

“It ain’t ‘nah’ it’s ‘no’”: Preparing preschoolers for the language of school

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Abstract

This research presents reflections from focus group discussions with childcare providers and parents of preschoolers in one African American community situated within a large Midwestern city in the United States. The purpose of this study was to examine parents’ and childcare providers’ conceptions of literacy and language related to school readiness. During these conversations it became clear that both parents and providers engage in a number of practices to prepare children to use the standard variety of English privileged by mainstream schooling. Participants verbalize the dual importance of encouraging all language development for young children while explicitly teaching the uses of language as situated in a larger social context. Both parents and providers discuss the need to build a bridge for children between the English varieties used at home and the standard English valued by schools. In light of these findings, the authors problematize common conceptions of ‘school readiness’ as unidirectional and discuss implications for children entering school settings where language varieties are undervalued.

Keywords

Adult/child talk, community literacy, early childhood, ecological perspective, home and school discourses, home–school practices, language development, language use

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On a cold but sunny Saturday morning, six childcare providers gathered in the kindergarten classroom of a local community centre. Holding Hands opened a year prior to meet the growing needs of neighbourhood youth seeking a safe and supportive after-school environment, and now partnered with the Abra Park Early Childhood Collaborative (APECC)¹ as a site for weekend professional development. APECC is a local organization working to enrich the lives of children and families by establishing a high quality community-driven system of support. As researchers at a nearby university, the first and second authors became involved in APECC at its inception; first as peripheral members to gain a deeper understanding of community collaborative spaces and later as leaders whom other members turned to for information about early literacy and language development. Within this role, we facilitated many of APECC's professional development sessions.

A session about preschoolers' social and emotional development would be starting at 9:00 am, but a group of African American child care providers, crossing three generations in age and experience, came together beforehand to talk about children's literacy and language development. Questions were broad and open-ended, including "When do you start paying attention to 'teaching' language? And at what point do you start thinking about early literacy? And are those two things separate or the same?" Participants responded:

Madison²: It goes hand in hand. Learn the language and learn the proper language too. Use the correct words.

Chloe: And if you don't have language it's hard to incorporate the literacy because they...

Multiple participants: [sounds of agreement] Exactly.//

Researcher: Right, ok. When you're saying the proper words are you making a distinction between the way we talk and the way books are written, is that what you mean? Or tell me more about language and proper language.

Serenity: Nah and no.

Nevaeh: Exactly. That's what you...

Serenity: Nah and no. It ain't nah..

Nevaeh: Use the correct.//

Serenity: ...It's no. Or whatever the language may be.

Nevaeh: But the kids are smart enough to know that they mean the same thing.

Makayla: Yeah, they know.

Researcher: Ok.

Serenity: Because when you correct them they say, "Ah, sorry, no ma'am."

Nevaeh: Mm hmm.

Chloe: Right.

Nevaeh: Especially depending on what community you're in . . .
Makayla: Culture.

While we presumed participant responses would inform our ability to further the learning opportunities for Abra Park parents and professionals, reviewing the focus group transcripts catalysed a foundational shift in our analysis. When asked about language and literacy in early childhood contexts generally, conversations repeatedly returned to acculturating children into the dominant discourse. When Madison stated, “learn the language and learn the proper language too. Use the correct words,” her comment was received by many nods and “uh huhs” from others who then went on to expand the construct ‘correct language’ as used within the context of culture and community. Multiple participants reiterated the need for children to become competent using the dominant discourse to assure future academic and economic opportunities. The volume of discussion by participants about language practices speaks to the importance they placed on the imperative nature of socializing children into the dominant discourse for school readiness and beyond. Therefore, we present these data to explore how perspectives on language, specifically the distinction between ‘language’ and ‘proper language’, play a role in the aims of early childhood stakeholders when preparing children for school in one African American community. Specifically, we ask:

1. What are parents’ and childcare providers’ self-reported beliefs about and practices of preschoolers’ early literacy and language development?
2. How do these beliefs and practices align with the social construct of school readiness?

Theoretical perspective and relevant literature

Language development as social practice

The development of language occurs through cultural and social experiences; people learn through apprenticeship, or enculturation, in social practices by observing and interacting with established members of the discursive community (Vygotsky, 1976). Children are, therefore, not only influenced by the social context in which they develop, but their “very development is dependent on opportunities to participate with others, notably parents, family members, peers and teachers, in the activities that constitute the culture in which

they are growing up” (Wells, 2009: 271). Therefore, each individual’s development is afforded and constrained by the social circumstances in which they grow. As Jackendoff (2002) notes, “Human beings have a need to ‘tune’ their conceptualizations to those of others – to have a common understanding of the world...adapting oneself to the community’s conceptualization” (p. 330). It is this commonality of shared meaning that is the goal for the developing child; the lexical acquisition of words provides the tools for meaning to be shared. As children grow, they participate in increasingly varied social circumstances. When children gain membership of a novel social setting (i.e. the classroom) they must learn the nuances of the new community’s conceptualizations. For some, the social norms of school and home require little assimilation. For others, the social circumstances of home and school bear little resemblance, presenting additional negotiation challenges.

School readiness as a social construct

While the construct of ‘reading readiness’ has a long history in both the early childhood and literacy fields (Durkin, 1966, 1970; Mason, 1977), the construct of ‘school readiness’ is a much newer one, becoming increasingly common in references to early childhood experiences. The school readiness movements began in the 1990s when high-stakes policies such as No Child Left Behind initiated reform of the perceived low-quality and ‘failing’ American education system. In addition to furthering pressures placed on teachers, the narrative of failing schools stimulated the idea of failing students, implying that students were not receiving the necessary pre-school education to enter schools ready to learn. So, the emphasis in early childhood education was put on readying preschool students for elementary school, and school readiness gained momentum as the necessary precursor to assuring students’ later academic success. Indeed, the task of *readying students for school* has become a common battle cry of early childhood education policies.

Despite this increasing momentum, there is little agreement as to what actually constitutes school readiness or how it can be measured (Lewit and Baker, 1995). School readiness continues to gain prominence in national and local reforms and political agendas with the explicit goal of improving student academic performance, and how school readiness is viewed by caregivers impacts on the early literacy environments of children. Amidst this lack of clarity, early childhood teacher educators are often left to interpret school readiness reforms and policies. Therefore, teachers’ ideas of school readiness often (1) reflect and standardize a White, middle-class understanding and

(2) place the responsibility for being ready for school on children as opposed to “an interactionist understanding of the construct” that is encouraged throughout the world (Brown and Lan, 2015: 10). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) defines school readiness as bidirectional and states that while students can prepare to be ready for school, it is equally important that schools should be ready for children. By this, we interpret NAEYC to mean that schools are prepared to meet the instructional needs of an increasingly linguistically and ethnically diverse population. Brown and Lan (2015) found that when teachers talk about school readiness, “the most frequently mentioned area of deficit was literacy” (p. 8). Due to the symbiotic relationship between language and literacy learning it is impossible to decouple the constructs of school readiness, literacy achievement and language variety.

School readiness and language variety

The literacy ‘achievement gap’ between African American students and their White counterparts still persists, at least in part due to the privileging of Dominant American English (DAE) over other variations (e.g. Beneke and Cheatham, 2014; Dyson and Smitherman, 2009), such as African American Language (AAL) (Smitherman, 2006). While naming groups of language varieties is difficult, since there is undoubtedly variation within any named language, we have adopted the terms DAE and AAL following Paris (2009). DAE refers to the generalized linguistic features in common use in the United States but highlights that these linguistic features are supported by a dominant group that tends to enforce these features via governance and schooling. This is preferable to terms such as “Standard English” as there is no set standard and the assumption of a standard language is simply a myth (Silverstein, 1996). We use the notion of AAL to describe the variations of language generally attributed to African Americans in the United States. This language has a generally cohesive set of linguistic features (Rickford, 1999; Smitherman, 2006), but as Rosina Lippi-Green (2000) points out, the language is used for a variety of purposes (e.g. resistance to white culture, solidarity among African Americans) and Paris (2009) notes that the speakers of the language come from many ethnic backgrounds. Scholars continue to echo the calls made decades ago for students’ rights to their own languages (Baugh, 2015; Smitherman, 2001), and they have begun to document, through critical ethnography, the important role AAL plays in the construction of communication and identity across ethnic lines in vastly changing urban schools (Martinez, 2012, 2015; Paris, 2011). For example, in an urban high school,

Martinez (2017) documents how Black and Latino youth use features of AAL in transcultural spaces, yet also recognize these forms and words as 'not right', pointing to a wider ideological assumption of correctness. Despite the use of these language practices, schools continue to value the dominant language, in the form of an assumed standard language, above all others (Dyson and Smitherman, 2009; Martinez, 2017). Because the idea of standard language is propagated through institutions (Lippi-Green, 1997; Silverstein, 1996), formal education experiences provide authentic opportunities for children to interact with and experiment with DAE, often at the expense of other languages and varieties.

Language use and double consciousness

The presence of multiple language varieties, with one being directly supported institutionally and ideologically (i.e. DAE), creates a space in which speakers of a non-dominant language compare their use of language with that of the dominant society. Participants in this study expressed concern with the limited amount of experience children have with DAE prior to attending formal school. Focus group participants said DAE was spoken in elementary schools, whereas AAL was spoken at home. Participants articulated DAE as "proper language," "English that is taught in school," "the king's English" and "proper English." Similarly, when discussing their use of AAL, they named it in a negative way in relation to DAE: "talking street talk," "street languages," "improper English," "broken English," "southern broken English" and "the broken layman's term." With all these terms, participants readily privileged DAE as the correct way of speaking and relayed how formal school settings improve children's ability to speak it. It is this authority, and the recognition of this authority applied to language, that is reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/2007) concept of double-consciousness in which

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

This double consciousness has been noted in the field of literacy. For example, as youth write across social institutions and navigate the authority of public

institutions while simultaneously attempting to represent private institutions such as the family (Goldblatt, 1995). As with youth writing, the participants seem to invoke the notion of double consciousness being used to highlight the struggle that participants voice in navigating the dominant institutionalized language practices of DAE as well as the community practices of AAL.

For as long as language differences have been viewed in contention with school success, scholars of anthropology (e.g. Heath, 1983), sociology (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1992), linguistics (e.g. Labov, 1972) and education (e.g. Ward, 1971) have worked to understand and reconcile discontinuities in language development across social strata. Thus AAL must not only be viewed not only descriptively, in comparison to some variety of DAE, but should also be understood within its ideological and political context (Lippi-Green, 1997, 2000). Particularly, developing critical approaches to analyse data (e.g. Paris, 2011) can serve as a lens to understand people, their use of language and their identities.

Methods

Study context

The largest neighbourhood of a Midwestern city by population and size, Abra Park was predominantly European American (99.83% White as per the 1960 Census) until the mid 1960s. As African American families began to move into the community racial tensions grew, culminating in two days of rioting following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The physical destruction incurred social, economic and political consequences, much was never rebuilt. Instead, businesses relocated and Abra Park is now a low income community. The previously slow trickle of White families out of the area increased rapidly. The African American population rose from 31 people in 1960 to over 41,000 in 1970, while the European American population decreased from 99% to 66% over the same decade. Naomi, a childcare provider of over 20 years, proudly narrates Abra Park's more recent demographic fluctuations (from 90% African American in 2000 to just over 85% in 2010, with a Hispanic population concurrently growing), "Well, that's the old [Abra Park]. The new [Abra Park], if you notice in the community, I've been in the community since 1974. And the community now, when we first moved in we were the second black [family] in the neighbourhood on our block. And then it went to all black. Now it's coming back to be mixed again."

APECC draws from a long history of the neighbourhood investing in itself, but have just recently begun providing childcare providers with high quality

professional development opportunities that are rarely available in the neighbourhood. In line with APECC's focus, we approached our role as facilitators of professional development with intentionality. That is, we sought to design professional development opportunities that were relevant and relatable to the needs of the local community while also considering the early learning standards that should guide instructional practice. We conducted a mixed methods enquiry to inform our understanding of the local literacy and language practices on which these professional development opportunities would build by gathering survey responses ($n = 226$) and holding focus groups ($n = 32$) with local parents and providers (see Hoffman and Whittingham, 2017). To answer the research questions put forth initially, we conducted statistical analyses of survey data and coded focus group data with the survey topics in mind, merging the two analysis following data collection. A secondary constant comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) of the focus group data highlighted participants' emphasis on language use specific to school readiness and became the ground for the data and discussion presented here.

Knowledge gathering and analysis

All parents ($n = 149$) and providers ($n = 77$) who completed a survey were provided the with an opportunity to participate in a follow-up focus group to elaborate on the topics contained within the survey. Of these participants, 16 parents and 16 childcare providers with unique and diverse lived experiences each contributed to one of six focused conversations (three with each sub-population). All 'parent' participants were parents and grandparents who served as primary caregivers. The 16 parents were African American females who utilized childcare for one or multiple preschool aged children. Their children attended childcare both full time (40+ hours per week) and part-time (on average, 10–30 hours per week). Provider participants were also all African American females. They represented both home-based and centre-based sites, various years (new to the field to 24 years) of practitioner experience, and represented various roles such as sole provider, parent educator or teacher assistant (see Appendix 1 for additional demographic information).

Focus groups were scheduled in response to the number of survey respondents who volunteered. As additional survey respondents volunteered to participate, additional focus groups were scheduled. There was no limit to the number of survey respondents allowed to participate. Focus group locations were accessible to all interested participants and fostered opportunities

for authentic conversation. Three childcare directors offered access to their sites for parent focus groups, allowing parents and other primary caregivers (i.e. grandmothers raising grandchildren) to participate at their will. Focus groups occurred were held around parents' typical pick up times, and arrangements were made for children to remain in the care of providers during the conversations. We held provider focus groups at local community centres that regularly host similar events. All provider conversations were scheduled immediately before or after other regularly scheduled APECC events to enable ease of attendance for participants. Focus groups took place over two months, with the first five conversations facilitated by Colleen and Emily and the final focus group facilitated by only Emily, they lasted between 45 and 75 minutes each. A semi-structured interview protocol was followed to ensure that similar topics were discussed across groups while simultaneously supporting the natural progression of conversation in each session. Focus group questions are incorporated within the findings to provide context for participants' quotes (See Appendix 2 for a complete interview protocol).

Focus groups were then audio recorded in their entirety and transcribed with field notes from each focus group serving as supplemental data sources. Following the thematic analysis conducted for the mixed methods study (Hoffman and Whittingham, 2017; Whittingham and Hoffman, 2016), the original transcripts were once again read in their entirety and reviewed to analyse the data anew. During this subsequent analysis Colleen and Emily read the data separately, and both began to identify preliminary themes regarding language beliefs and practices related to the expectations of school. We discussed our notes to collaboratively inform our general understanding of transcript content, and to achieve consensus within our coding scheme. Preliminary data trends were reified when the third author reviewed the transcripts. Recursively coding, we continually read and revisited the transcripts, repeating this process to achieve a strong sense of consensus. We analysed focus group transcripts to produce theoretical interpretations from participants' relayed beliefs and experiences (Charmaz, 2000).

Limitations of the current study

One of the limitations of any interview study is the reliance on participants' self-reports. The findings presented here are limited by these self-reports, as no observations of parents' or child care providers' interactions with young children were observed or recorded.

Findings

As evidence of our findings, we present interview excerpts from 21 of the 32 participants. These excerpts are not exhaustive but are representative of the overall tone and atmosphere of each focus group conversation, they were met with many agreeable gestures and confirming comments by fellow participants as evidenced in the full transcripts. Participants verbalize the dual importance of encouraging all language development for young children while explicitly teaching the uses of language as situated in a larger social context. Towards the first aim, they intentionally engage children in conversation to facilitate the mastery of conversational conventions and to provide access to new information. Towards the second aim, both parents and providers discuss the need to build a bridge for children between the language variety used at home and the DAE valued by schools. For example, one home-based childcare provider of eight years describes easing disparities between home and school language by teaching children to use the standard.

... having a way to bridge the older generation with the newer generation. Like, we may say, nah, or no. Someway they got to incorporate that so the kids can have an easier time transition. Because if a kid is raised by a grandparent, an old southern grandparent, most of their language that that child is going to learn in that household... is going to be a bit harder for that child to transition into a school system where they using the king's English, so to speak.

Focusing primarily on this second aim, the following themes recount parents' and childcare providers' self-reported beliefs about and practices of (1) modelling language to teach both AAL and DAE, (2) promoting translanguaging in different contexts and (3) emphasizing the use of 'correct' language by correcting children's language use to assimilate the dominant discourse.

Modelling language

The first of three major themes addresses the importance parents and providers attach to their role as models of language. Parents and providers adopted a method of instruction mirrored in many early learning environments – modelling or showing children the expected ways of acting (or speaking) to achieve educative and socialization aims (Wasik and Hindman, 2011). Participants discuss both the importance of modelling speech in general and the importance of modelling DAE. Modelling language is a longstanding yet complicated and multilayered construct, with little

research consensus regarding its affordances or limitations in practice. Lilian Katz (1984) cites the benefits of modelling and correcting young children's language in the classroom; Ken Goodman (1969) claims the role of the adult as language model purports an 'elitist view', suggesting that these strategies inhibit the development of young children's oral language and the kind of flexibility parents and providers later mention. The participants' description of the necessity of modelling language is reflected even when conversing with very young children, specifically children just beginning to make sounds. For example, two providers explain

Olivia: It's like when, them being as younger kids and you speak it and they hearing it either they modeling what you, sometimes they can model what you saying.

Brielle: Um, because that's when they're more able, can understand the words that you saying and, like they said, mimic you or pick up what things you're getting at, cues and things like that.

Modelling language was also referred to as a strategy for teaching children conversational conventions such as turn taking. When asked how talking and listening help with reading and writing, parent Abigail notes

I believe the more you talk to them, the more they'll want to talk and they'll stop and listen so when they start talking, you listen to them.

Beyond teaching conventions, childcare provider Alyssa describes the benefits of modelling language to provide exposure to new concepts and vocabulary, particularly when participating in a conversation, rather than simply overhearing talk.

I believe children are just broadened the more that they hear. Um. And I don't mean just telephone conversation. It's when you are talking with them. It's just broadening. I want to say their horizons. It's broadening them. They are just learning. They are really sponges. They take in everything they hear.

Fatoumata, a former centre-based childcare provider currently seeking employment, refers to modelling through conversation and reading when building children's language

Researcher: Ok. What do you think about building kids language? What kinds of things build their language or vocabulary?

Fatoumata: Reading, and talking to 'em. I think, really being, you know, you have to talk to kids and read to them and stuff and make them understand different things and stuff.

Grandmother Ava attributes her granddaughters' verbal accomplishments to authentic conversations with older, skilful family members:

Researcher: What makes you think that, and why do you think she is doing so well?

Ava: The fact that a lot of people talk to her. She has older siblings. She has older siblings that really talk to her. And her mom puts in a lot of time . . .

Here, caregivers simultaneously navigate the standard language ideology with children and model alignment to this language ideology through such practices, modelling this type of speech even when they are uncomfortable with their own ability to do so. When Isabella, a centre-based teaching assistant, reified the importance of speaking the DAE in schools, she comments, "... and a lot of us don't know the king's English although we try to speak it." This duality of roles – modelling both DAE and AAL for children – is one in which parents and providers also see their children as needing to be well-versed. Therefore, following the theme of modelling we discuss another key theme discussed often across all six focus groups – linguistic flexibility.

Linguistic flexibility

Language is an essential part of community identity, and language choices have real social implications and/or consequences. In Abra Park, language capacity encompasses much more than the mastery of DAE. Community members must know both DAE and the AAL variety used in the community, and must know when to use each one. This crucial negotiating of discourses is a skilled performance; it is a creative strategy for navigating social norms (Blom and Gumperz, 1972). A useful construct proposed in the field is the notion of linguistic dexterity (Paris, 2009, 2011), or the ability to use a range of language practices in a multiethnic society. Related to this notion is the more general concept of translanguaging.

Participants in this study described the linguistic practice of switching between two English varieties and acknowledged the need to manipulate speech based on their social situation. We adopt the term translanguaging

to describe these complex practices. The term *translanguaging* was first developed in the 1980s by Cen Williams (1994) to react against the negative connotations of bilingual speakers of Welsh and English (Lewis et al., 2012). Instead, Williams proposed an alternative view that bilingualism, and particularly the practices of using both languages, was an asset for speakers and should be advocated in schools. Baker (2011) and García (2009) additionally advocate the use of this framing to underscore that effective communication often entails complex practices drawing on multiple languages (e.g. AAL and DAE). While participants repeatedly talked about language varieties, whether DAE or AAL, as distinct from one another, Martinez (2012, 2015, 2017) and Paris (2011) document that in classrooms with youth, AAL, DAE and Spanish may all be used in complex ways for effective communication. Additionally, in a Head Start context, Souto-Manning (2010) notes that AAL, DAE and Spanish were all used for effective communication in dynamic ways. However, similarly to participants in the studies by Martinez (2015), Paris (2011) and Souto-Manning (2010), the participants in this study recognized that the language practices of the home or community conflicted with those expected in school, and students may generally be aware of these (see also Author 3). Parents and providers routinely confirmed the tension between the two existing discourses, attributing DAE use to a more professional or public setting:

Brielle: Um . . . For our society, African Americans, we have children that have street languages . . .

Multiple participants: Yeah, street language.//

Researcher: Street language. Ok.//

Brielle: That's how I put this. It's what, what I'm saying is, proper English is when in public they get up to somebody more professional.

This exchange reflects Hymes' (1972) description of linguistic choices as *situated meaning*, in the sense that parents and providers alike verify these tensions and stress the importance of knowing when and where to use each linguistic variety.

Khloe's discussion of language choices indicates the importance of DAE use when communicating with anyone outside of her primary discourse community and underscoring the intentionality of these decisions. The emphasis on mastery of the DAE for external discourse exchanges refers to 'the community's own theory language flexibility, an application of double-consciousness.

Khloe: I want her to understand and like be aware that there's like that when you are with your friends or we outside playing you can talk however you want to talk, not however you want to talk, you can't say any old thing, but that's speaking one way, but there is also a proper way to speak and say words and to read, like, so I want her to understand and know both of them so you know if she is just at home, then that's fine, you don't need to say "for" instead of "fo" like, you know, you can say it however you want to when you at home, but when we out and about or something, like, yeah, let's get it together, like, to me that's important.

Researcher: Ok, and why do you think that's really important to you?

Khloe: Well I just want her to be able to be prepared for life, for the real world, like properly prepared. So, when you are engaging with people that don't live where you live you need to be able to communicate with them.

This intentional focus on teaching linguistic flexibility is a way of empowering children with language choices in different contexts (Beneke and Cheatham, 2014). Centre-based childcare provider Isabella says:

Like, we may say, nah, or no. Someway they got to incorporate that so the kids can have an easier time transition. Because if a kid is raised by a grandparent, an old southern grandparent, most of their language that that child is going to learn in that household . . . is going to be a bit harder for that child to transition into a school system where they using the king's English, so to speak.

Isabelle hints at the variation within the language practices of people in her community by referring to an "old southern grandparent," thus acknowledging even more distance from DAE and indicating a further distance from the contemporary culture of the school system. However, Isabelle also does not differentiate the language of the "old southern grandparent" as distinct from the variety of AAL used in Abra Park, thus preserving the community identity as one that is homogeneous, marked by an assumed single and discrete linguistic code shared over time. Home-based childcare provider Victoria extends the concept to include not only language but other cultural norms as well

Victoria: If they develop it at home and they, the surrounding at which they are in, in which they talk a certain way, when they come to school, that's the way you should model the, if they're saying the wrong things.

London: Exactly.

Victoria: You know what I'm saying. If they're saying something wrong. They used to using those words. And then when they come to school and you try to

correct them and let them know that's not the proper way to say that word. That's the time that you do that.

Researcher: K.//

Victoria: That's . . . Households themselves they have some way that they talk to their children.

London: Right.

Victoria: They understand that but when they come to school if they're not used to someone else saying something the same, then they figure that's the way we're supposed to talk, that you're supposed to talk.

London: It's just like learning . . .//

Victoria: It's culture too. It's a culture thing.

At this point Victoria notes that to competently interact with outsiders, one need not simply speak a linguistic code, but also appropriate the larger cultural system. This problematizes the simplistic notion that students need to learn and be corrected for language use, and rather more accurately reflects the cultural tensions students experience in schools. London continues:

London: It's like learning the two languages as earlier I was speaking.

Nyla: Right.

London: No matter you speak Russian and I speak Polish, the key is to differentiate between the two languages and know that it means one thing. And it's the same with our culture. They can understand when they're coming from, say, a southern discipline old fashioned type, you know, uh, learning, as opposed to a more modern, should I say less disciplined environment. They know the difference, trust me.

Nyla: So casual conversation . . .//

Victoria & London: Mm hmm.//

Nyla: And the home cultural language is different than what you're doing in schools.

London: Exactly.

Nyla: And they are picking up on those differences.

Victoria: Yes they are. They are very smart. They learn.

Participants describe the generational practice of teaching children to switch between the two English varieties, as parents and providers alike were transparent in the need to acquire this ability as a life skill, voiced no resistance to this need, and commonsensically described their parents doing the same before them. It is again reflective of the socialization of children into

double consciousness through language use as a way to simultaneously allow one to identify as African American and concurrently as a part of the dominant society privileged in schools. Abra Park contributes to the multilayered approaches of parents and providers when negotiating language. These influences also affect the way parents and providers socialize children into the navigation of language choice.

Correct and correcting language

Linguistic flexibility and other language-based strategies are often manifest in local childrearing practices, transmitting social and cultural values from one generation to the next. Correcting children's language use is a childrearing practice characteristic of the Abra Park community. Razfar (2005) discusses how this 'repair' of one's language demonstrates how deep ideologies of standardization run because the focus of such corrections or 'repairs' is almost always on fixing the form of language, not the meaning. The importance of using correct language, and the common practice of correcting children's language, is the third common theme and reveals another means by which parents and childcare providers prepare children for expected language use in schools. For example, childcare provider Zoe discusses her responsibility for correcting students' use of AAL to more closely resemble DAE when they are at the childcare centre, while being very transparent about how children need to learn to switch language practices.

You know, we're all in west side [redacted] and we promote English that is taught in school. But however, in the streets it might be a different language out there. So the kids are bringing that to the daycare. The kids are learning that stuff at home so we have to decipher the two and explain to the children that they can't use that type of language and everything so that's another interference for me, I know. So it's like a battle of, you know, talking street talk, and then you have to teach them the proper way to say things and everything so we have to go over that before we can get into the actual teaching. And that's with the older kids a lot.

Similarly, parent Aaliyah discusses the practice of correcting her daughter's language as a multigenerational practice:

I correct my daughter because she has to know how to say things right. I learned that from my aunt. She has to be able to say things the right way.

Aaliyah's perception of the need to correct her daughter is one that is situated within a particular relationship of trust and experience, and is not simply a stance toward an assumed standard.

Other parents also explain the practice of correcting children's language use as a deep-seated tradition.

Taylor: – so like the last time she speaks, I tell her how to talk, how to say it properly.

Researcher: So, you talk a little bit about building that language and correcting that language and why do you think that is important?

Taylor: Um it's important to know how to speak properly, how to talk everyday, and how to spell words.

Both parents and providers stress the importance of readiness for life's challenges when cultivating the navigational language skills of the community's children.

I would talk to her, and like, make sure she understands the words that I am saying and make sure she learns more words with me than she would outside, because other people teach you the wrong way and um I want her to resemble how I teach her at home outside when I'm not around.

Correcting language is sometimes coupled with the modelling of expected behaviour or language use. Brielle, a home-based childcare provider who runs her own daycare, refers specifically to peer interactions as the site of a modelling-correcting hybrid, illustrating how all three themes or strategies are not separate approaches

Correct their English if they say a word wrong, correct that. Show them how to use their words when they're interacting with each other, like their peers. Showing them manners, tell them don't say these things, say this another way or say other, show vocabulary for them.

Instead, all three strategies, (1) the modelling of language, both AAL and DAE, (2) assume these languages are discrete varieties to be used in distinct contexts and (3) the use of "correct" language, as often corrected by an adult, are layered and inter-reliant socialization processes aimed at helping children achieve school readiness. These strategies demonstrate the living language practices of Abra Park, as parents and providers prepare children with the

tools necessary to navigate the racially and politically charged arenas of formal education – a layer of ‘school readiness’ which often goes unnoticed.

Discussion

Abra Park parents and childcare providers work to preserve language varieties while providing access to the dominant discourse of DAE so as to equip children with the linguistic tools necessary to navigate the racially and politically charged educational system of which they will soon be a part. Enactment of a “double consciousness” in the *doing* of language takes many forms; we have explored the three most prevalently discussed practices. Parents and providers, operating from a language stance that acknowledges the privileging of a standard language model in schools, incorporate both AAL and DAE varieties, model language for children, teach linguistic flexibility and correct children’s language so that they use the ‘correct’ language to assimilate the dominant discourse.

These practices reflect the reality that schools often adhere to middle-class norms, even when the majority of students attending schools are not middle class (Heath, 1983). Given the interdependence of language and early literacy, the cultural and linguistic variety of each must be considered when creating opportunities for young children to construct shared meaning. However, literacy is not static knowledge of how to read and write; it is the understanding of how and when to apply knowledge situated within a certain social context (e.g. Heath, 1983; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). The language and literacy teaching and learning of young students should reflect the rich cultural experiences of all children, valuing local literacies while preparing students for more formal educational experiences. Thus, we revisit NAEYC’s (2009) definition of school readiness as bidirectional and aim to shift the conversation from what parents and childcare providers can do (and are doing) to prepare students for the mainstream expectations of ‘doing school’, to ask instead what are local and global educational policies doing to combat the systemic racism which makes such dual consciousness necessary for some students, but not all?

The allegiance to the assumption of monolingualism as ideal (García and Torres-Guevara, 2010) and the assumption that there is a standard language (Silverstein, 1996) in US schools fails to ready students for the needs of a diverse society (Author 3, 2016). We therefore caution against the privileging of a *standard language ideology*, or ‘a bias toward an abstract, idealized homogenous spoken language, which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and . . . is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper

middle class' (Lippi-Green, 1997: 64). We recognize that the participants' desire for students to learn DAE is part of a larger social and political structure that privileges particular people and particular ways of speaking, and not the social reality in which linguistic dexterity is essential to daily life. Language is a replication of social position, as dialect, accent and vocabulary all indicate different social standings (Bourdieu, 1991), and the manners and patterns of speech and writing that are valued by those with authority become generally accepted and enacted in society. By describing the dual consciousness of the parents and childcare providers of Abra Park, we hope to have problematized the socially- and politically mainstream conceptualization of 'school readiness', so as to advocate a broader conception of language and literacy practices which honour and sustain students' diverse linguistic identities.

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Notes

1. Organization, location and participant names are pseudonyms.
2. In order to respect the participants' anonymity and cultural background, the study chose pseudonyms from New York City's 2013 list of most popular names of "Non-Hispanic Black" female babies. This list was selected as it was the only large US city to report baby names by ethnicity.

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Appendix I

Parent participant information

Pseudonym	Gender	Childcare setting	Number of children	Children's ages & genders	Additional information
Leah	Female	Centre	1	3-year-old girl	Grandmother who is a primary care giver
Ava	Female	Centre	1	5-year-old girl	Grandmother who shares care responsibilities with the girl's mother
Ariel	Female	Centre	1	4-year-old girl	Participated from the perspective of a grandparent but is also a centre employee
Skylar	Female	Centre			
Taylor	Female	Centre	2	1-year-old son 3-year-old daughter	Works at a medical centre
Khloe	Female	Centre	1	18-month-old daughter	Just took a new job downtown
Abigail	Female	Centre	1	11-month-old daughter	
Jayla	Female	Centre			A mother and an assistant director at the childcare site
Nila	Female	Centre			
Kayla	Female	Centre		1-year-old boy 3-year-old boy	
Aaliyah	Female	Centre	1	4-year-old daughter	
Arianna	Female	Centre	1	5-years old 6-years old 13-years old	
Faith	Female	Centre	1	7-year-old daughter	
Mia	Female	Centre	1	3-year-old daughter	
Kaylee	Female	Centre	2	4-year-old daughter 12-year-old daughter	
Sarah	Female	Centre	2	5-year-old daughter 2-year-old daughter	

Childcare provider participant information

Pseudonym	Gender	Childcare setting	Role	Length of time in occupation	Additional information
Madison	Female	Home-based	Sole Provider	17 years	Has 6 children of her own
Laila	Female	Home-based	Sole Provider		
Chloe	Female	Home-based	Parent Educator	2 years	Has also been an elementary school teacher
Serenity	Female	Centre	Teacher Assistant	"very long time"	
Nevaeh	Female	Centre	Lead Teacher	24 years	
Makayla	Female	Centre	Lead Teacher	2 years	
Victoria	Female	Home-based	Sole Provider	6 years	
London	Female	Home-based	Sole Provider	8 years	
Olivia	Female	Home-based	Sole Provider	5 years	
Brielle	Female	Home-based	Sole Provider	13 years	
Alyssa	Female	Home-based	Sole Provider	15 years	
Nyla	Female	Looking for employment	/	/	
Fatoumata	Female	Looking for employment	/	/	
Naomi	Female	Centre	Assistant to the Director, Cook, Assistant Teacher		
Isabella	Female	Centre	Teacher Assistant		
Zoe	Female	Centre	Lead Teacher		

Appendix 2

Interview protocol

Childcare providers	Parents and primary caretakers
Language • How does language help literacy? • How does talking and listening help kids read and write? • How do you build kids' language? • What gets in the way of your helping kids build their language? • What resources would you love to have access to? • What resources would help you to do this more effectively? Literacy • What is your role in getting kids ready to read and write in school? • How do you help kids build their literacy skills? • What gets in the way of you doing these things? • What resources would you love to have access to? Communication • How do you currently communicate with parents? • What do you communicate about? • What gets in the way of communicating with parents • What does the ideal parent-provider relationship look like?	Language • How do you build kids' language? • How does language help literacy? • How do talking and listening help kids read and write? • What gets in the way of your helping kids build their language? • What resources would you love to have access to? • What resources would help you to do this more effectively? Literacy • What is your role in getting kids ready to read and write in school? • How do you help kids build their literacy skills? • What gets in the way of you doing these things? • What resources would you love to have access to? Communication • What is your childcare site's role in getting your child ready for school? • What does your childcare site do to communicate that information to you? • How do you currently communicate with your childcare provider? • What do you communicate about? • What gets in the way of communicating with your childcare provider? • What does the ideal parent provider relationship look like?