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The Importance of Linguistic Diversity Instruction within Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

The United States is continuously growing, and as it grows it has become more and more diverse. As diversity increases, awareness of culture becomes a more pressing and important manner. So, while schools have often worked to include and encourage multiculturalism and diversity within their boundaries, one major section has been left out of the equation. The importance of linguistic diversity is vastly misunderstood and left out of teacher education programs, negatively impacting young students, particularly those of traditionally marginalized groups. In order to better prepare prospective teachers and to help provide a real social change in an inherently racialized society providing teachers and students with proper education about the cultural, social, and even economic ties that dialect has on people in society will help to promote learning, acceptance, and achievement within schools and society alike.

Introduction

Ghetto, redneck, hillbilly, low-class, improper are all words that no one who is at least moderately considerate to the feelings of others would consider using to address what a person is or looks like. Yet, when it comes to talking about the way that people speak, people are quick to judge, and all of a sudden these derogatory terms become commonplace. Within multiple classes at Wayne State University (WSU), one or more of these belittling words have been used by fellow classmates to defend the use of prescriptive, standard-English, a frankly antiquated, ethnocentric theory behind language and language instruction. One class in particular sparked a personal interest in the idea of requiring all education majors to take an introductory course about linguistic diversity. In this class aforementioned, which was centered on incorporating reading and writing into all subject areas, a student asked what to do when s/he was faced with a student who spoke “improperly” and “wrong.” Hoping to provide a bit of insight into current sociolinguistic standards, I told her/him that s/he cannot tell kids they speak improperly because it is simply different, and that s/he will essentially dismiss a student’s culture and the validity of her/his parents by talking to a student that way. Her/his response was more or less a complete defense of her/his comments with a complete unwillingness to understand, at least within this single class period. This ignorant, and subconsciously racist attitude is something that I believe can begin to be remedied with a simple introductory class that allows students who have never been exposed to the topic of linguistic diversity have a safe place to explore this widely accepted concept. This paper will explore the implications that language has on culture and how the two are completely intertwined, and that when teachers do not understand dialectal differences within their students they set their students up for failure which continually adds to the racial-achievement gap. Additionally providing all future teachers, specifically those attending Wayne

State University, with access to a class that discusses and addresses linguistic diversity and the effects of understanding and acceptance can have on students achievement will be beneficial not only to future students but the teachers themselves and the University's reputation.

Linguistic Diversity and Culture

What is Dialect?

To begin, it is important to understand what dialect is. First and foremost, it is the way that people speak and communicate within a particular group that is a variant of a particular "standard" language. Dialect is a cultural identifier, second only to biological/racial identity (Jones, 1997); dialect is almost always a result of where a person grew up (region) and what group they grew up in (this can include race, class, religion, and even gender). So, for example, some major dialects of English within the United States are Hawaiian Pidgin, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), Appalachian/Mountain English, Southern White English (SWE), and Chicano/Mexican-American English. It is important to realize that dialect is not slang, although when a dialect is non-standard many people are quick to jump to the conclusion that people are speaking slang, thus dismissing the validity of a particular dialect. Slang "[refers] specifically to new vocabulary often developed and used by youth" (Godley, 2012, p. 705) they are words that many will dismiss as gibberish, some feel that this vocabulary is not worthy of even being deemed part of a particular vernacular. So if a group is deeming slang not worthy of acceptance into a particular language, terming an entire dialect as slang is evidence of a rejection of that dialect. This rejection has led many people, including educators, to deem these dialects as deficient. AAVE in particular has "historically [been] viewed... as a deficient language system" (Harris & Schroeder, 2013, p. 194), but these biases will be discussed further on, because it is

firstly important to understand the importance of language to social, cultural, and personal identity.

A multitude of research has been conducted regarding the importance of language and identity. It is obvious that different dialects are not as respected as others, the ones that are held to higher esteem are considered languages of power, within the United States, these are the dialects that fall closely in line with SE. Dialects that fall outside of these standard varieties are often considered to be “low-prestige” (Jones, 1997, p. 253). So it would seem like the expected behavior of groups that speak a low-prestige/non-standard dialect would be to try and rid themselves of it, as is often practiced and pushed within schools, but the opposite has often been found. “Despite the increased status associated with prestige varieties, vernacular [non-standard] dialects are held in high regard by members of many ethnic and cultural communities” (Jones, 1997, p. 254). Research shows that language indicates to others what group a person falls in, and when someone speaks or chooses to speak in a particular dialect they are showing their solidarity and “signaling loyalty to their group” (Jones, 1997, p. 254). In this way, language is a very political characteristic, central to a person’s identity.

A standard language is, as its name suggests, a way to create a single, uniform, standard group. So, there is often a resistance to this standardization, conformity, and assimilation to the culture in power (which within the United States is the white, rich, power elite). The resistance to the standardized language is often a result of the desire (conscious or subconscious) to create a “...strong distinction between outsiders and insiders...” and this is done by “[strengthening] insider unity by heightening group differences; and [increasing] outsider distance by acting to restrict communication between the two groups [the in-group and the out-group]” (Jones, 1997, p. 254). A notable example of this in-group, out-group desire for distance that should be familiar

to most is the example of Senator Bernie Sanders. Sanders is running strongly on an anti-Wall Street, pro-lower and middle class campaign. He has done little to rid himself of his working class, New York, Jewish accent, and this is debatably because he has no desire to distance himself from the working-class culture in which he grew up and is still fighting for- even though his position as presidential-hopeful and long-time senator prove his lifestyle no longer falls into the working-class position he previously held. He has recently stated his connection to his cultural identity with a post from his official Facebook page on February 28, 2016, "I'm very proud of my heritage. What comes to mind so strongly is a kid growing up in Brooklyn and seeing people with numbers on their wrist; you probably have not seen that but those were the people coming out of the concentration camps, and knowing that a good part of my family was killed by the Nazis." The same idea can be held for other politicians, whose native accents tend to become stronger when campaigning in their home states and disappearing (becoming more standard) when addressing the general public, prominent examples are Hillary Clinton and George W. Bush. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) reporter Matt Kwong (2016) states that certain candidates adjust their accent, or rather code-switch, in order to be perceived as part of the in-group or part of the group the candidates are appealing to, this is particularly notable in George W. Bush when he uses his Texas twang to appear more "folksy" or when Chicago born Hillary Clinton invokes a southern drawl while campaigning in the south and becomes what is referred to as "Southern Hillary." It appears that 2016 hopefuls Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump keep their equally iconic New York Accents because it is associated with, "saying what you mean, and with not beating around the bush." Therefore, whether it is pride in their New York in-group or a non-necessity to belong to a different in-group, their dialect stands. All four politicians are examples that illustrate the power and influence of dialect and the

perception people have of a speaker depending on that dialect. Their status as politicians only serves to highlight just how political language actually is. Additionally, these politicians can easily adjust their speech and be widely accepted using the non-standard dialects because they are in positions of power; they have already established themselves as leaders. It is only once they have the platform to use their voice and once they have already proved their intelligence and leadership ability that they are popularly allowed to shift from Standard English to various non-standard dialects.

Acceptance and Discrimination Through Dialect

Despite the fact that when a person does not employ Standard English they may face discrimination within schooling, employment, and even medical situations, many non-standard speakers willingly and enthusiastically maintain their dialect. For children and adults alike, “...language is a core part of their identity, and serves as an anchor connecting them to their cultural heritage” (Harris & Schroeder, 2013, p. 200). This is particularly true for historically and widely disenfranchised or alienated groups. Although their non-standard English may be seen as low-prestige among mainstream, standardized speakers, they often hold prestige within their in-groups, even though this prestige may be veiled. A speaker of non-standard English who completely rids themselves of their native dialect in order to “escape denigration by the out-group” then consequently face denigration from their in-group because it is viewed that the speaker feels they are potentially superior with their word usage, are not proud of their heritage, or wish to cast aside their identity. In addition, even when they use standard-language only in situations with other standard-language speakers this can be met with contention from members of their in-group (Jones, 1997, p. 256). This can have drastic effects on their self-esteem and success. As a

result of the tensions that often arise between standard-English speakers and non-standard English speakers, speakers of the non-standard often and commonly adopt the practice of code-switching, that is switching between two or more dialects to be better received, to fit in with different groups, and to be better understood (Hill, 2009), but even this can sometimes be met with controversy as it can be seen as giving into the language of power.

Due to the vast evidence supporting the notion that language and dialect are crucial to a person's identity, there has also been research done on the validity of such dialects. The majority of sociolinguists and linguists have accepted that there truly is no proper language, that meaning there is no single correct way to speak. They have continually put forth evidence that "all dialects of English are equally valid and grammatical" (Godley & Escher, 2012, p. 705). AAVE in particular has received much notoriety for being "a logical and rule-governed variety of English that diverges from SE in specific ways, including grammatical, phonological and stylistic features" (Godley & Escher, 2012, p. 705). In fact, it has also been pointed out that Americans, even when speaking what is considered standard/"proper" English, are still speaking a dialectal variant of British Standard English because they are speaking European American Vernacular English (Hill, 2009), still European American Vernacular English has come to be considered standard English within the United States. Despite the repeated and extensively understood fact that non-standard dialects are completely valid linguistically, they are still often viewed with a very strong negative prejudice because they are seen as a deficit form of the standardized language (Harris & Schroeder, 2013)(Baugh, 2007). Of course, not all non-standard dialects are treated equally, some receive much less criticism. An example of a non-issue deviation is the use of particular words that differ from dialect to dialect. People do not tend to believe, beyond a bit of joking, that there is something intrinsically wrong with a person if they

use a regional form of a word, for example if someone said “pop” as opposed to “soda” or a “shopping cart” as opposed to a “buggy.” These are both examples of acceptable terms that would not be judged as incorrect, but would rather just serve as an indicator of regional identity. The situation becomes much more tendentious the farther a person’s vernacular and accent vary from what is considered Standard English.

Dialect and Discrimination

There is a close correlation between both race and language and class and language—and the speakers of non-standard dialects are often those groups that have historically been openly discriminated against. Discrimination through language is often a continuation of this prejudice in a more discreet context (Jones, 1997). Within a country where higher and higher forms of education are required to get hired into and maintain sustainable jobs, the prejudice that many educators hold (often because of an ignorance about the cultural connections language holds) will have an unprecedented effect on the success of marginalized, minority, and working-class groups. There is evidence that points to the fact that “teachers’ language attitudes are often racialized and affect student learning” (Orzulak, 2015, p. 177). There is continued support that shows that teachers and employers alike view non-standard language as deficient or frankly flat out wrong and un-teachable (Harris & Schroeder, 2013). One researcher accurately described this attitude amongst teachers and community members in Dayton, Ohio towards members of the group of citizens who speak Appalachian English:

Forty years after my fourth grade experiences, prejudice against speakers of Appalachian English is still widespread in the Dayton area. A recent interview with a former administrator of a highly-regarded suburban school district in the Dayton area—and a

West Virginia emigrant—illustrates this point. The administrator was talking with a teacher in an elementary school hallway when a small girl stopped to ask for directions to the cafeteria. Noting the Appalachian English spoken by the child, the teacher snapped, ‘How am I supposed to teach that [her]!’ Informal interviews with teachers and employers in the Dayton area disclose similar, albeit more subtle, biases against ‘mountain’ speech (Jones, 1997, p. 259).

The lack of willingness to understand is blatant in this example. There is obviously underlying and overt prejudice that is based on not necessarily race, religion, or class but on culture—which can and generally does encompass all three of the aforementioned exclusions of race, religion, and class. It has been proven that deficits in language development and general development are linked much more closely to socioeconomic status than it is to a particular dialect, yet many are quick to judge and place blame on the dialect as taking away ones ability to acquire any sort of knowledge, rather than understand the economic situations that negatively effect learning (i.e. hunger, lack of home security, less direct parent involvement, etc.). One source cites that African American students develop at a consistent rate with that of White students, but they have overwhelmingly preformed lower on standardized tests and been placed into remedial classes because the measurement for success has been measured on a standard English bias rather than on comprehension and understanding (Harris & Valarie, 2013). One source put it this way, “Current research has suggested that the racial ‘achievement gap’ in literacy learning is more likely caused by teachers’ lack of acceptance of AAVE than by bidialectal students’ confusion over the features of SE [standard English]. Several studies have documented that teachers erroneously believe that speaking AAVE is ungrammatical, lazy, and unintelligent” (Godley & Escher, 2012, p. 705). So despite the fact that African Americans and

other marginalized groups show the capacity for equal learning and success they are often denied that right because of language prejudices held by those responsible for both their education and employment. The blatant refusal to accept or even the lack of willingness to understand non-standard dialects, particularly those of traditionally marginalized groups, is a roundabout and veiled attempt to keep in place the systemized institution of racism.

Dialectal Discrimination and Effects on Learning

Unfortunately this prejudice is currently a fact of life, and one that non-standard dialect speakers are generally very acutely aware of. So just as it is a disservice to neglect linguistic diversity, it is also a disservice to not provide non-standard speakers with an opportunity to learn and access Standard English, which is the language of power. How many non-standard speakers have learned to combat the prejudices held against them is to become fluent in two or more dialects and master the practice of code-switching. A group of 10th graders from an urban, lower-class, Midwestern school with a predominately African American population demonstrated their understanding of the prestige and discrimination of different dialects through writing exercises and interviews in a piece of research done by Amanda Godley and Allison Escher titled “Bidialectal African American Adolescents’ Beliefs About Spoken Language Expectations in English Classrooms.” They discussed how and when different dialects should be used and also their own attitude towards their native dialect, which in this case was AAVE. In the study done in this article, the responses of 51 students to the question of whether or not they should use AAVE in the classroom and why was explored. From a school where demographics were 100% economically disadvantaged and 99% African American, 63% of 51 students interviewed argued that they needed to be familiar with SE because it allowed them better opportunity in their future,

particularly within employment. One boy wrote, “I say that [SE should be spoken in job interviews] because a white man is not gonna want a ghetto black male or female working for his company” (p. 708). While other students either did not base their opinions on race or seemed to be oblivious to the ties their language had to their racial identity, it was evident that they were aware of the implications their native dialect could have on their future job opportunities, as evident from the following excerpt: “Thirteen students (25%) noted that they chose not to use AAVE in various professional and public settings because of their fear of being judged by others as ‘ignorant’ or ‘illiterate.’ Conversely, students noted that if they spoke SE in such settings, strangers would judge them as ‘intelligent’ and ‘polite’” (p. 709). It is also interesting to note that of the 51 students 45% of the students believed that they should ONLY speak AAVE while in an English class because it allowed for easier communication among peers and also allowed students to properly formulate ideas without the pressure of code-switching to SE. So while it is obvious that most students are aware of the prejudices held against their dialect, they are also largely defensive and proud of it, and there is large-scale reluctance to give AAVE up for SE.

The most shocking part of this article though, is that nearly none of the students seemed to believe that their teachers might hold (and often do hold) the same prejudices that they know may of their future employers will hold. Godley and Escher write, “Significantly, none of the students mentioned fear of judgment from *teachers* if students used AAVE in classes.... In other words, students seemed unaware that many teachers—nationwide and at their school—held negative views of AAVE,” and “Because most teachers at their school did not share their views about AAVE with students, students were oblivious to such judgments, though they were very aware of the potential negative judgments of employers” (p. 709). This misunderstanding can have extremely negative effects on student performance, because rather than realizing the

prejudice their teachers might hold, which was not usually addressed to students but discovered to be discussed privately among teachers, students can often come to the conclusion that they are not good learners or good students (p. 706-707). As stated previously, this dialect prejudice often adds to the racial-achievement gap—and it is deplorable that students are unaware of the prejudices held against them in classrooms, and even worse that these prejudices exist in the first place.

Linguistic Acceptance and Student Achievement

Teacher prejudice can have devastating effects on a student's future. The importance of education in today's economy is unequivocal to any other time that has preceded the current generation. So doing well in school and continuing an education beyond high school is critical in today's climate. So, it is a teacher's job to create a safe-environment for students to foster a desire to learn and become accustomed to the educational environment. The problem that is affecting many non-standard dialect speakers is that this safe environment is shattered because there is a constant struggle to preserve their culture in the face of a teacher and school system that has more or less deemed it invalid or deficient. Researcher Melanie Rachel Hines-Knapp stated the following:

The English or Language Arts classroom has historically forced students to abandon their native (home) language and use the language of power (Mainstream American English)... Forcing students to abandon a part of their culture can cause resistance, thereby stifling the learning process. AAVE is not Mainstream American English with errors. Schools and teachers should understand how beneficial AAVE can be if used as a quality to be built upon instead of a barrier to triumph over... the disparity between the

student's home culture and the school culture, and the stubbornness of the schools can cause the student to digress. Students may then begin to view the classroom as a battleground, instead of a safe haven (Hines-Knapp, 2015, p. 49).

The suppression of culture is a crucial factor in many non-standard speakers' access to a successful education, but it is not the only one when it comes to an understanding of dialects. As mentioned before, many teachers attribute the use of AAVE as an inability or unwillingness to learn (Godley & Escher, 2012) rather than understanding that an AAVE speaker's dialect has nothing to do with the ability for high academic achievement. It is not understood by many educators that for a student to master standard English, they often must be explicitly taught it as well as given time to practice it and properly given time for acquisition. This would mean that their understanding of standard English needs to "[happen] in natural settings which are meaningful and functional" (Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll, and Rose, 2001, p. 539).

For many speakers, learning a second dialect is often a difficult process, for some just as difficult as learning a second language—one group of researchers (Cushman et. al, 2001), in their article "Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook" call this second dialect a secondary discourse which gives a better understanding to just how massive of a task learning a second dialect can be. Yet, when teachers and educators view the non-standard dialects as errors as opposed to the historically and culturally defined dialects that they are, they fail their students by not providing proper opportunity (Cushman et. al, 2001). The National Center for Education Statistics, reported that in 2012 Black dropout rates among students aged 16-24 were twice as common as White drop out rates, Pacific Islanders were twice that of Whites, American Indian/ Alaskan Native were nearly three times that of Whites, and Hispanics were exactly three times as more likely to drop out of school than their white counter-parts. So while causation cannot be explicitly stated

by this data, there is obvious correlation. Minority groups are more likely to have a varying non-standard dialect (although whites too, often exhibit non-standard dialects, such as Appalachian and Southern White English) and are more likely to drop out of school. Additionally, achievement on tests and schools are often full of dialect prejudice, "...educators generally have biases against errors that contain [AAVE] features, and that most raters view [AAVE] errors as 'carelessness' and that raters are 'annoyed by them' ... thus causing [students] writing scores and performance to not truly reflect their abilities as a whole, due to inherent biases among raters and scorers" (Allen, 2015, p. 5). This attitude needs to change in order to better serve the student population and the future work-force.

Effects of Teacher Education on Dialect Acceptance

The problem among teacher education programs, even programs that are rooted in a Multicultural and Urban education like the one promoted at Wayne State University, is that "while adding multicultural content or field experiences aimed at bridging the cultural and linguistic mismatch between teachers and students are viewed as progressive, these efforts by teacher educators often fail to systemically address issues of racism, power and Whiteness" (Haddix, 2008, p. 257). This occurs because although teachers are beginning to be widely educated about the ever-growing diverse population they will be expected to teach, they often view their diverse students, the ones who are culturally, racially, ethnically, or religiously different than themselves as abnormal or non-standard, where as whiteness has been "normalised."

What is suggested by researcher Marcelle Haddix (2008) is that for teachers to be better prepared for their educational careers in a diverse nation, and to assist in erasing subconscious

racism is to have teachers be educated on the impact that their own culture and the cultures of others have on the racial order of the nation. He writes, “In order to unravel dominant ideologies about multiculturalism and multilingualism and interrogate Whiteness and White privilege, preservice teachers must first reflect on their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this way, one of the aims of multicultural teacher education should be to help preservice teachers ‘bring front and center’ their culture and linguistic heritages” (p. 258). Haddix notes that this process is particularly important as certified teachers remain overwhelming white, middle-class, women.

Haddix notes that trends in teacher education show that it is likely that educators will remain predominately white and middle class, and when it comes to education, this can be a problem if teachers are not properly educated about their own positions of power in the U.S.’s racialized society. He notes that many white people have a difficult time culturally associating with anything, they view their culture as the prototype, normal, or typical and view those different from their own as the opposite. Haddix states the following, “Without seeing, hearing and experiencing their own cultural and linguistic heritage, White preservice teachers remain in danger of not understanding their own positions of White privilege, reinforcing boundaries that keep their ‘marked’ and ‘non-native speaking’ students from full participation in society” (p. 262). What Haddix also implies is that because many teachers view their often Standard English as normal, they view non-standard forms as improper. For example, at the beginning of a semester long class, Haddix interviewed a woman in a linguistic diversity class about her family’s linguistic history as south Boston residences. She responded, “[My mother] is still very connected to her Irish heritage and background in South Boston, but my mom has lost much of the harsh accent she grew up with . . . Norwell is an upper- class neighborhood, and my siblings

and I were raised to speak clearly, properly, and grammatically correct” (p. 264). It is noted that this woman speaks a dialect that is extremely close to Standard English. So, in that one sentence, the inherent belief that Standard English is proper English that proliferates many teachers’ pedagogies is highlighted.

The study that Haddix did followed students throughout the semester as they took this linguistic diversity course. He described the course as follows, “In the language and ethnicity course, we were provided with a strong linguistic foundation to discuss the issues surrounding language and ethnicity in the United States, especially the debates around the use of English varieties. The course deconstructed mainstream ideologies about language, namely the definition of language as simply the way that a person talks, and it provided a basis for viewing language as an essential boundary marker of ethnicity” (p. 265). Throughout the semester, Haddix noted that the students he followed, who had predominately held the view that standard English was proper English began to become more open and aware of the fact that non-standard English dialects are “rule-governed,” represent culture and ethnicity, and are “complex systems and ‘not just bad English’” (p. 266). He writes, “Standard language and colour-blind ideologies do persist within teacher education, and a sociolinguistic approach to teaching and learning about language diversity can begin to unpack these deeply ingrained social attitudes towards language dominance and inferiority” (p. 266).

Haddix is not the only person who cites the importance of explicit teacher education on the variety of English diversity. As far back as 1971, researches have pushed for the establishment of educational programs “to teach teachers about dialects” and that these types of classes “should be major priority for educators and school personnel” (Fogel & Ehri, 2006, p. 466). More recent linguistic researchers have noted that teachers who lack an understanding of

the different non-standard dialects they encounter cannot appropriately recognize when a student's error is due to a difference in dialect or truly an error. This is because an underwhelming number of future teachers have been educated in the ways in which dialects differ. Researchers Howard Fogel and Linnea Ehri (2006) write, "Research had indicated that traditional teacher education programs fail to educate teachers about dialect differences and [fail] to alter their attitudes toward culture diverse students." They also report that because of this misunderstanding of language, speakers of non-standard English, particularly AAVE speakers, are often misdiagnosed with a language disorder and placed in to special education or remedial classes, therefore stifling their opportunity for learning. So in order to beat this type of prejudice resulting in discrimination, education in linguistic diversity should be expected for all future educators. Fogel and Ehri write, "simply having teachers participate in a study on [AAVE] and exposing them to dialect forms were sufficient to change attitudes." Although this did not by any means erase completely negative perceptions of AAVE, it allowed for future teachers to begin understanding and grappling with this notion, especially ones who had come from a middle-class, white, suburban background where standard English is essentially the only language.

While a teacher's number one priority is the well being of their students and student achievement, job concerns and personal success within their job is also a major concern. Fogel and Ehri address this in the following:

In urban schools, it is common for students to speak nonstandard dialects of English, yet few teachers have been taught to recognize the features of these dialects...Such a lack of awareness puts teachers at a disadvantage. It hampers their ability to help their students learn the features of SE because they are unable to target the source giving students difficulty. Moreover, they lack appreciation of the sociolinguistic heritage of their

students whose speech derives from their families and communities. Being ignorant of these origins, they regard dialect features as ungrammatical slang possibly to be censured.

... It is noteworthy that effective instruction can be accomplished in a relatively short period of time and enhances not only teachers' understanding but also their attitudes.

They note that teacher education in linguistic diversity can help to ease or even extinguish tension that might arise between a teacher and student of culturally different backgrounds.

Imploring Wayne State to Aim Higher

Wayne States Current Situation

To bring this paper to more personal, local terms, this paper will explore personal suggestions on how to better prepare future educators at Wayne State University (WSU), the school for which this paper is being written. So, if courses for teachers about linguistic diversity help students as well as teachers, this brings up the question of why does WSU not require ALL education majors to take even a single semester course on the influence their attitudes on language will have on their particular students. The following excerpt is taken directly from WSU's College of Education website as it stands in 2016:

Welcome to the website of the College of Education at Wayne State University! We hope that you will become a member of our diverse community of alumni, faculty, staff, and students dedicated to educational excellence in Detroit, Michigan, the US, and indeed, the world. Our theme, "The Effective Urban Educator: Reflective, Innovative and Committed to Diversity", reflects the mission of the college and is the driving force behind our commitment to excellence, inclusion, and social justice.

It continues on, “We are proud of the education our students receive, with its emphasis on diversity, innovation, technology and research-based practices.” The emphasis on the Urban Educator is nothing but natural for the Detroit based, urban university.

Detroit, where WSU is located, in 2014 had a poverty rate of 39.8% as opposed the 14.8% national average, and an 82.7% African-American population (U.S Census Bureau, 2014). Although WSU has been ranked above average in the number of diverse students attending the school, the majority of students remain white at 52%(Wayne State University Diversity, 2013). The program encourages students to work within the urban community that surrounds them, which for many can seem like a daunting task, especially when according to Data Driven Detroit, between 2002-2003 a “widely publicized” Gates Foundation study found that Detroit had the worst drop-out rate in the entire country. Although numbers have gradually improved over the last few years, numbers remain high. Data Driven Detroit reported on the graduation and drop-out rate of all Detroit public high schools in 2009 about the 2008 school year. The school with the lowest drop out rate was George Crockett Academy with a 100% graduation rate, and the highest was Charlotte Forten Academy with a 66.1% dropout rate, which consequently was then closed (*State of the Detroit Child: 2010, 2011*). As a result of these drop-out rates, underfunding, and often dangerous or not up to date building codes, many parents have opted out of the Detroit Public Schools and have chosen to either send their children to charter schools, private schools, or schools out of district. As a result of this, prospective teachers from WSU will more often than not be faced with teaching students who are more likely than not to have AAVE as their primary dialect, especially if they stay in the immediate area. Unfortunately for both students and teachers alike, educators from WSU will leave college drastically underprepared to deal with the language of their students.

Teacher Attitudes at Wayne State University

While WSU has demonstrated its commitment to diversity with the requirement of classes like Inclusive Teaching and Multicultural Education, it is clear that the designers of the general curriculum are drastically uninformed of the complete and utter connection that dialect has to culture and inclusion, and it is evident in prospective teachers' attitudes. Although not empirical data, I have personally observed on more than one occasion resentment towards non-standard speakers. In fact, one particular event sparked my desire to explore this topic. The event occurred in an education class required for all majors, "Reading in the Content Areas." This class has students from all educational majors, not just English majors like myself, so most of the students have not experienced any form of education in linguistic diversity. What happened on this particular day, which was addressed at the beginning of this paper, is that this student was asking essentially how to correct students when they were talking improper, and how she believes everyone should speak "correctly". This irked me the wrong way because I had already had a number of classes, through the English education course of work, that had addressed this topic and pretty intensely explored the implication of negative views of particular dialects. So I addressed the way the other student was speaking, telling her/him she really should not tell students that the way they speak, and the way their parents speak is wrong. A few other students, who a large number of them were also English majors or minors, also chimed in on the side of understanding dialectal diversity. The student then got very defensive and said something along the lines of, "My parents taught me to speak correctly so I think everyone else should as well." She also explicitly used the words "speaking ghetto" and "speaking like a redneck" when describing dialects that were "irritating" and "wrong." The argument escalated and prolonged,

and it became obvious that this particular student would not be swayed by a single in-class discussion, in a class that was not designed to address language. Professor Christopher Crowley was the professor in the class that this situation took place. His success in mediating the debate as well as his attempt to persuade the other student to think about and understand the implications her/his attitude could have on a future student is whole-heartedly why I asked him to oversee and be my mentor for this paper. His enthusiastic response to my aspiration to write about the importance of linguistic diversity in teacher education, particularly at WSU, is further evidence of the vast and growing support for such courses. Additionally, the situation aforementioned is not the only time discussions like this have occurred, even for me personally. I have seen arguments about this unfold in a variety of classes with very little progression, because the people who are on the side of prescriptive, standard English have generally not been exposed to any other understanding of dialect than the one that has been ingrained in them from a young age.

It is important to note that this debate is not taking place only within the confines of classrooms, but within a broader context. In fact, just this year, there was high-level backlash at *Teachers College Record* for publishing a commentary titled, “Word Play: How Black English Coarsens Culture” by Hannibal Johnson. Signed by 11 different professors from 9 different prestigious Universities, a response was written titled, “Letter to the Editor of Teachers College Record” (2015). In a response lead by Adrienne Dixson of the University of Illinois and Keffrelyn Brown of the University of Texas at Austin, they wrote:

As members of the Editorial Board we write to express our dismay and outrage at a commentary written by Hannibal B. Johnson (December 10, 2015). The expressed purpose of the *TCR* commentary section is to move the conversation around education

further into the future while reframing and evaluating scholarship of the past. Johnson's commentary failed this mission in its gross neglect of key scholarship that would both amplify and clarify the issues he addresses. It also does not move us to the future, but rather takes us back to a deeply problematic history of language, culture, and the legacy of anti-black rhetoric that denigrates African American language and culture in the U.S.

The professors that signed their names to this response all hold Ph.Ds in areas of either education, gender studies, English, African American studies, or some form of degree related to social policies. The sheer number of people who support the cause of ridding the United States of the ignorance surrounding "proper English" and who have obviously dedicated their careers to the expansion of social issues like gender, race, and education is evidence of the importance and relevance of this issue in today's environment. The group goes on to say, "Johnson's piece not only ignores established research and scholarship but further demeans and dismisses young people. In essence, we find that his piece is a personal rant against Black youth that is more appropriate for a blog than a learned scholarly journal such as *TC Record*." It is unmistakable that these professionals are angry and upset. Despite "established research and scholarship" that they mentioned, they still are required to fight for the proper recognition of non-standard dialects. Despite having to put up a fight, it is obvious that evidence, research, and scholarly support is on their side. So it seems outlandish that undergraduate education programs have not yet adopted the crucial practice of educating future teachers in the importance of linguistic diversity.

Problems with Wayne State University's Current Curriculum

Currently, the WSU standards for secondary Education majors, does not require any students outside of English majors and minors to take courses in any form of linguistics, putting many of the graduating teachers at a disadvantage, and frankly setting them up for tension-filled experiences with their future students. What is more shocking too is that, as state mandated curriculums have changed, there has been a major push for more frequent oral communication and writing in classrooms, in fact, WSU has dedicated an entire class required for all secondary education majors, “RLL 4431 Teaching Reading in Middle and Secondary Subject Areas.” The description of this class is as follows, “Reading in relation to subject matter instruction, including comprehension, study skills, diagnostic procedures and techniques for meeting individual needs.” This class was focused on how teachers of all disciplines are required in one way or another to teach their students to read, write, and talk in the language of that discipline. It addresses how “The [Common Core State Standards]” of which 46 states have adopted, “emphasize nonfiction reading and writing across the content areas, including the ability to analyze text and form evidence-based propositions and arguments” (Evans and Clark, 2015, p. 1) and how “the [CCSS] view literacy as a shared initiative; that is, all educators at every level in every subject share the responsibility for literacy achievement” (Wendt, 2013, p. 40). The entire class was dedicated to the idea that all teachers are responsible for helping their students learn to read and write, which is inherently linked to language. One of the articles I read for a research paper in this class stated the following:

Critical and careful readings of government initiatives and assessments (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2002), national standards (e.g., CCLS, 2010; International Reading Association, 2010; International Reading Association/National Middle School Association, 2005) and educational statistics (Perie & Moran, 2005) mandate that we

consider students' individual literacy and learning needs that stem from cultural and linguistic diversity. More specifically, educators need to focus on the academic (i.e., word meaning) and social vocabulary (i.e., word use) that students develop, contributing to their reading comprehension and writing competencies. Enhancing oral vocabulary instruction in classroom experiences and activities has been shown to be beneficial for developing the academic and content-rich vocabulary for later learning” (Evans and Falk-Ross, 2014, p. 86).

So, the government and the university is telling teachers to respect linguistic diversity and to increase oral and reading skills within ALL classrooms, and WSU appears to have done it pretty efficiently. That is, it has done it efficiently with the exception that it has only taught a very small number of prospective teachers what linguistic diversity actually is, how to handle it, understand it, be open-minded towards it, and incorporate it into everyday classrooms. And it is in this that the university is failing its students and its reputation.

As mentioned, there are two classes in the education program required of all WSU education students that explicitly address diversity in the classroom, these are: SED 5010 Inclusive Teaching; and BBE 5000 Multicultural Education in Urban America. Both classes are focused on understanding student diversity both culturally and academically, and both are a necessary part of becoming an effective educator. Inclusive teaching, to begin, is a special education course that is required for all teachers, it is essential as schools are moving towards integration of special needs students into “normal” classrooms. It addresses issues of learning style, peer influence, and creating a collaborative and open-minded classroom. But while the class was focused on the diversity of skills that a teacher will encounter in a classroom, it truly never explicitly addressed bi-dialectal or non-standard dialectal students' needs (although

English language learners (ELL) were addressed, so bidialectalism is not that far of a stretch for this type of class).

Multicultural Education did in fact touch on Bidialectal and non-standard dialectal students, based on the syllabus that I received during this course, one of the learning outcomes was as follows, “Student will apply strategies for gaining, analyzing, and reflecting on one's own linguistic and cultural competence and professional knowledge (e.g., establishing professional goals, pursuing professional growth opportunities).” So while dialect understanding was presented, and even was a major part of the class, it really is only a minor introduction to an issue that needs a larger a deeper exploration. Additionally in this class, dialect and a different language were often not thoroughly differentiated. So while it was addressed, students who were not fully versed in the academic language of linguistics may have become confused or never really learned to clearly understand that people whose first language is a variant of non-standard English may struggle with standard English just as much as ELL students. Even more striking is that this class appears not to be a standardized class, and students can have vastly different experiences when taking this class. Friend and classmate Alain Guédès recalled his experience, and said although he was not positive that linguistic diversity was not mentioned, he did not recall learning about it in his experience in either Multicultural Education or Inclusive Education. Guédès is a secondary education major with a focus in English and History, so this combined with prior college experience leads him to be well versed in the topic of linguistic diversity.

Another problem with these classes, which should be a crucial part of all education majors careers, is that they are offered overwhelmingly online. While online classes are often convenient and attract students, they often allow students to gain only surface knowledge. In a class that has a high possibility of being contentious, like Inclusive Education and Multicultural

Education, an online class can be quite problematic. In fact, according to the list of classes on the WSU scheduling website from the winter semester of 2016 through the fall semester of 2016 Inclusive teaching is available exclusively online, and half of the classes for Multicultural Education are offered online (and for the winter term of 2016, the traditional style class had about three times as many openings left as opposed to the online options). This means, that the classes that help to shape broad open-mindedness that will positively affect a large number of students have essentially been demoted to an online option. While online classes are generally convenient, and often result in an increase in enrollment, to many students they are also seen as “blow-off” classes. So what does this say about the importance of multiculturalism and diversity in the classroom to students with this mindset? One research pair (Bergstrand & Savage, 2013) wrote the following about online classes, “...we find that students typically evaluate online teachers as less effective than teachers in face-to-face classes, view online teachers as less respectful, indicate that they learn less in online classes, and rate online classes more negatively than face-to-face classes” (p. 294). Later in the paper they also write, “Online courses receive lower overall course ratings, and students state that they learn less in online courses. This is worrisome because research reveals a high correlation between student ratings and actual achievement” (p. 302). This is worrisome, or at least should be worrisome, for WSU college of education because they are taking the two classes that should ideally shape their students attitudes about the school’s motto (recall: “The Effective Urban Educator: Reflective, Innovative and Committed to Diversity”) and marginalizing it or making it a joke for a large number of students.

The problem for linguistic diversity thus becomes effectively even more compounded and problematic. Not only is linguistic diversity largely being left out of the curriculum for most

education majors, but it is being further marginalized by being only briefly discussed (or driveled about in a discussion board post) in a class generally taken online. Some students may completely miss the crucial importance that dialect has on student's motivation, performance, and success.

Adjusting Wayne State University's Curriculum

Therefore, I propose in an attempt to provide future teachers at WSU with the knowledge and understanding about linguistic diversity that will assist their future students and benefit their own success as teachers, that WSU develop a required, in-person, traditional styled class that focuses on the importance of linguistic diversity for ALL education majors, not only those pursuing an English focus. I believe that by presenting the idea of linguistic diversity, which to many, including myself before I had taken linguistic courses through my curriculum as an English teacher, will benefit teacher understanding of diversity and culture. Language, in addition to appearance, religion, and tradition is a crucial part of diversity and one that many people remain unaware of, or feel can be easily changed to function in a Standard English curriculum. By providing a class where future teachers can safely be introduced to this topic, it will benefit the WSU College of Education student body by beginning to help all teachers understand the underlying racist institution that exists within language and to grapple with the idea that Standard English is not the only correct form of English. So rather than having prospective teachers enter the workforce (where speaking, reading, and writing are becoming a crucial part of all content areas) and struggle with situations where they encounter linguistic diversity or a dialect that is non-standard, the hope is that a class where the importance of

language and dialect is addressed extensively will allow WSU students to better understand their own future students' needs and accurately assess their academic achievement.

This is a very feasible task, as WSU already has professors in line and classes designed that teach this very topic. In fact, it was at WSU that I first developed the understanding that there truly is no “proper” or “correct” form of English, or any correct language for that matter. I developed my most extensive understanding of non-standard dialects, and developed a firm belief in supporting the use and acceptance of non-standard dialects and languages within a classroom setting while taking “Linguistics/English 5720: Linguistics and Education” at WSU. The course description, as found on the syllabus I was given from the winter semester of 2015 states the following, “It is essentially an introductory course in linguistics (the scientific study of language) with a focus on linguistic applications to the field of education. Language is an integral part of teaching, not only within the framework of a language arts curriculum, but also in the context of current issues in contemporary society, such as cultural and linguistic diversity, language acquisition, and literacy... We will also be examining the English language in its historical, social, and cultural contexts.” It was in this class that I read differing views, listened to lectures, participated in conversations, and was presented with concrete evidence and empirical data that explained the importance of tolerance of language, especially when trying to foster academic growth within students. This specific class is not a class I would expect all education majors to complete because it does delve extensively into particulars of linguistic functions, or as the course description says, “This course covers fundamental areas of linguistics: first and second language acquisition; phonology, the relation between words and their component sounds, phonemic awareness and the written representation of phonemes; morphology, the internal structure of words, word etymology; and syntax, the hierarchical patterns that generate

sentence structure.” Going this extensively into linguistics would obviously not be expected of all students, because it is the equivalent for English majors what a high-level math course would be for math majors. But the first part of the class, the more philosophical part of the class as presented in the beginning of this paragraph, is an experience highly suggested to be required for all education majors.

The traditional style class is desired because unlike in an online class, attendees are going to hear a variety of opinions, whether they choose to or not. In an online class as opposed to a traditional class, students can essentially shape his/her own experience—for example, in an online class if a student begins to read a post s/he disagrees with s/he can simply go read a different one. Discussion will take place in a traditional style classroom in a way that allows students to also ask for clarification of ideas of both the teacher and other students in a way that most students online do not push for, and student experience generally becomes more personal. So while online classes are a great option for the fundamentals of core subjects like math and history, it is not a desirable setting for a class designed to explore the implications of actions on future students. Students can hear the emotions of their peers, and truly get a gage of the importance of language in a traditionally styled class, especially at a university like WSU where the student body is relatively diverse.

A class like this is also a safe place to really be introduced to and explore the idea of linguistic diversity for students who had never encountered the idea before because it is a classroom, a place to learn, as it was for me. Student opinions may clash, and tension may develop in the classroom, but it is a much better place to change opinions and butt-heads than in the work place, where a teacher can create tensions that may last a lifetime, and also where teachers may foster resentment in particular students. For example, if a teacher who is not versed

in the inherent importance of language and dialect in culture and is a strong believer in the sole acceptance of standard English in academic works, gets hired into a school district where standard English is not the predominate native dialect (such as Detroit) students may develop strong animosity towards a teacher who disallows their home culture in the classroom. Even if negative attitudes towards the teacher and student do not develop, if the teacher believes that non-standard English usage is indicative of a lesser capacity to learn, they may not push students to their full potential, denying students the right to a better education.

Keeping Wayne State University at the Forefront of Progress

A class on linguistic diversity would place WSU at the forefront of a more inclusive education program, as this topic among professionals is still highly debated and defended. Within politics it is a very misunderstood topic, as local Republican Michigan State Representative Marty Knollenberg demonstrated late in 2015. Local news station WXYZ reports that at an education committee meeting Knollenberg stated the following, which gained nationwide criticism, “You mentioned these school districts failing, and you mention economically disadvantaged and non-white population are the contributors to that. I know we can’t fix that. We can’t make an African-American white. That’s just, it is what it is.” Whether what Knollenberg said was intended to be racist or not, it nonetheless was. His comments reveal an underlying belief that speaking white, writing white, and essentially acting white is what is to be aspired to, and by putting forward this attitude, it dismisses other cultures, which in this particular case is African American culture. His comments drew much criticism, Representative Brian Banks of Detroit responded, “I was disgusted to hear any human, especially an elected official who is responsible for creating policy, to talk that way... It is clear [Knollenberg has]

some built in racism. It is clear [he is] out of touch with reality. As an elected official, as one of your colleagues, [he owes] us an apology.” David Heckler, the President of the Michigan branch of the American Federation of Teachers in Michigan said, “It was as racist a comment as anyone can make...It is scary to think an elected official thinks that.” Heckler’s response is evidence of the expected and accepted attitude of teachers within the United States, and so providing a class about linguistic diversity at WSU will help WSU students in the college of education become more in line with the accepted pedagogies.

It is important to note that adjustments in teacher education, particularly in regard to changing demographics and a deeper understanding of the implications of culture, is widely needed and wanted. Kenneth Zeichner (2009), a prominent leader in the fight for equality within education, wrote the following in his book *Teacher Education and the Struggle for Social Justice*, “... teaching for social justice goes beyond a rhetorical commitment to social justice. It must include strong preparation in academic content knowledge and the instructional, assessment, relational, and management skills needed to translate that knowledge to students in a way that promotes understanding” (27). Throughout his book he argues that social equality within schooling starts with both teacher education and teacher initiatives. Taking these words and instructions I would argue that WSU is lagging behind in providing anything past “rhetorical commitment” for a large number of its students. WSU has required some token classes, but has widely ignored the importance of language and dialect within EVERY classroom, not just the English ones. Currently, WSU has only made a half commitment, because it is obvious that at least a part of the education board is committed to linguistic diversity and the power of language, because otherwise classes like Linguistics and Education would not be required for all English majors and minors.

A general linguistics diversity class could be developed so that it is a class of its own, the equivalent of a two-credit class like Inclusive Education and Multicultural Education, or simply by expanding one or both of aforementioned classes, which as they stand are only two-credit classes. If the class was developed as a single-focused class about linguistic diversity, it should be developed as a two-credit, traditional style course. This will allow for a thorough introduction to the accepted standards on dialects and the effect on learning without really delaying graduation for students or placing an excessive financial burden on university students. If it were to be added or expanded on within Multicultural Education or Inclusive Teaching, it would be suggested that one of these classes be pushed up to at least a three-credit class from the two-credit class at which they stand. Ensuring understanding of linguistic diversity would be crucial in the expansion of one or both of these classes, and should be explicitly required within the curriculum and course syllabus. Incorporating the importance of linguistic diversity and making it a crucial part of the curriculum whether it stands as a class alone or as an extension of a previous class should be a priority when it comes to teacher education. It will be beneficial to future teachers and their students if they experience linguistic diversity courses, no matter his/her particular subject area focus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of education in linguistic diversity for all education majors cannot be understated. With the increase and push for reading, speaking, and writing in all content areas in addition to a student body population that has continually become more diverse, future educators cannot risk not knowing the most up to date research and opinions of the vast majority of linguists and sociolinguists on the importance and connection of dialect, language, and education. It is important that Wayne State University, with its continued commitment to

diversity and urban education, keep up with current research and provide a safe environment for teachers to develop their understandings of linguistic diversity that is up to date to current standards, standards that they have already established for the English education faction. If it is up to educators to shape the future generations, it is up to the university to help shape them to the best of their ability into inclusive, open-minded, and effective teachers—and this can be done with a simple requirement.

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