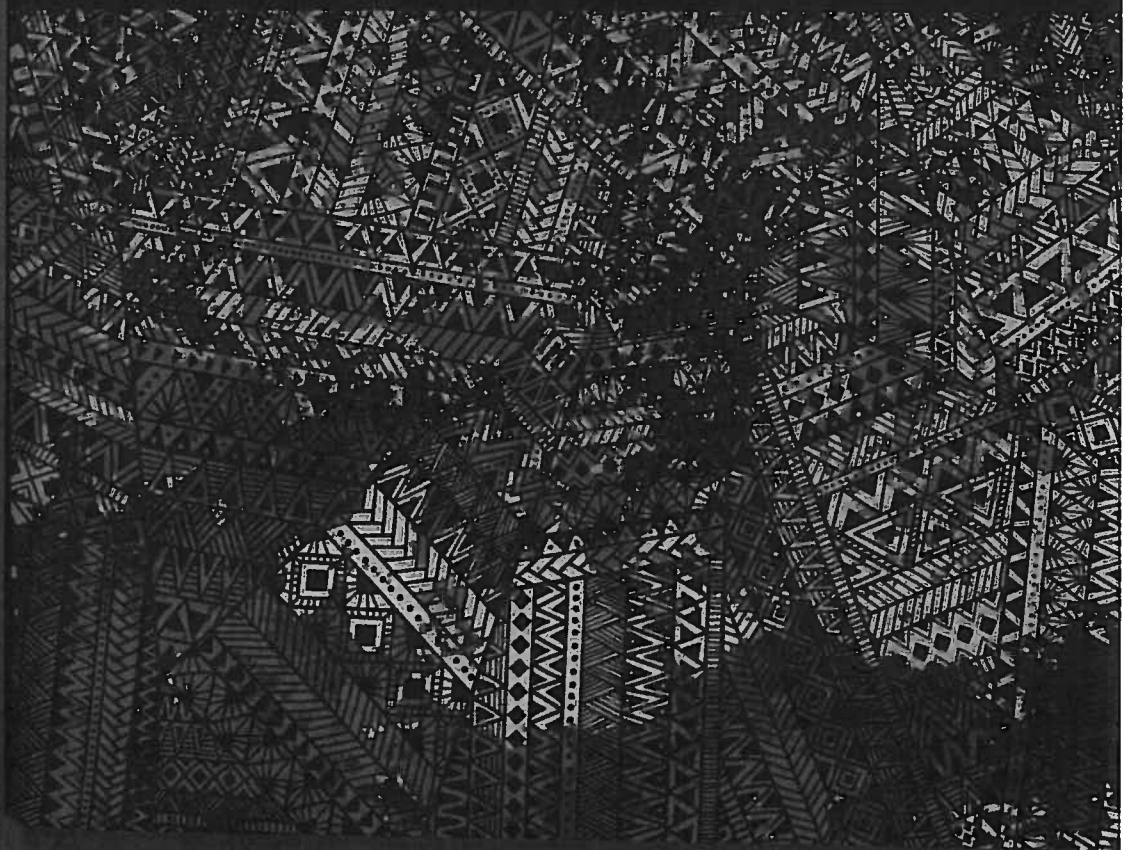


ADVOCACY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Dedicated to all TESOL advocates.

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FROM MAJORITY TO MINORITY

Advocating for English Learners from the African Diaspora

Kisha C. Bryan, Ayanna Cooper, and Babatunji Ifarinu

Blessing

Blessing arrived in the U.S. after the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti. In Haiti, she attended a private school and had an English tutor. Blessing's plan was to complete school in Haiti and then apply to a college in the U.S. The earthquake did not physically injure her, however, she has suffered emotionally. It was during the transition to school in the U.S. that Blessing had to negotiate her new identities – Black, immigrant, and English learner (EL). As a high schooler, she struggles academically and emotionally. Her course schedule includes ESL and content courses. American History II is especially challenging. Her history teacher often says, "You should have learned this last year in American History I." Blessing gets discouraged since school was easier for her in Haiti. A devastating natural disaster has had long-term effects on Blessing's life.

Plamedi

Plamedi and his family moved to the United States in January 2015 from the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the assistance of a refugee agency. Plamedi had just started the 12th grade in the Congo. Due to the local school district's policy, Plamedi's family was informed that he would not receive credit for several classes he had taken in the Congo. In addition, he would be placed in Intensive English courses due to low scores on an English proficiency screener. Due to Plamedi's diligence and experience coming from a country with hundreds of different languages, after six months he was eligible to transfer to his home school. At that school, Plamedi's teachers were not culturally responsive nor did they use strategies that could develop his English literacy and academic content skills. Despite his struggles, Plamedi has excelled in his Social Studies and Science courses and has enough credits to be considered a senior. His concern now is that he is older than the other students and he does not have a job to help support his family.

Stanley

Stanley is a Jamaican student. He qualified for ESL services because of his English screener score and non-American English status on his home language survey. By middle school, Stanley felt he knew "enough English." However, he remained in ESL until high school and worried that he would not graduate on time. It was not until his sophomore year that a teacher was able to help and confirm that he was on track to graduate. In addition, the teacher helped him understand his score on the yearly English proficiency assessment, which determined his EL status.

Why Blessing, Plamedi and Stanley's Stories Matter

Immigrants of African descent continue to add a new and changing dynamic to both the Black student, and English learner populations. These immigrants' stories are different from the typical English learner because they are Black, and more often than not, refugees. Blessing, Plamedi, and Stanley's (pseudonyms) pre- and post-migration stories are exemplars of situations in which Black immigrant students often find themselves. Their stories are varied. Some Black immigrants have come to the U.S. voluntarily (i.e. those from the English-speaking Caribbean). While severe economic difficulties, poverty, political instability, and violence have resulted in large-scale migrations of refugees from Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan. For the purposes of this paper, we use the term *Black immigrant* to refer to the population in its entirety and the term *Black English learners* (Black ELs) to refer to P-12 students who are eligible for English language services, identify as Black, and are originally from countries where the vast majority of citizens are of African descent or from a country that has been subjected to colonization and/or was a site of the enslavement of Africans.

The Black immigrant population is one of the fastest-growing segments of U.S. society, increasing by about 200% during the 1980s and 1990s and by 100% during the 2000s (Capps, McCabe, & Fix, 2012). In 2015, the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans (WHIEEAA) and the U.S. Department of Education Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) released the following information on the Black EL population:

- In the U.S., Maine has the highest concentration of Black ELs, 48.6% and Minnesota has the greatest percentage of Black ELs, 19.9%.
- 11–20% of the EL student population in New York and Florida is Black. Washington D.C., Maryland, and Texas report 6–10% of their EL populations as Black.
- 40% of EL students who are Black speak Spanish and approximately 18% of EL students who are Black speak French Creole at home.
- 31% of Black ELs are first generation immigrants.
- Igbo, Yoruba, Bantu, Amharic, and Swahili are among the top 15 languages spoken by Black ELs.

As this population continues to grow, it is incumbent upon us to acknowledge their unique experiences in U.S. schools, and explore ways that we can advocate to ensure their physical, social, and academic well-being.

Intersectionality and Black English Learners

Intersectionality is a conceptual framework that enables us to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias. Because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience and internalize biases. For example, men and women can often experience racism differently, just as women of different races can experience sexism differently. As a result, an intersectional approach to understanding our English learner and general student population goes beyond conventional analysis in order to focus our attention on discriminatory actions or inequitable practices that we otherwise might not recognize (African American Policy Forum, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005).

Intersectionality is also a critical lens for bringing awareness and capacity to social justice practices in order to expand and deepen its interventions. While intersectionality was initially conceived as a way to present a simple reality that seemed to be hidden by conventional thinking about discrimination and exclusion, disadvantage or exclusion can be based on the interaction of multiple identities rather than just one. For Black ELs, their race, lack of English proficiency, religion, and/or immigration status could result in maltreatment in the broader society and in schools. Research has pointed out the ways in which dominant institutions, such as schools, play a legitimizing role in identity construction as they condone particular cultural, religious, and/or linguistic practices while ignoring others (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Kanno, 2003; Skapoulli, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999; Villenas & Foley, 2002). In this paper, we use intersectionality as a tool to acknowledge challenges, render certain oppressions more visible, and use it to highlight and reframe approaches to social justice and advocacy in educational settings.

Challenges of the Black Immigrant and EL Population

Immigrants of African descent (including those from the Caribbean) often face psychosocial and academic challenges during their migration and resettlement. In order for educators to be effective in our advocacy efforts, we must understand, acknowledge, and address these challenges.

Psychosocial Challenges

The transition from one country to another often encompasses changes in every aspect of daily life from the language one speaks to the ways in which groups

and individuals interact. It includes loss of work status for adult family members, communicating in a new language and, often unique for Black ELs, encountering discrimination based on new and intersecting identities.

Acculturative stress. Acculturation is the process of cultural transition. The stresses associated with acculturation, acculturative stress, impacts ELs' psychosocial development (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Miller, Kushner, McCall, Martell, & Kulkarni, 2008; Williams & Berry, 1991). While most ELs experience some degree of acculturative stress, Black ELs (especially those with refugee status) typically experience acculturative stress that manifests in poor psychological well-being, including feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression, identity confusion regarding race and ethnicity, difficulty making friends, and behavioral and family problems (Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Seaton et al., 2008; Winer, 2006). Acculturative stress is exacerbated as Black ELs are subjected to racialization processes and racial trauma.

Racialization. Racialization is a socially constructed process where race becomes the predominant way of defining oneself or being defined by others (Bigelow, 2008). Ibrahim (1999) and Waters (1999) suggests that many immigrants of African descent only "become Black" when they arrive on U.S. soil. Ibrahim (1999) states, "When continental African youths experience both physical and the psychological pain of differential treatment, they comprehend that this treatment has a long history. In fact, their experiences are only one line in a long script of what it means to be Black in North America" (p. 59). Waters (1999) and Rong and Fitchett (2008) maintain that these populations are often accustomed to only being labeled (and judged) on the basis of their socioeconomic status, tribal affiliation, and language use in their home countries and not the color of their skin. We suggest that this is because their socialization has most likely taken place in a more favorable climate where they have always been a racial majority and have had less direct contact with people of other races. When children of African or Caribbean immigrants enter the U.S. American school system, they acquire identities such as "Black," "English learner," "non-Christian", and "immigrant" – labels for groups who have been historically marginalized in U.S. society and miseducated in U.S. schools.

Racial Trauma. An additional stressor Black immigrants face is trauma resulting from racial harassment, witnessing racial violence, or experiencing institutional racism (Bryant-Davis, & Ocampo, 2006; Comas-Díaz, 2016). Many Black immigrants have settled in the U.S. to escape poverty and persecution only to realize that going from the majority to the minority means that they must learn how to drive, act, respond, and react while being Black (Takougang, 2005). In her study of Somali students, Bigelow (2007) highlights examples of adolescents discussing instances of being profiled by police:

You know . . . the cops see us color-wise. 'Cause old Somali people try to separate themselves from Black people, but the cop, he sees you as a Black person and he's gonna do [to you] whatever he will do to another Black person. (p. 29)

When asked about the law enforcement, another Somali adolescent in Bigelow's (2007) study stated "You are a Black man, because African, Somali, Kenya, Congoan, we all the same, we Black men. Have the skin of Black" (p. 29). Even in adolescence, Black immigrants have come to understand the dangers of being Black and male in the U.S.

Academic Challenges

Schools are often challenged by the presence of Black ELs, as attention is often paid to their language proficiency, immigration status, or their racial identities, without an understanding of the intersectional nature of these identities or its consequences. While native-born Blacks are wholly ineligible for language services, the immigrant status of Caribbean English speakers, like Stanley, and students migrating from countries in Africa often supports their eligibility. This eligibility, however, does not always equate to appropriate identification and/or programming for students from nations that were colonized by Anglophone countries. The linguistic identities of these students often leave school districts confused regarding students' native language(s), and the student population underserved when they are either erroneously identified as Black American or as a non-native speaker with little to no proficiency in Standard American English (Cooper, Bryan, & Ifarinu, 2016).

Pratt-Johnson's (2006) study of Jamaican Creole English-speaking students in New York City public schools found that these students were often not provided opportunities to linguistically self-identify, and when they did self-identify as native speakers of English, school personnel often challenged them. She noted that Jamaican Creole English-speaking students were usually faced with one of three situations: (1) they were classified as ELs when their language seemed decidedly creolized; (2) they were identified as native English speakers when they were from dominantly and officially English-speaking countries; or (3) they were classified as disabled and assigned to special education classes in the hope that the smaller class size and slower pace would solve their obvious language differences. Because these students fall outside of the native speaker/non-native speaker paradigm, they are often misidentified and miseducated (Cooper, Bryan, & Ifarinu, 2016).

Unlike the situation with Black immigrants from the Caribbean, Black ELs who are refugees face additional challenges in adapting to U.S. schools and communities. Like all immigrant ELs, they must adapt to a new language and culture and successfully navigate the educational system in a relatively short amount of time and with varying levels of support (Rong & Brown, 2002; Rong & Preissle,

1998; Roy & Roxas, 2011). In addition, according to Roy and Roxas (2011), the majority of Somali Bantu who migrated to the U.S. over a decade ago had spent nearly 12 years in Kenyan refugee camps. They arrived with little formal education and spoke a native language that is not traditionally written. Even though members of the Somali community have a sense of optimism, many Somali children continue to struggle academically and socially.

Despite having a high incidence of education attainment and employment rates, Black immigrants from refugee situations (like African Americans) have high rates of wage discrimination (Bertrand & Sendhil, 2004; Samuelson, 2017). This makes it difficult for families to meet their needs and may lead to the expectation of students to assist the family by gaining employment. Students from these families often choose to work in addition to or instead of attending school.

Viewing Black ELs from a Non-Deficit Lens

Solorzano and Yosso (2001) contend that "schools operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize students which co-exists with their potential to emancipate and empower" (p. 3). Viewing the opening stories and considering the varying identities and backgrounds of Black ELs, it is easy for school employees to make assumptions about the students' capabilities. Academic goals are often set low to "accommodate" the emotional and academic deficits of these students. The problem with this deficit-based perspective is that it becomes debilitating to the academic progress of these students because their instruction lacks the necessary rigor needed for growth. Administrators and educators should develop the ability to use strength based strategies and techniques to address the academic needs of Black ELs.

Students' circumstances do not limit their academic potential. Some may place much consideration on Blessing's emotional distress, but not emphasize the fact that her family placed her in a private school, or her personal educational goals. Educators may make assumptions about Plamedi because of his experience as a refugee, and not recognize that he speaks at least three languages, and learned conversational English in six months. They may focus on Stanley's accent or his English proficiency scores while ignoring his intrinsic motivation to set and achieve educational goals. School personnel must understand that the focus should be placed on the students' abilities when developing activities to help them improve academically.

Being an Advocate for Black ELs

The African American Policy Forum (2017) suggests that social justice advocacy has entered a new era. There seems to be rising expectations (and needs) brought about by the recent shift in the national political arena. The White nationalist rhetoric from the current administration, protests, and subsequent hate crimes, has heightened the need to rethink standard approaches to social justice advocacy. The AAPP

suggests that one of the most significant aspects of current social justice practice that warrants reconceptualization is the dominance of a particular orientation that disaggregates social problems into discrete challenges facing specific groups. These groups are often defined in mutually exclusive ways, generating artificial distinctions and sometimes conflicting agendas. The immigrant agenda, in particular, can intersect with the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) because many immigrants will be ascribed a Black identity – and whether or not they identify as Black, they can expect to be castigated onto the same social hierarchy as U.S.-born Blacks. So when there is a call for advocacy on behalf of Black bodies, recent immigrants of African descent, like Blessing, Plamedi and Stanley, should not be excluded. Intersectionality informs not only a fuller understanding of the sometimes overlapping forces that structure the lives of constituents but also draws attention to the limited vision that grounds advocacy and intervention on their behalf.

Advocacy holds different meanings for different people, but at its core, advocacy is about action. Advocacy also means something different depending upon the context. Ultimately advocacy is about empowering people to have a voice and to protect their rights. When confronted with an inequitable or unjust situation for Black ELs (or ELs in general), advocates can effect change, but they don't always know the best way to turn their passion into action (Staehr Fenner, 2014). In order to do this, there are five key steps to advocacy: (1) isolating the issue; (2) identifying your allies; (3) being clear on the rights of ELs; (4) organizing and educating yourself and others; and (5) identifying outlets for change (NEA, 2015). Here we discuss these steps in relation to Black ELs.

With ELs having diverse issues, it is important to determine the individual problems to develop specialized solutions. As stated before, Black ELs have issues that could be placed into categories such as psychosocial, academic, and acculturative. As a result, isolating the specific issues is essential to determining the best course of action to amelioration. With such variation in issues and the challenges that they present, it is important to identify allies that specialize in solutions for specific issues. There are many organizations that have expertise in working with and for Black immigrant populations. This includes the Somali Community Center of Colorado, Black Immigration Network, and The Black Alliance for Just Immigration. After determining the areas of need, developing a resource guide that identifies these organizations and individuals may be helpful.

With constant shifts in the political environment, it is important to stay current with laws regarding the rights of ELs. Having knowledge of these laws provides the necessary path to effective advocacy and empowers advocates to become effective change agents. In addition, it is important for those seeking to be advocates to understand that they should not strive to be the voice for families, but to empower families to have a voice. Therefore, having the ability to educate and organize yourself and others is essential. The advocate must understand the families. They must know their strengths as well as the issues. They must inform and organize families to the point where they become self-reliant.

The advocate must also be able to identify appropriate outlets to address issues and evoke change. An example is having knowledge of the structure of the school system – from school building to school board. Advocates should know what issues to address at the local school, as well as how and when to follow the hierarchy beyond the local school. Advocates must also be able to use their sphere of influence to help families go beyond the school system and use outlets such as the media.

It is our belief that administrators, teachers, teacher educators, and school personnel are especially responsible for pointing out and naming inequities and advocating for this student population. This should be done through professional development that leads to culturally responsive practices from the classroom throughout the school building. Everyone in the school building should be self-reflective and be expected to act as advocates.

What Teacher Educators Need to Know and Do

Because Black ELs are a population whose voices often go unheard, we must begin to consider their voices, their plight, and our role as teacher educators. In a 1979 New York Times article Baldwin stated,

It is not the Black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: it is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be Black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. (11 p)

Pre-service teachers must know and understand the challenges of this population before they are able to effectively teach and advocate on their behalf.

Furthermore, teacher-training and professional-development programs in this country have an enormous task, theoretically training teachers to work with all students so that they are socially, emotionally, and academically successful. While most teacher-training programs aim to address the sociocultural foundations of education and the results of racial discrimination and cultural bias, to what extent are teacher educators providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to consider their attitudes and ideologies regarding intersectional identities (e.g. race, religion, language, gender, etc.), psychological trauma, and the marginalization of Black ELs? How often do TESOL courses address the academic needs of students with interrupted formal education? How often do schools encourage difficult conversations with Black immigrant parents about what it means to be Black in U.S. society? It is only when these questions are addressed positively that Black ELs will see themselves as a commodity in our classrooms and safe in the greater U.S. society

What Teachers Need to Know and Do

Teachers of Black ELs must be aware of their students' social-emotional and academic needs. We do not wish to suggest that the responsibility to meet those needs are solely those of the teacher; however, the classroom teacher must be prepared to act as an agent that assists the students' in reaching their full potential. Information about a student's prior schooling, proficiency in their first or additional languages besides English, and family dynamics helps to provide background for the teacher. Preparing to teach Black ELs requires time to plan and research the student population. Are they U.S.-born ELs? Do they have refugee status? How do they identify themselves? How is the classroom and instruction designed to support their needs?

What Other School Personnel Need to Know and Do

School psychologists and school counselors are particularly important in the advocacy efforts for Black ELs. They must first acknowledge the role of race, immigration status, and English proficiency in U.S. society. In performing academic and psychological assessments, school psychologists must beware of the acculturative stress placed on refugee children and adolescents who have transitioned from being a member of a racial majority in their home countries to being a member of a marginalized (and often targeted) racial minority in the U.S. There are important factors in the adaptation to a new culture that can either increase or decrease susceptibility to poor mental health. Conflict in the development of identity among adolescents, for example, has consistently been related to poor psychological adjustment (Rousseau, 1995).

School counselors are vital members of the education team and can be staunch advocates for this population. They help all students in the areas of academic achievement and personal, social, and career development, ensuring today's students become productive, well-adjusted adults of tomorrow. They too must be educated about this population so that they are effective in their role and their advocacy efforts. They must take the initiative to work with teachers to get to know the identities and needs of Black ELs so that their social and academic development does not suffer due to discriminatory practices (real or perceived) or social pressures often experienced by this population. Specific professional develop for school personnel must be implemented and ongoing.

What School Administrators Need to Know and Do

Administrators must be the leading advocates for the student populations in their schools. First, they must have an awareness of the intersectional identities of their Black ELs and be able to distinguish their needs from that of the native-born Black population and other immigrant populations. Second, administrators must ensure that the school environment is one of inclusivity, free of discourses of

marginalization based on immigrant status, race, or religion. Third, they must require teachers to provide a culturally relevant curriculum where Black ELs become aware of the lives and contributions of Black immigrants. Students should see themselves in the curriculum. Finally, administrators must be aware that not all ELs, especially ELs from the Anglophone Caribbean fit neatly into the native-non-native English speaker dichotomy. Traditional ESL instructional models and practices might not work for this population of students.

Conclusion

As the population of Black ELs continues to grow, educators must gain the skills needed to teach and advocate for this population. We must understand that there are social, psychological, academic, and linguistic challenges that are unique to this population. When these students come to the United States, they are exposed to the opportunities that the U.S. has to offer, but they also become racial minorities and are exposed and sometimes subjected to inequities based on their intersecting identities. Hopefully, the growing population of Black ELs will provide an opportunity for educators and community members to think more about U.S. race relations, educational barriers and opportunities, socio-emotional development, diverse socioeconomic statuses and language and literacy. Hopefully, educators will see the need to self-assess their own biases and ignorance as catalysts for change. Inevitably, by being action oriented, educators can be on the forefront of improving outcomes for all English learners so that no subgroup will be silenced, be ignored, or go unrecognized (Cooper, Bryan, & Ifarinu, 2016).

Reflection Questions

1. How might your intersecting identities, experiences, and ideologies impact the ways that you advocate for various populations of ELs?
2. What are some of the issues and challenges that you believe are unique to Black ELs?
3. In what way(s) have you supported and/or advocated for Black ELs? What, if any, were the outcomes?

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