Dangerous Discourses

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Dangerous Discourses:
Language Politics and Classroom Practices
in Upstate New York

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“Why are these kids doing this? Why are they not speaking English when they can? Why aren’t they trying to fit into the mainstream?... There’s never going to be an American identification if we all have our own areas. They’re no different than earlier waves. They worked, they learned the language, and that was your key to success.”

—Euro-American Spanish language teacher, age 30, Arnhem

Contemporary historians of U.S. immigration and ethnicity, and those who chart the experiences of Puerto Ricans on the mainland, may recognize the flaws inherent in using the “immigrant analogy” to evaluate and anticipate the Puerto Rican experience on the mainland. However, my ethnographic research in an upstate New York city with a growing Puerto Rican population suggests that such perspectives have yet to make their way into the mainstream. In analysis of community and school discourse over a three-year period, I found ethnic success stories being used by community “old-timers” to “discipline” those who are judged to have failed through a dearth of hard work. Within such discourses, the continued maintenance of Spanish (including “Spanglish”) among Puerto Ricans indexes the unwillingness of the speaker to conform to “American” ways, is perceived as a key contributor to the low socioeconomic status of the Puerto Rican community, and threatens the unity of the nation.

As the trend of Puerto Rican migration out of large metropolitan areas such as New York and into smaller, more homogeneous communities accelerates (Stains 1994), struggles over language and identity issues such as those outlined below are likely to be recurrent phenomena. For Puerto Rican youth in schools where teachers perceive Spanish language maintenance as problematic, the stakes are particularly grave.

Community Background

Arnhem, the site of the research, is a small upstate New York city that has experienced many of the trends common to the deindustrializing northeast. Settled by northern and western Europeans and Americans pushing westward in the 1700s and 1800s, the pulse of the community quickened perceptibly by the mid- to late 1800s as the nation’s industrial growth accelerated. By the early 1900s thousands of southern and eastern European immigrants, primarily Italians, Polish, and Lithuanians, had settled in ethnic enclaves in the region to work in the booming garment, glove, and broom industries.

Unionization and a post–World War II economic surge in the late 1940s and the 1950s benefited the grown children of this earlier immigrant wave. The first signs of economic decline, however, were also visible as early as the 1950s, as factories began the move south in search of cheaper, nonunionized labor. Arnhem’s Latino population traces its roots to this era, when Puerto Ricans, and later Costa Ricans, were recruited to work in the city’s growing secondary labor market.

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Deindustrialization accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, leaving row upon row of abandoned factory buildings and stories of “the good old days” in its wake. Many younger Euro-Americans in the labor market, meanwhile, left Arnhem in search of better employment opportunities. By 1990 the overall population stood at just over 21,000, down from its one-time high of 35,000. Thirty percent of the city’s residents today are over age fifty-five, the majority of these seniors the children and grandchildren of the earlier wave of southern and eastern European immigrants. While the overall population has declined, the Latino population has grown rapidly, almost doubling between 1980 and 1990. Much of the growth is attributable to family networks that convinced relatives they had left behind—including a sizable proportion intent on escaping the gangs and violence of blighted urban New York neighborhoods—to join them in Arnhem.

“Hispanics,” three-quarters of whom self-identify as Puerto Rican, made up 12 percent of the city population according to the 1990 census, while comprising almost 20 percent of the city school population. One-third reported being born in Puerto Rico. Eighty percent speak Spanish in the home, with 81 percent of those speaking Spanish in the home also reporting that they spoke English “well” or “very well.” Twenty-five percent had not gone beyond grade eight; another 27 percent had not finished high school. Four percent had college degrees.

This growing Latino population, the most severely impacted by the region’s economic downturn, constitutes a visible “poverty class” in the city. A 1991 Hispanic community agency report estimated the unemployment rate for Hispanic adults to be 22 percent, with 40 percent living in substandard housing. Thirty-four percent of Hispanics were living below poverty level according to census data, compared to 12 percent of local whites. Per capita income for whites stood at $12,228; for Hispanics, $7,427.

Community Experiences

In recent years ethnic, generational, and class conflicts in Arnhem have repeatedly surfaced. The community’s Euro-American seniors, politically active, wield much power locally; for example, they controlled the majority of votes on the local school board in the early 1990s. Many of these seniors are openly critical of the growing “Hispanic” (a term they use as a pseudonym for “Puerto Rican”) population, and their sentiments are routinely expressed in such public venues as newspaper editorials, radio talk show call-ins, and community coffeehouse discussions. Many local whites also bitterly complain about Puerto Ricans using Spanish in public. Hispanics who speak Spanish in public places may encounter open hostility, and they are frequently accused of being too lazy to learn English or of being unwilling to become “American.”

Hostility toward accommodating Spanish speakers also surfaces in the newspaper, public meetings, and informal conversations. When the local newspaper, for instance, printed a public notice in both English and Spanish of the imminent danger of drinking polluted tap water, the editor received angry calls and resentful letters:

The next time you feel the need to “serve the community” by printing an article in another language, be sure to serve all of Arnhem’s residents, and print your story in Polish and Italian—two nationalities that are the cornerstones of this city. [The Arnhem Record April 29, 1993]

Local events in the fall of 1991 increased the open expression of such sentiments. Latino community members, offended by comments made by a school board member about Latin America and local Latinos, demanded a public apology. The school board member adamantly refused to do so. There ensued an intense public debate over whether he should resign and ultimately, whether discrimination toward Latinos existed and whether the schools needed to be changed to accommodate their needs. While minority spokespersons (Latinos and one African-American woman) focused largely on issues of prejudice and discrimination and the need for educational change, Euro-Americans, overwhelmingly from the community’s “senior” population, responded by chastising the Latino community for their failure to work hard and accommodate to the mainstream society.
Within these community discourses, as the excerpts below suggest, the assumption that the Puerto Rican experience may be compared with that of earlier ethnic groups is taken for granted; Hispanics, that is to say, Puerto Ricans, are measured against earlier ethnic groups and found wanting. Spanish language maintenance is considered indicative of their lack of desire to work at learning English, and of their unwillingness to join the national community. Critics of the Puerto Rican community maintain that it is individual effort or lack of effort that is responsible for people’s socioeconomic position in society; for the white community, the cherished myth of equal opportunity remains intact:

They (whites) resent them.... You can’t blame them, you pick up the paper every day, and these people are constantly in trouble with the law.... They don’t try to better themselves, they go on welfare.... (Whites) say that their parents or grandparents came from Poland, Ireland, and that kind of thing, Italy, and when they came here they could not speak English either, but it gave them no excuse not to try, go to school, try to be the best you can, try to learn the American ways.... Their grandparents, their parents worked hard in these mills and stuff to see to it, that they got educated. Their parents, grandparents, were not trouble, they did not go on welfare, they were not shown any special favoritism, they were not given anything, in other words. And they don’t think the Puerto Ricans should be either. They should have to try, like everybody else. If they can’t try then get out. They have no patience for the idea that you come here and go on welfare. (Euro-American, personal interview)

Some Hispanic students have complained about cracks thrown at them.... All nationalities go through the same experience. (school board member speaking at public forum)

As far as this racial thing goes Hispanics complaining about racist epithets thrown at them, I received a letter from my sister in Rochester, and the same thing is going on. And a lot of this is the fact that YOU people REFUSE to LEARN the language.... You are demanding that the classes be held in Spanish. What is wrong here? (radio talk show caller)

Keep your heritage and language, speak Spanish at home or with your friends, but learn to speak English in school and the outside world if you want to succeed.... You have to WANT to learn English. (Jewish-American school board member at public forum)

I can’t understand why the Hispanic population doesn’t WANT to be educated.... Do you think that those people (European immigrants) were just handed everything. NO, they worked hard. They had to learn to speak English. (Euro-American speaker, public forum)

Such discourses however did not generally reference all community Hispanics. Both in community and school discourse, local Costa Ricans, who make up 12 percent of the Hispanic population, were most often depicted as the “good Hispanics,” conforming to the patterns followed by earlier European ethnic groups. That they too are “Hispanic,” and have achieved a modicum of economic stability, is seen as further evidence of the willed lack of success of Puerto Ricans. The two groups are often depicted as representing opposite ends along a continuum of “acceptability” to the Euro-American community:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Costa Ricans</th>
<th>Puerto Ricans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard workers</td>
<td>Lazy, settle for welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep up homes</td>
<td>Let homes get run down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep family together</td>
<td>Irresponsible; broken family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care about education</td>
<td>Don’t care about education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Law-abiding Men like to have a good time but settle down when married Willing to adopt community’s cultural values

Many involved with drugs and crime Irresponsible sexual behavior of males (and females) Stick to themselves; don’t learn U.S. values, language

Visible in community discourse is what Urciuoli (1996) characterizes as the differences between “ethnicized” and “racialized” discourses. In the American “imagined community,” the unmarked normative or generic American is white, middle class, and English-speaking (also see Oboler 1995). This normative person stands in opposition to all categories of origin difference but furthest from racialized difference. “Ethnicizing” discourses frame group origins in cultural terms, in which cultural or language differences are not seen as problematic. According to Urciuoli, “racializing” discourses frame group origin in natural rather than cultural terms, in which “(r)acialized people are typified as human matter out of place: dirty, dangerous, unwilling, or unable to do their bit for the nation-state” (1996:15).

Racializing discourses talk about unindividuated populations that differ fundamentally from whites in values, habits, language, character, and aspirations. Examples include the scientific racialism of the 1800s, the anti-immigrant writing of the early 1900s, and much of the writing on the culture of poverty and the underclass in the mid-late 1900s. In such discourses, racialized groups are seen as collectively, inherently, and unchangingly flawed (Urciuoli 1996:17).

Ethnicization serves as a sort of mediating discourse between the nonmarked white middle class Anglo and the non-white, poor, and culturally and/or linguistically deficient portrayed in racializing discourse. Ethnicity is safely marked, race is dangerously marked, and populations can be shifted from one category to the other: consider, for instance, the changed representation of southern and eastern European-origin populations in the twentieth century (e.g., di Leonardo 1992).

Ethnicizing discourses frame foreign languages as acceptable for certain purposes. For instance, foreign language use is justifiable in public places when they function to reinforce the cultural authenticity of a public performance. Racializing discourses, however, “equate language difference with disorder, with images of illiterate foreigners flooding the United States and refusing to speak English or hordes of the underclass speaking an accented English with ‘broken’ grammar and ‘mixed’ vocabulary” (Urciuoli 1996:18). Such images were woven throughout much of the seniors’ discourse.

School Experiences

Arnhem teachers are overwhelmingly Euro-American, as in the nation in general (Sleeter and Grant 1988). In Arnhem Middle School, where most of the school-site field research was carried out, 20 percent of the students were Latino; 2 percent, African American; and 1 percent, Asian American. Fifty-nine of the sixty teachers were Euro-American, almost half of whom were of Italian or Polish heritage. The average age of the faculty was almost forty. Almost half had grown up in Arnhem, with most of the remaining teachers coming from nearby towns and cities.

The school district, responding to the changing student population, had introduced English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in the 1970s, with policies, practices, and administrative commitment remaining uneven throughout the 1980s. The high school ESL teacher, for instance, “lost” his classroom and had to work out of the library; later the high school program was cut back, and the teacher was required to divide his time between the high school and an elementary school, despite growing enrollment. By 1990, middle school ESL students attended only on alternate days when not in gym classes. While the community Hispanic advocacy agency in the late 1980s had called for bilingual education, along with other changes intended to benefit Latino students, there was little talk among teachers and administrators of how the school might adapt to the changing student population.

But this changed dramatically beginning in the fall of 1991, in the wake of the comments made by the school board member and the ensuing public debate between minority leaders
and community seniors. Minority community members had written the New York State Education Department complaining of their treatment in schools, and alerting them to events unfolding around the issues raised by the school board member’s comments. Ultimately the New York State Education Department sent a team to Arnhem to look into the charges. Many local teachers and community members were extremely apprehensive about the announced site visit and felt unfairly attacked, complaining that the district had been singled out. References to the investigation as a “witch hunt” abounded. Most teachers were very reluctant to talk publicly about the issues raised by community activists, and those that expressed opinions in faculty room conversations generally felt that minority students were treated fairly in the schools.

The State Education Department team, after meeting with community members and visiting the schools for several days, issued a series of recommendations for change. Emphasizing that the situation they found in Arnhem was not exceptional, they called upon the school district to take steps toward detracking, addressing racial prejudice, cultural sensitivity training, hiring more bilingual and minority personnel, improving school-community relations, implementing multicultural curriculum reform, and strengthening the educational programs for LEP students.

As the findings from the report suggested, Arnhem teachers, not unlike their peers elsewhere, were typically resistant to what Nieto (1996) terms “affirming diversity.” Spanish language usage and students’ identification with the larger Puerto Rican community were not encouraged in the school and instead were often actively discouraged. For instance, when I initially entered the school in the spring of 1990 and asked the librarian about books on the Hispanic experience or books in Spanish, she stated that she thought that carrying such books was inadvisable, as it would interfere with their identification as “an American” and with their learning of English. After administrative pressures to be more responsive to Hispanic students in the wake of the New York State Education Department investigation, she added a set of books in Spanish on land and sea animals. When Puerto Rican students did not respond to her announcement of their availability, she cited it as proof of a lack of interest in Spanish on the students’ parts.

Teachers in general also knew virtually nothing about Puerto Ricans’ history or experiences, or the growing body of literature on educating culturally and linguistically diverse students more effectively. With the exception of the Spanish language teachers (and occasionally an ESL teacher), none of the teachers spoke Spanish. Spanish language teachers were thus often called upon to “interpret” when Spanish-dominant parents came in to the schools (generally they came only to register their children or if problems existed). Notices did not go out to Spanish-dominant parents in Spanish until the New York State Education Department investigation in the subsequent year prompted them to change the policy.

Teachers were also wary of practices that resulted in students being separated by ethnicity or race. Faculty expressed discomfort, for instance, with students clustering in the halls or on the school grounds before and after school (where Spanish and English were intertwined), with their separating along ethnic lines in classroom activities, and with their sitting together at lunch. Teachers also insisted that they wanted to treat all their students “the same.” Thus one said she didn’t want to know if her students were Puerto Rican or Costa Rican, because it might bias her; another worried that making allowances for ESL students’ language problems by permitting another student to interpret might harm students by embarrassing them about their “difference” and also hinder their progress in learning English; a third teacher Anglicized Javier to Xavier because “it would be better in the long run for him to have a more American-sounding name.”

Arnhem middle school teachers’ responses to students’ usage of Spanish in the school varied. A very small number of teachers did not see Spanish usage as problematic and were cognizant of some of the factors associated with Puerto Ricans’ bilingualism. On the other end, a small number were extremely ethnocentric and openly demeaned Puerto Rican students’ language and culture in faculty room discussions. One teacher, for instance, commented that “they ought to lock ’em up across the river in the caves and don’t let ’em come out until they learn English,” and after seeing an assembly by a Puerto Rican dance troupe derisively commented “Wasn’t that a hoot?” upon exiting from the auditorium;
another talked about the “slut clothes” and “slut shoes” the girls wore to school; a special education teacher commented that giving Puerto Rican students writing assignments was always difficult because they didn’t really have a “home” and “any real family life” to write about.

Among the overwhelming majority of teachers, concerns revolved around whether Spanish usage in the schools reinforced their segregation from the mainstream students and community, and interfered with their opportunities to practice and master English, a skill seen as prerequisite to taking advantage of educational opportunities. A recurring argument was that earlier generations had relegated their native languages to the home (or completely abandoned it), and embraced American values and identity. In turn, they had succeeded in becoming upwardly mobile and accepted into the community. Ethnic success stories from their own families or community members frequently accompanied such discussions.

As in the larger community, Costa Rican students were sometimes pointed to as the most recent “ethnic success” story, much like the “model Asian” student stories that are frequently put forward to argue against the salience of “minority status” as a barrier to success. A popular story that was told to me several times throughout my stay speaks to the power of this belief. The story was offered up when there was talk of the academic performance of minority students or discussion of Puerto Rican students’ behavior. I first heard it from an administrator who was explaining to me why he thought Puerto Rican students were less successful in schools. It was later told to me, among other instances, by a teacher angry with the New York State Education Department’s investigation into the schools, which she felt would put the blame for minority student failure on teachers; a teacher in an English department meeting where minority student progress was being discussed; a school aide during a faculty room conversation in which teachers were discussing the “attitude problems” of several Puerto Rican students; and several more teachers in follow-up interviews on their responses to the State Education Department proposals the subsequent year. According to the story, an immigrant student from Costa Rica/Hungary/Czechoslovakia (the country of origin varied) who had recently entered the school district had, within only months of being in this country, achieved enough fluency in the English language—through hard work—to be able to exit from the ESL classroom. In one instance the story included the parents, who it was said intervened to pull him out of the ESL classes, where everyone was reputed to be “fooling around” and learning nothing. The student, so the story goes, had then gone on to become an academic superstar at the high school.12

What does the story, and the context in which it was told, reveal to us? This stellar student serves, first of all, as an “ideal type”: a student (as well as parents) who values education, respects teachers, surmounts language barriers, and works hard—even harder than the typical American student with far fewer obstacles to overcome. He is linked to our national past by way of being an immigrant of the type who is said to have built the nation. What doesn’t get said is also significant: There is never any mention of the educational, linguistic, or class background of the student. What the story affirms is that educational success, and thus success in life, can be achieved by anyone willing to work hard enough at it—and by implication, many Puerto Rican students were not.

Classroom Practices

Discomfort with acknowledging difference extended to almost all the classrooms observed, with few exceptions. I have elsewhere elaborated upon the factors that contributed to a “silencing” of minority voices in the English classroom teachers’ choices and treatment of multicultural literature (see Bigler and Collins 1995). It is instructive to return to those teachers’ classrooms to examine classroom treatment of students’ language and class differences.

Ethnographic research in schools and communities has provided a rich body of research on how classroom practices may enter into the educational performance of nonmainstream students. Microethnographic research in schools and communities beginning in the 1960s (e.g., Gumperz 1982; Keddie 1973; Leacock 1971), for instance, undermined assumptions of cultural and linguistic “deficit” explanations (e.g., Bereiter and Englemann 1966; Heller
1966) for minority student performance. Sociolinguists documented evidence of the sorts of subtle classroom interactions that may contribute to nonmainstream students’ poor educational performances (e.g., Au and Jordan 1981; Cook-Gumperz 1986; Heath 1983).

Macrostructural analyses, meanwhile, have attended to the consequences of societal inequalities for minority student identity formation and relations to school. Here it is argued that an oppositional social identity may emerge in response to minority treatment by dominant group members, where conformity to school expectations is equated with a loss of cultural identity (e.g., Cazden, Hymes, and John 1972; Collins 1988; Ogbu 1987; Walsh 1990). In such instances, as Erickson (1987) notes, hegemonic school practices may transform politically neutral cultural “boundaries” (e.g., nonStandard vs. Standard English pronunciations) into cultural “borders” (e.g., through insistence on “correct” pronunciation) that may engender student resistance and quite possibly loss of trust in their teachers.13

The English teacher’s classroom is arguably one of the most crucial sites in which the validity of minority students’ home culture and language/dialect is likely to be contested or affirmed. It is in the English classroom that students are exposed to “great” writers and the topics deemed worthy of reading about, and it is in the English classroom that judgment may be passed on students’ home languages and dialects, as expressed in their spoken and written language. My extensive observations of two English teachers’ classrooms over the course of one school year revealed significant differences in how nonmainstream students’ cultural and linguistic practices were treated, as well as in students’ accompanying willingness to enter into classroom participation.14 I have chosen here to highlight particular excerpts from the transcripts of these two teachers’ classrooms that illuminate the significance of the classroom encounter for Puerto Rican students.

Mrs. L.
Mrs. L., the first teacher, was selected because her classroom represents a more traditional approach to the teaching of English. She is in her early 50s and received her M.A. twenty-five years ago from a Catholic university. Hers is a teacher-centered classroom; she devotes much of her classroom time, particularly in lower track classes, to spelling, vocabulary, and grammar exercises, and repeatedly stresses the need for “proper English.” In the process of encouraging her students to shift to Standard English, she frequently disparages her students’ use of the vernacular, as the following excerpts illustrate:

Excerpt # 1
Mrs. L.: (handing back a test on present and past participles) Shame on you individuals that gave me “brang” and “brung!”

Excerpt # 2
Mrs. L.: (going over students’ answers to a worksheet) This is the one I cringe at: “I seen that movie last week.”

In informal discussions with the researcher, Mrs. L. expressed discomfort with students’ use of Spanish in the halls and classrooms, which she felt interfered with the students mastering English. She also appeared extremely uncomfortable talking about students’ race and ethnicity. In the course of over sixty classroom observations, I never witnessed her acknowledging her students’ ethnic backgrounds or Spanish language abilities, with the one important exception outlined below. She did not incorporate “multicultural” literature into her classroom, relying instead on traditional canonical selections with white male protagonists (with the exception of The Diary of Anne Frank). Much of the ethnic literature being put forward as a supplement to the traditional canon, she felt, was too “particularistic” and would not appeal to mainstream students.

Despite such reservations, Mrs. L. did bow to departmental pressure to include a story written by visiting Nuyorican author Nicholasa Mohr, who had been brought in as a guest speaker in the wake of the New York State Education Department investigation into the educational experiences of Hispanic students. Her treatment of the story, however, as seen below, undermined the objectives of those who would urge the inclusion of multicultural literature in the classroom. In her classroom response to the stories, she disparaged the vernacular used by the main characters and telegraphed to the students her own discomfort.
with ethnic difference. In the following example, taken from a grade eight Regents-level classroom discussion, she reads from background material about the author and from a Nicholasa Mohr story from *El Bronx Remembered* (1986) entitled “Once Upon a Time....” Note the treatment of vernacular idiom (lines 20-24) as well as of Spanish/English differences (lines 5-13):

1 MRS. L.: I want to give you a little background about Nicholasa Mohr, so that when she comes next week to talk to you people, you know something about her.

4 [Reading aloud]

5 “Nicholasa Mohr was born in Manhattan, where she grew up in
6 El Barrio.”

7 [Teacher pauses]

8 The word begins with “B.”

9 [Teacher points to the two Hispanic students in the classroom]

11 You Hispanic students have some insights here?

12 [No response from two students. Long pause]

13 Barrio. She grew up in *El Barrio*.”

14 ....

15 [Later in same class, reading aloud from Nicholasa Mohr’s short story “Once Upon a Time...”]

17 MRS. L.: “What do you think?” asked the second girl. “Should we tell somebody what we seen [a dead body]?”

19 [Teacher addressing class, in an astonished tone of voice] SEEN?

20 Continues reading]

21 “… We better not; then they’ll ask us what we was doing up on
22 the roof and all,” said the first girl.

23 [Teacher addressing class] These kids haven’t had Mrs. L.’s grammar class yet.”

The lack of responsiveness of the two Hispanic students may have been because they were unable to guess the correct word, though both were bilingual. A more likely explanation is that they felt uncomfortable in a situation where they were suddenly “marked” as Hispanics; Mrs. L. had never noted students’ ethnicities or bilingual skills in earlier classes. Her treatment of the vernacular, meanwhile, subtly ridicules the speakers.

Mrs. L.’s response to Nicholasa Mohr’s story included another comment designed to elicit a laugh from the class, but one which could also have had an unanticipated effect on some of her students:

Mrs. L: [reading from text] “Yvette lived on the top floor of a tenement, in a four-room apartment which she shared with her parents, grandmother, three older sisters, two younger brothers, and baby sister.” [pauses briefly for effect]
Mrs. L.: Good grief!

The scenario Nicholasa Mohr incorporates into her story is certainly not unusual among working class Puerto Ricans in New York City or Arnhem: a large, extended family in cramped living quarters. Given that five of her students in this lower track class were from working class Puerto Rican families, we can assume that some of her students are now, or have at one time, lived in similar situations. For working class students, the comment affirms their “otherness” without recourse to understanding the roots of class differentiation, shared (im)migrant experiences, or the strengths that may accompany such residential patterns, such as strong family ties.

Mrs. T.

Mrs. T., the second teacher I followed, taught the same subject matter, grade, and track levels as Mrs. L., but with a very different approach. The far greater engagement of her Puerto Rican students in classroom discussions, and the degree of comfort they manifested in discussing their linguistic and cultural practices, speak to the significance of such environments for students whose structural location in society may enhance the likelihood of resistance to the norms of educational institutions.

A first-year teacher in her mid-thirties, Mrs. T. identifies strongly with students “on the margins,” having herself had a troubled adolescence that contributed to her dropping out of school at the age of sixteen. Her classroom teaching and educational philosophy were profoundly affected by her student teaching experience, where she worked with a Hispanic teacher well known in state educational circles for her excellence in developing a multicultural literature program and learner-centered classroom.

Among the most apparent differences in Mrs. T.’s classroom were her selections of literature, her treatment of Spanish and nonStandard English, and her affirmation of students’ ethnic backgrounds. She routinely incorporated multicultural literature into her classroom lessons, and she was responsible for identifying and inviting Nuyorican author Nicholasa Mohr to the school. Mrs. T.’s selection and handling of several of Mohr’s short stories, as seen in the following selection, provided opportunities for Puerto Rican students to act as “cultural interpreters” for other students, in which they contributed to building understanding of the text. Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican students in Mrs. T.’s class became the experts and final arbiters on Spanish pronunciations and translation. Ethnic and linguistic differences were handled matter-of-factly, and her Puerto Rican students appeared comfortable talking about their linguistic and cultural practices:

1 Fred: [reading from “The Window Display” by Nicholasa Mohr (1986); Little Ray has recently arrived in New York City from Puerto Rico] Little Ray was always with Papo, who had to look after him. In the four months since he had arrived, he had become the group’s favorite. At first he had spoken no English, but now he was almost fluent.
2 He spoke with an accent, which amused the other children, and he would get back at them by correcting their Spanish.
3 Mrs. T: Okay, does that make sense?
4 Ss: Yeah/Uh huh.
5 Mrs. T: He’s learned Spanish, he’s picked it up rather—or, English—and he’s picked it up rather quickly, but of course he has the accent, and sometimes that—
6 David (Puerto Rican): What accent?
7 Mrs. T: A little Spanish accent. Wherever you come from, you
bring with you, the one—

Mario (Puerto Rican): [addressing David] You know how you—

Carmen (Puerto Rican): ()

Mario: Sometimes your grand—my grandmother, my grandmother says, instead of “yellow” she says “jellow.”

Carmen: [chuckling] Yeah.

Mrs. T: You know something, sometimes you say “jes” instead of “yes,” you say “jes.” Now why is that Mario?

Mario: ‘Cause he sits near Jessica.

Mrs. T: No, why is that?

David:()

Mario: ‘Cause it happens to me, ‘cause it just happens the “y” gets pronounced as a “j.”

Carmen: Instead of saying “something” they go “some sings,”

like—

Mario: Some sings, some sings.

Carmen: Yeah. Some SEENG.

Mrs. T: Like you (in Spanish) would say, “How is your school like?” instead of “What is your school like?” Just little switches, in the language, that just make it a little bit amusing to that person listening to you. Okay? So if I would—sometimes I find it a little amusing when I hear that. But I might say things in Spanish, that would make you laugh very hard.

Mrs. T: Like what?

Mrs. T: Like not—
Mario: Like um—you don’t have the accent that we do.

Mrs. T: Well like my, my friend says, “The fingers () my toes.”

And of course in English, “the fingers of my feet.” And in English we call them toes. _Dedos de mi manos_, right? How do you say feet, *pies* (PIES)?

Carmen: Yeah, *pies* (PEE AYS).

Mario: *Pies* (PEE AYS). Making *pies*.

David: Pizza (PEEAY-ZA) *pie*.

Mrs. T: So it’s just a language switch that doesn’t con—that doesn’t parallel.

In lines 18-30, students eagerly offer examples from their own experiences growing up in a bilingual community that regularly moves back and forth between English and Spanish (Zentella 1981). Mrs. T., who has previously explained that she is taking Spanish lessons, makes it clear that she views students’ bilingualism as a strength. Her Puerto Rican students—at risk of being labeled “language deficient” by some—incorporate a sophisticated play on words into their classroom discourse, making a bilingual joke of the differences between the pronunciation in Spanish and English of the word *pies* (lines 59-61).

Mrs. T also refused to make student use of the vernacular an issue in student writing and talk. She pointed out to students that in certain contexts—talking with friends, writing dialogue, and so forth—use of the vernacular was in fact the language of choice:

1  S: [reading from Nicholasa Mohr story] “I guess then they—
2  I guess they are really—*are* real late. Or they *ain’t* coming.
3  *We better split or we are going*—*are gonna be late,“
4  *said Hannibal.*

5  Ms. T: Okay, Fred—.

6  Mario (Puerto Rican): “Gonna” and “ain’t” are not words, you know that?

8  Mrs. T: Pardon me?

9  Mario: “Gonna” and “ain’t”—they’re not words.

10 Ms. T: But she’s using them how in this piece of writing Mario?
11 Why are they okay in this?

12 David (Puerto Rican): They’re Puerto Rican people.

13 Ms. T: Nooo.

14 Mario: No, that’s how we speak. That’s how everybody speaks.

16 Mrs. T: Remember when you were doing stories, and we used these? [draws quotation marks on board] What are those?

19 David: Quotations [sic]. Quotes.

S: Quotations.
Ms. T: Quotation marks. So if you're putting the writing inside, and that's what the person said, then that's okay, even if they say "gonna." All right? If it's inside the quota—

Mario: But "gonna"'s not a word.

S: Gonna, gonna.

Ms. T: But the person SAID it. Now Mario, if you said to me, "I'm gonna go to the store, I'm gonna go to the store," right—

S: Okay.

Ms. T: and I want to quote you exACTly the way you said it. I'm gonna have to use those kinds of words aren't I? Because if I change them—

Mario: It's not a quote.

Ms. T: If I change them, then we don't know exactly how Mario said it. I'll make him sound like me—and that's not how Mario sounded. And if I wanted—if I want people to hear, hear it in their head, okay, if I want them to hear, how Mario sounds, I'm gonna use it the way it sounds, inside the quotation marks. And that makes it okay.

Is that clear? Do you understand what I mean?

In summary, Mrs. T., unlike Mrs. L., incorporates her Puerto Rican students' cultural and linguistic practices into classroom conversations. Her choices of literature and treatment of Spanish validate and affirm their presence in the U.S. In a situation of increasing political tension and negative representations of Puerto Ricans in much of the community (and national) discourse, such classroom practices may help serve as a counter to the larger society's negative evaluations. Mrs. T.'s classroom, however, was the exception rather than the rule.

Discussion

The residential and economic segregation of Puerto Ricans on the mainland, which resulted from a complex interplay of the dynamics of race, class, and colonialism, fostered the maintenance of Puerto Rican ethnic identity and Spanish language usage (Nelson and Tienda, 1988; Rodriguez 1989). As Puerto Ricans increasingly move out of these urban ethnic enclaves into smaller "whiter" communities such as Arnhem, they confront more directly a discourse of exclusion that locates their lack of social mobility in their cultural and linguistic practices and personal choices.

White ethnics in Arnhem evaluate local Puerto Ricans by drawing upon the classic European immigrant success myth, in which all groups start from the same point and are assimilated into the national fabric by dint of hard work, sacrifice, and a willingness to conform to "American" norms. As Alba's sociological study of ethnic identity among whites in the capital district of New York state suggests (1985), an emerging Euro-American ("white") identity is visible, with emphasis on the shared immigrant experience and social mobility as setting them apart from "non-white" ethnic groups. Ignored in this public discourse are both the factors that enhanced white ethnics' upward mobility—including the post-war expanding economy, the earlier successes of the union movement, and government largesse that benefited white ethnics (see Bigler 1996a; di Leonardo 1992)—as well as those that have historically impeded racial minorities' upward mobility.

The expanding economy that made upward mobility possible for white ethnics has drastically changed. The inequalities of income in the United States are now greater than
at any time since the 1930s (Lind 1995), deindustrialization continues apace, and federal support for ameliorating the consequences of poverty and inequality has eroded in past decades. Economically marginalized groups, which include the vast majority of Puerto Ricans in the United States, who were poorly positioned to take advantage of the post-war boom that lasted into the 1960s, will continue to confront structural barriers to upward mobility.

Attacks on language maintenance, such as those outlined here and as put forward by proponents of English Only measures, ignore the historical and sociopolitical realities and the cultural affirmations that underlie the continuing existence of Spanish among Latinos in the U.S. (Flores, Attinasi, and Pedraza 1981; Urciuoli 1996). They place the blame for poverty on individuals rather than on racial hierarchies and the historical exploitation of Puerto Rican labor that evolved within the context of the colonial relationship of the Island to the U.S. after 1898 (Bonilla and Campos 1981). They may attract traditionally liberal voters who accept an uninformed argument that Spanish-language speakers are “prisoners” of language and special interest politics (see Woolard 1989); more often they serve as a smokescreen for concerns about the “browning” of the face of the U.S.A. (Attinasi 1994; Crawford 1992; Zentella 1988). And they have insidious consequences. As Attinasi (1994) notes,

Silencing, or linguistic suppression, is the ultimate dehumanization through language. Both dialect suppression and language prohibition exclude speakers from dialogue with the culture of power... (The ideological effect) is to reinforce the mistrust of non-English languages, speakers, and cultures.... Those who support language diversity are thought to be un-American, and those who speak other languages are seen as deviant and dependent, rather than as bearers of a precious human resource. (334-35)

The overwhelming majority of teachers in Arnhem accepted the dominant ideology that while equal opportunity had once been denied to minorities, such factors were no longer relevant in explaining their status in American society. They also assumed that the roots of poor school performance lie in individual students’ efforts and in the cultural values espoused in students’ homes. The myriad ways in which race and class enter into communities’ relations to school, and the significance of the cultural capital students bring to school, went largely unacknowledged. More specifically, teachers knew little about the history of Puerto Rico’s relationship to the U.S., Puerto Rican culture, the historical experiences of Puerto Ricans on the mainland, or the diversity within the community.

Most teachers had completed their degrees prior to the advent of educational programs promoting multicultural awareness. In-service courses incorporating such issues would be an important component of any program designed to better address the educational needs of local Puerto Rican students. Such courses would necessarily need to move far beyond the “heroes and holidays” approaches most likely to be embraced by educators; they would also need to incorporate sustained and serious analysis of how societal inequalities are created and maintained, and to address their consequences for the community and the well-being of the nation.

Teachers also need opportunities to explore how their personal assumptions about language, and how their decisions to incorporate, denigrate, or ignore students’ linguistic practices, may have profound implications for their nonmainstream students. As Bloome (1991:48) notes, “African American and Hispanic students are often made to feel less academically capable and that their home, community, and culture are less valuable because they do not speak Standard English.” Importantly, teachers need opportunities to examine the premise that maintenance and public display of native languages or dialects are undesirable and incompatible with the acquisition of Standard English. Pedagogy that supports the vernacular or home language while also moving students toward Standard English literacy (e.g., Attinasi 1994) has multiple benefits. It acknowledges the validity of the home and community language—in the process not reinforcing societal denigration and reducing the risk of oppositional behaviors—while also empowering students with the standard language skills that will permit them to participate more effectively in the public discourses that are redefining what it means to be an American in the 21st century.
Teachers who already hold such perspectives are one important resource to consider when working toward such goals. Calling upon teachers like Mrs. T., for instance, to assist in teacher training holds out the potential to reduce the likelihood of teacher resistance to “top-down” initiatives. The significance of the student teaching experience for Mrs. T., as noted above, also speaks to the value of providing similar opportunities for aspiring teachers. And at both the local and the national level, we need to actively work toward creating a teaching force more representative of the students in our schools.

Working to lower the barriers that function to segregate sectors of the American community from one another is essential. Fostering among teachers and administrators a greater recognition of how class, language, and race mediate encounters between parents and the schools is essential. At the local level in Arnhem, hiring more bilingual and bicultural school personnel from the community and expanding school outreach in Spanish remain integral elements of any such plan. Barriers might be further reduced by a greater utilization of school buildings for community events that bring parents onto school grounds. Involving the Euro-American seniors, the portion of the community most resistant to bilingual and multicultural education initiatives, in school-related activities may also be of value. Greater contact with Latino youth and communities through involvement in school projects—from foster grandparenting to serving as historical “resources” for students studying U.S. immigration history—may also help reduce polarization and enhance each group’s understanding of the other.

Political action remains essential. As the 1996 election returns indicate (Ayres 1996), Latinos nationwide are responding to legislation they perceive as anti-Hispanic or not in their own best interests by becoming more politically involved. Following the intense public debate in Arnhem, a diverse group of residents, concerned about polarization in the city and the growing expression of hostility toward the Hispanic and African American communities, organized to elect a Hispanic minister to the school board and to replace the most intransigent board members. Their success in doing so points to the potential for organizing across racial groups through appeal to democratic principles.

State actions can also lend official support for educational initiatives intended to benefit diverse students. Arnhem school officials and teachers collaborated with State Education officials, academics, and community organizations to develop a 300-page document responding to the New York State Education Department concerns. The ensuing response laid out plans for implementing district goals that evolved from the report recommendations. Important movement did occur: the school now sends out bilingual materials, bilingual aides were hired; the ESL program was revamped (though bilingual education initiatives were sidelined); some curriculum reform was attempted; and a small group of interested teachers and administrators began to seriously examine the issues raised by the New York State Education Department and community activists. The impetus for change, however, slowed considerably in the face of declining revenues that resulted in the elimination of department chairs, cuts in funds for educational workshops, and threatened teacher layoffs.

It remains an open question what the outcome would be of even the most optimal schooling conditions for Puerto Rican students, given the larger economic realities of life in a deindustrializing economy and the grim economic realities that confront Puerto Ricans on the Island. The growth in past decades in educational “credentialing” has also further raised the educational level that students must attain in order to enter the competition for jobs that offer a living wage, and Puerto Rican youth continue to lag behind their cohorts in educational attainment. Without a greater public commitment to a more equitable distribution of employment and educational resources, positive change will be further hampered.

Educators and community members interested in effecting educational change at the local level, meanwhile, can begin by listening to the voices of the Puerto Rican community. The responses of Puerto Rican students in Arnhem, when asked how they felt about Nuyorican author Nicholasa Mohr’s books, point to their perceptiveness of the many ways in which our schools have traditionally rendered invisible the realities of their lives beyond the school doors (Rodriguez 1989; Zanger 1994). Their responses also underline the urgent need to continue to work toward a more inclusive, equitable, and just society:
I like her stuff, 'cause she talks—you know—she just came out right straight like she didn’t care. She came out right straight saying what she felt. She writes about what is going on, you know, more like about prejudice.

I thought it was good. Because it was like, more like our times. Like all the other books are like real old and they taught us about like ancient history and stuff like that. This one was like you could relate to it.... Like New York City, like with all the people there like, having a hard time and stuff like that, with the money and stuff.... 'Cause you know like a lot of people are out—like these times are like that. Like they don’t got a lot of money. Like in New York City. They—you could picture it in your mind.

It [her book Felita (1979)] was good. ‘Cause it told about prejudism and we learned a lot out of it, like not to pick on people because of their color.

I think it was so good [Felita]. She talks in Spanish and English. Like in true life.  ■

ENDNOTES

1 Arnhem is a pseudonym, and all names of people have been changed. Minor biographical details of some individuals have also been altered.  
2 Locals believe this to be a significant undercount, and there is much impressionistic evidence to support their contention.  
3 When Arnhemites speak of whites, they refer to Americans of European descent. As a racial term (setting aside the challenges to the concept of discrete “races” as scientifically valid [see Gould 1981]) it would also include Latinos of European descent, but “white” Hispanics, both in this research setting and nationally (see, for instance, Rodriguez 1989), generally set themselves off as distinct from “whites.”  
4 Responding to a journalist’s questions about how he felt in regards to the strong multicultural emphasis in a New York State Education Department report, he replied that while minorities who had made “genuine contributions” should be included: “You have to understand that some contributions have been disasters. The Spanish people in South America, for instance, can’t run a country without total chaos. You don’t find that in Western civilization because people there are reasonably intelligent and know how to do things.” He later announced in an interview that he had cancelled vacation plans because he feared that younger Hispanics high on drugs might retaliate for his refusal to apologize for his earlier comments, and that he would not ask for police help because “some of them may be Hispanic as well.”  
5 A detailed analysis of a year-long heated public debate between the seniors and minority community members over whether the schools and society were racist, and whether multicultural and bilingual education were necessary, can be found in Bigler 1996a.  
6 Young Costa Rican men began emigrating in the early 1960s. Many had high school degrees, and their racial, class, cultural, and educational backgrounds would have made their transition easier. They also came as skilled soccer players, and were recruited in part to play on the local soccer team that Italian Americans had organized, further integrating themselves into the community. Many Costa Rican males married women from their hometowns and brought them to Arnhem, but a number of them also married Euro-American women from Arnhem; their children in Arnhem today bear Hispanic surnames but are otherwise undifferentiated from the majority population.  
7 The only exception was an African-American teacher, who had grown up in the community in one of the very small number of black families in the area.  
8 Some, however, did not agree that Latino students’ needs were being well met. They were generally reluctant to express these sentiments publicly, particularly if they were untenured. See Bigler 1994.
The school district did attempt to offer a course in Spanish for teachers, but it folded after one session because of a lack of response.

Ironically, lunchroom policies fostered segregation: students who brought their lunches were allowed to take them out of the cafeteria and sit in the gymnasium bleachers, while those who bought lunches (overwhelmingly students on free or reduced price lunches) had to remain in the cafeteria. The policy was later changed.

Most of the school research was conducted at the secondary level, concentrating on the middle school. I do not have sufficient data to generalize about the elementary schools.

Further examination into the origins of the story revealed that this student was actually from Czechoslovakia. His father was a biochemist, and his mother was completing a college degree. They had lived for a short period in Canada before emigrating to Arnhem.

For a detailed historical and interactional analysis of the standard/vernacular conflict in schooling, explicitly developing the notion of “hegemonic practices,” see Collins 1989.

See Bigler 1996b for a more detailed analysis of the differences.

REFERENCES


