplexing for Students of Color whose marginalized cultures are juxtaposed with the dominant, or mainstream, culture. When middle level teachers encourage students to embrace all aspects of their identity, including their preferred language(s) and language practices, students are able to develop positive and integrated identities as opposed to disparate, isolated ones. Anzaldúa (2000, p. 141) theorized that in order for individuals to be whole, in academic settings for example, they should bring all their cultural identities with them and "activate them all." When educators create inclusive learning environments that encourage adolescents' diverse language practices, tensions surrounding identity can be mitigated. This is the goal of culturally sustaining language instruction.

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING INSTRUCTION

The aim of culturally sustaining language instruction is to foster and perpetuate linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism (Paris, 2012). It is based on the belief that schooling is a democratic undertaking that should support cultural diversity and cultural equity (Paris, 2012). An example of culturally sustaining language instruction is code meshing, a hybrid language, in which students are encouraged to "maneuver between two or more dialects" (2018) as opposed to code-switching, a process which could require students to use two different languages (Behizadeh, 2017). Each of these practices are part of a translanguaging pedagogy, where a bi/multilingual individual uses all of their linguistic repertoire to learn and make meaning (García, 2009). In light of these practices, culturally relevant writing instruction supports using multiple dialects and languages in the classroom, as it is an essential aspect of honoring linguistic diversity. Teachers who aim to enact culturally sustaining language instruction should consider ways they might decenter what Woodard, Vaughan, and Machado (2017) refer to as Dominant American English (DAE) in favor of metalinguistic awareness and linguistic plurality (Woodard, Vaughan, & Machado, 2017). In other words, we advocate for honoring the inherent complexity and creativity of each language variety and the multiple people and contexts they represent.

BELIEFS

Resisting White language supremacy with culturally sustaining language instruction is rooted in the following beliefs that lead to tangible practices. You should believe that:

1. languages serve as proxies for people and their identities;
2. SAE* is a myth with damaging consequences for Students of Color;
3. equity does not equate to sameness but allows for students to be treated differently based on their needs;
4. students' use of languages other than SAE*, or language pluralism, is an asset, not a deficit; and



5. it is important to build on students' languages and language varieties.

PRACTICES

You can enact your beliefs through specific classroom practices. In this section, we offer seven concrete strategies that are essential to language instruction that sustains students' cultures as a result of developing these beliefs.

1. **Examine what you've been taught, directly and indirectly, about language in a language autobiography.** This will require several sessions of reflections. Consider what your parents, teachers, or community members have said about speech, writing, or languages. For instance, Ale's abuelita had a strict "Spanish only" policy at home with her mom, aunt, and uncles. Additionally, Spanish and English wasn't to be mixed, but used separately, as mixing was considered "pocho". Coming to terms with this helped Ale realize why as a bilingual teacher she was so ardent to maintain the use of Spanish materials, speech, and writing in her classroom: she had seen that modeled in her family and as a second-generation Mexican-American wanted to hold on to her roots, one of which was the (standardized) Spanish language.
2. **Articulate your philosophy about language diversity in the classroom.** After you reflect on your own language experiences, you can more readily identify what language ideologies you possess and connect them to specific pedagogical practices. This doesn't have to be an extended treatise, but rather a thought-out explanation of what you believe about language and how you can honor that belief. If you believe that language is creative and purposeful, and then consider what spaces in your schedules, you can incorporate explicit value for this belief in action. A possible sentence stem to spur reflection could be: I believe ____, so I will ____ and ____.
3. **Learn the characteristics of the languages and dialects of students.** Since you've explored your language ideologies and are committing to pluralist views of language use, next explore the key characteristics of your students' varieties. What's different in the phonology, syntax, semantics, morphology, or discourse? As an example, a student speaking African American English might delete the be verb and omit the possessive (Bland-Stewart, 2005), as in "She driving Faye car." Additionally, a student using what they know of Spanish word choice might say in English, "She's making a party for her birthday". Stay curious and notice patterns, delighting in its unique beauty as part of the human experience.
4. **Demonstrate respect for non-SAE* languages by affirming multiple language varieties or dialects.** This can be surprisingly simple as you listen to students' speech in

informal and formal classroom contexts. Saying "Well that's creative!" or "my mom says that, too!" are ways to positively call attention to language varieties. Another idea is to brainstorm how you can describe a job well done, surprise, or any other emotion. These can be captured as authentic dialogue in student writing and presentations for specific audiences over a variety of genres.

5. **Use students' languages and dialects as building blocks for developing and critically examining the place of SAE*.** As you affirm students' language varieties, you create a language-rich classroom. Next, you call attention to how language is used with whom, and why. What are the similarities and differences between AVE and SAE*, Chicano English and SAE*, or Spanglish and standardized Spanish? What combination of these would you use when talking to your family, your teachers, or principal? Why? Furthermore, invite students to consider the potential effects of using these language varieties with each audience. This develops a critical multilingual awareness (García, 2017) and potentially empowers students to dismantle the SAE* myth.
6. **Integrate reading materials that demonstrate diverse languages and dialects.** Current young adult literature and middle grade publications increasingly represent more Authors of Color writing in their own voice(s) across languages and dialects. Follow the hashtags #ownvoices or #disrupttexts for contemporary book recommendations. Other ideas are to create units that include a portion or a majority of these books as mentor texts during writing instruction or instructional units that typically spotlight books in the canon. Ale's unit on positive and powerful bilingual characters showcased how multiple languages and varieties were used to meet full grade-level standards, bi/multilingual identities, and social justice efforts (Babino, Araujo, & Maxwell, 2019).
7. **Avoid penalizing students for using their languages and dialects.** Penalization can be formal or informal. Formally, this may take the form of a presentation or paper, while informally this could occur during oral classroom discussion. In each case, many teachers are conditioned to correct students' speech. Instead, see this as an opportunity to learn about students' language varieties, consider when and why this variety may be used, and continue to create places to critically discuss the nature and place of language variety. You can implement practices three through six in this list in a student writing conference. You might ask the student, "I notice you say your 'sister brung the ball to you'. Sometimes people say 'brung' and other times, they say 'brought'. When and where have you seen each of these words used? Why do you think they use these words this way? Finally, based on how you've seen them used, which word choice do you

feel best fits this context?"

CONCLUSION

Though most teachers have positive ambition when teaching Students of Color, White teachers and Teachers of Color can unknowingly place barriers that make it difficult for their students to achieve academic expectations and integrated identities by creating classroom cultures that invalidate the language practices of Students of Color. Resisting White language supremacy requires not only a shift in the ways teachers understand SAE* and students' languages and language varieties, but more importantly results in a transformation of practices. Conclusively, it is important to recognize that we do not recommend these practices because Students of Color are incapable of learning and using SAE*. Neither are we suggesting that Students of Color should not learn and use what is oftentimes referred to as academic language (Flores, 2019; Pyo, 2016) that leads to traditional forms of academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To the contrary, we see students' languages and dialects as inherently valid language systems that can also be used to develop proficiency in academic discourses as part of their language architecture (Flores, 2019).

In Equity & Cultural Responsiveness in the Middle Grades, the editors accentuate the need to "make equity a priority from within" (Brinegar, Harrison & Hurd, 2019, p. 337). It is our hope that these ideas for resisting White language supremacy are instructive for middle grade teachers who are committed to educational equity for the increasing number of Students of Color in U.S. schools. Instead of harming students by responding to their languages and dialects in punitive ways, middle grades teachers can work to heal and repair students by using culturally sustaining language instruction. When enacted with fidelity and authenticity, these beliefs and practices can lead to integrated identities, academic excellence, and equity.

¹We use *Students of Color* to describe Latinx, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American/Indigenous, and multiracial students. As such, it is a term used with a mind toward coalition building in our piece, as the vast majority of our students are Black and Brown. We had considered using "minoritized" in order to more precisely include Students of Color and bilingual students who are white/white presenting as well as those that are many times multiply minoritized across several of their social identities. Ultimately, we chose the term "Students of Color" in order to foreground the place of race in identity formation and socialization, even as we use "racialized" in other work.

²We use an asterisk next to SAE as Lippi Green (2012) does, in order to emphasize the problematic effects of this myth.

³Roughly translated this utterance says, "Your lunch? It's not here. Did you check your locker?"

⁴"Pocho" can be a pejorative term used to describe Mexicans, Mexican Americans, or Chicanos that have lost their language and/or culture. It is also used with self-deprecating humor to describe one's hybridized language and cultural practices.

⁵Though beyond the scope of this article, we contend like others do (Flores, 2019; Pyo, 2016) that social and academic discourses are not completely separate language practices.

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