Cultural Mismatch in Honduran Garífuna Communities: The Role of Culture, Race, and Language in Schools

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The Garífuna are an Indigenous, Afro-Latino group in Honduras whose distinct cultural, ethnic, and linguistic background has been unacknowledged and frequently misunderstood on a societal level and, consequently, in the schools that serve them. This study argues for the utility of a cultural mismatch approach, one applied primarily to U.S. settings, but which can be extended fruitfully to the Latin American context generally, and for Garífuna populations specifically. Through a comparative case study of 2 Garífuna communities, this study examines student, teacher, and administrator attitudes and perceptions toward culture, race, and language. Then a corresponding analysis of practices within 2 divergent schools is offered: One setting illustrates how a cultural mismatch between students and educators plays a significant role in the formation of an irrelevant education; the second setting demonstrates how mutual respect, caring, and culturally embedded teaching practices result in a relevant pedagogy for Garífuna student.

Honduras is home to seven minority groups that deserve a culturally and linguistically appropriate education. Garífuna citizens, in particular, often find themselves excluded from relevant educational literature, discourse, and practice. Their distinct culture, language, and race are unacknowledged and frequently misunderstood on a societal level and, consequently, by teachers within these communities. Thus, their educational attainment and quality of instruction suffer.

In this article, I argue that, although the cultural mismatch approach has been primarily applied to U.S. settings, where the minority–majority educational gap persists, a similar explanation has
bearing in the Latin American context generally, and for Garífuna populations specifically. A relevant education for Garífuna students can only stem from an understanding and respect for their historical, cultural, and linguistic background. When educators have a nuanced understanding of their students, care for them as students and people, and hold high expectations, the outcome is often a meaningful and transformative education (Gay, 2000; Noddings, 1992). This type of pedagogy develops a sense of students’ connectivity to the content, which increases their self-concept, motivation, and, ultimately, academic achievement. Furthermore, by openly addressing issues of inequity and discrimination, students have opportunities to develop critical perspectives and analytical skills (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

To develop a better understanding of cultural mismatch across two contexts, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relation between cultural mismatch theory and the education of the Garífuna in Honduras?

RQ2: How do two Garífuna community schools compare in the way they address students’ cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds?

Through an examination of student, teacher, and administrator attitudes and perceptions toward culture, race, and language, as well as a corresponding analysis of practices within two divergent Garífuna community schools, I illustrate two opposing phenomena. In one setting, a cultural mismatch between students and teachers plays a significant role in the formation of an irrelevant education. Conversely, in a second setting, mutual respect, caring, and culturally embedded teaching practices result in a relevant pedagogy for Garífuna students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The cultural mismatch framework in the United States juxtaposes the culture of minority students to their predominantly White, middle-class teachers. Many studies look at sociolinguistic concepts, such as communication patterns of the home and the school (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1974; Philips, 1983), and target their criticism of the disconnect that exists between the home and school culture. As a result, dominant White values and standard English are positioned as superior, to the detriment of all other values and language varieties, which negatively impact minority students in schools. These hierarchies mirror sociopolitical realities that permeate school settings as they similarly impact educators who have grown up with these views. Thus, a “cultural conflict” or “cultural incongruence” between teachers and students may result in differential treatment of minority and majority students, as well as lowered expectations of minorities (Foley, 1991).

Although the term cultural mismatch has not readily been applied to international settings, many key elements of the concept have been discussed in the literature. On a macrolevel, the application of Western educational philosophies in Eastern and Southern contexts has been considered. Specifically, expatriate teachers’ views of English as a second language students in China (Dooley, 2001), the clash of communal values in Papua New Guinea and African Indigenous knowledge with Western bureaucracy and curriculum (Semali, 1999; Tivinarlik & Wanat, 2006), and local early childhood teacher’s implementation of Western-based curriculum and practices that diverge from Hindu values in postcolonial India (Gupta, 2008) all speak to local and global
cultural differences that impact educational outcomes. Yet, even when minority groups’ linguistic needs are taken into account, as in the case of a bilingual education program for the Australian Pitjantjatjara, a lack of consideration for the local sociocultural climate can lead to contentious school–community relations (Folds, 1989). Thus, issues related to cultural mismatch have been explored on a variety of levels and locations.

To lessen the negative impact of cultural mismatch or difference theory, scholars advocate for a breakdown and unlearning of mainstream perceptions related to social differences, especially those that negatively affect minority students (Nieto & Bode, 2008). One approach is to increase teacher sensitivity to their students’ cultures as a way of overcoming the skewed outcomes of minority students in the U.S. school system. It is argued that if teachers do not heighten their intercultural awareness, they will tend to teach solely through their cultural lens, and often in the same manner they were taught (Latham, 1999). However, the larger issue is not one that is directly concerned with the cultures of teachers; rather, it stresses the ability to see the world through multiple perspectives and teach in a way that acknowledges, respects, and also questions divergent views and beliefs. Conversely, teaching from a one-sided stance decreases students’ chances to connect to the content matter and to understand the complexities of a given topic.

Within the Honduran context, the dominant majority are Spanish-speaking Ladinos, who comprise the bulk of the teaching workforce. Few have had meaningful contact with the Garífuna people, let alone any other Indigenous groups. With Spanish as the official national language and the medium of textbooks, it becomes especially easy for teachers and school systems to disregard differences and teach about what they know and in the language in which they know it. Teacher training programs rarely address how to take cultural differences into account, as intercultural-bilingual education has yet to make a meaningful impact in Honduras, unlike nations with larger Indigenous populations such as Guatemala, Peru, or Bolivia (López & Küper, 2004).

Cultural mismatch can contribute to students’ lackluster academic performance. Gay (2000) stressed that “decontextualizing teaching and learning from the ethnicities and cultures of students minimizes the chances that their achievement potential will ever be fully realized” (p. 23). When minority students are unsuccessful in the academic arena, blame is often placed on the students for perceived deficiencies, whereas school policies and practices are viewed as sound and effective. Beyond the child, families are also held at fault for presumably failing to prepare or support their child’s academic achievement (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). These approaches take the focus off teachers, schools, and, most importantly, the sociopolitical context that position certain groups—with their knowledge, values, and languages—as better educated and prepared for school than others. From the cultural mismatch framework, a closer examination of societal beliefs, attitudes, and institutional policies are called into question as salient elements that impact student success.

Although the literature on cultural mismatch primarily focuses on the cultural backgrounds and beliefs of students and teachers, linguistic sensitivity is also a critical factor for teachers to address as they work with students whose home language is different from the dominant language. School policies and practices around language are largely driven by differing ideologies that fit within three frameworks elaborated by Ruiz (1984). The first framework—“language as

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1In some Central American countries, including Honduras, people of mixed Indigenous and Spanish backgrounds are referred to as Ladinos. This is not to be confused with the language of Sephardic Jews, which goes by the same name.
a problem”—labels any language, variety, or dialect outside the dominant, most powerful form as an obstacle for national integration and, ultimately, assimilation. Such a perspective promotes a monolingual instruction, thereby denying minority speakers the opportunity to develop their home language and effectively learn the dominant language. The language as a problem approach uses the dominant language as a tool for oppression by stripping minority speakers of their first language and home identity.

In the next framework—“language as a right”—one is allotted the freedom and choice of using their home language without discrimination because language is seen as a basic human right. This “middle ground” provides a safe space for native language use, but stops short of encouraging and supporting minority languages.

The final framework—“language as a resource”—treats all languages, regardless of their social and political status, as valuable and worthy of inclusion in the academic sphere, as well as in wider society. Minority and majority language speakers are encouraged and supported in developing both their first and second language so that they can become high-functioning bilinguals.

In Honduras, the Spanish language is most prominent in the education system. English ranks a close second and is a subject required of all students in Grades 7 through 9. Textbooks and instructions remain in the nation’s dominant language, as minority groups’ need for bilingual education often goes overlooked. Comparisons to neighboring Guatemala’s bilingual programs aimed at their Indigenous populations remain a distant reality for Honduran minority citizens. Only Spanish and English, therefore, are treated as valuable linguistic resources in national educational policies and practices.

Although sharing a common language and culture may result in increased understanding, cultural mismatch is not a direct outcome of students and teachers who come from different backgrounds. Furthermore, it does not seek to place fault on teachers’ beliefs and treatments of students. Cultural mismatch takes a macro-approach that links societal narratives of a minority group being viewed as “less than” majority groups, especially as it relates to education. It is couched in mainstream values and perceptions that dictate, often covertly, the ways in which teachers perceive the groups with whom they work, the absence or presence of caring for students, and the academic expectations they hold for them.

Although cultural mismatch may help explain why certain groups struggle in schools, it does not apply to all minority populations across contexts. According to Ogbu (1992), “minority status involves complex realities that affect the relationship between the culture and language of the minority and those of the dominant groups and thereby influence the school adjustment and learning of the minority” (p. 8). In other words, cultural mismatch disproportionately affects groups that have a lower societal position, as those who hold a favorable status are able to succeed, despite cultural and linguistic differences. This adds a layer of complexity to the issue, taking the national cross-cultural relationships and hierarchies into account. To illustrate this phenomenon, Ogbu provided the example of Koreans who tend to do poorly in Japan where they were forced laborers, as opposed to the United States where they have a less contentious history. In this case, similarities in cultural and linguistic features play a less consequential role than the historical position of the group. In the Honduran context, Garífuna are perceived and often treated as second-class citizens, who have minimal interaction with the majority. Their societal positioning, therefore, further compounds the cultural mismatch prevalent within many schools in Garífuna communities.
GARÍFUNA IN HONDURAS

The Garífuna, also referred to as Garínagu and Black Caribs, trace their heritage back to Western Africa and the island of St. Vincent. In Honduras, the Garífuna fall within two labels: Indigenous and Afro-Latino. Although their roots do not stem from Honduras, they have resided in the country prior to its independence. Currently, Garífuna can be found in primarily homogeneous villages along the northern coast of Central America in Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Many have also relocated to the United States, with large concentrations based in New York City, New Orleans, and Los Angeles.

Approximately 131,000 Garífuna reside in the 40 Honduran coastal settlements that span the Caribbean Sea. They comprise the largest absolute number of Garífuna in Central America and account for 2% of the national population, the largest minority group followed by the Lenca and Miskito Indians (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2001). Throughout their time in Honduras, the Garífuna have been held and nearly pushed to the fringes of the nation and, therefore, live in extreme poverty. Many rely on remittances from family members living and working abroad, mostly in the United States.

Throughout their travels across continents, the Garífuna have maintained, to varying degrees, their distinct language, also called Garífuna. It is made up of a mix of Native American, West African, and European grammatical and vocabulary structures. Although the language has been predominantly an oral one, manuscripts such as the Bible, dictionaries, poems, and grammar books have recently been scripted, although they are not readily available. In many communities, Garífuna is widely spoken and is the initial language children learn, as they often have their first significant exposure to Spanish upon entering school.

Nationally, Garífuna face exploitation for their touristic appeal (Kirtsoglou & Theodossopoulos, 2004). Advertisements highlight their unique music, dance, and typical foods. However, they receive little compensation compared to the tourism companies that promote and profit from their distinct characteristics to outsiders. Furthermore, the nation turns their back to any meaningful and sustainable incorporation of Garífuna into the labor force. Only a small percentage of Garífuna have managed to overcome the exclusion and racism to acquire professional employment.

Garífuna community schools may only go through third grade; however, most span through sixth grade. Many Garífuna leave school early on, whereas others go on to attain a ninth-grade diploma, which increases their chances of being granted permission to immigrate to the United States. The teachers vary from one setting to the next. They range from Ladinos who live in neighboring cities, to local Garífuna teachers. Certain teachers speak the Garífuna language, others understand basic phrases, but many have no knowledge of the language at all.

METHOD

The qualitative data for this comparative case study were gathered during my time spent living in two Garífuna communities during the summer of 2003. In the first community, Wagai2, I resided

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2Both community names are pseudonyms.
with a Garífuna family where I participated in many of the daily tasks, such as cooking and washing clothes. In the second community, Hayuna, I lived in the neighboring community and commuted to the school in a dugout canoe. As an outsider, I was given considerable access to the classrooms, educators, and students. No request for an observation or interview was ever turned down. My status as a White, North American woman likely played a large role in the treatment I received throughout my time in both villages. Specifically, it impacted how participants perceived me, responded to my questions, and what I was able to learn about cultural mismatch.

Data Sources

The data were primarily collected through direct and participant observations, interviews, and focus groups. I spent approximately 3 weeks in each community. In the mornings, I observed the elementary school classes; in the afternoons, I taught English to the students in Grades 7 through 9, as per the request of the administrators. To get an emic perspective, I also conducted semiformal and informal interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and parents (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). Following a brief introduction from the school directors, I individually approached teachers to set up interviews, to which all those approached had agreed to participate at both sites. I also invited the students in Grades 7 through 9 to talk with me after I had gotten to know them through the English classes. Table 1 describes the number of participants at each site, their ethnicities, and genders.

The interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes and took place on school grounds, either inside classrooms or on the schoolyard, and before or after school or during recess. Occasionally, I audiotaped these conversations, but more often I took notes during or after the discussions.

Focus groups were held with students in the upper grades. Listening to the perspectives of students was important: Their voices are often overlooked in the literature regarding the quality of schooling, yet they reveal experiences that differ from educators and that which is observed by the researcher (Howard, 2001). I conducted all the interviews and focus groups in Spanish and translated them into English. Due to space issues, the quotes within this article appear in English. Because the purpose of this research is to understand people’s ideas and beliefs (as opposed to analyze their discourse), the translations are adequate in terms of meeting the study’s aim. Although Garífuna was the native language of most students and parents, as well as some teachers, Spanish was the only language the interviewees and I had in common. Although the participants were verbally fluent in Spanish, their responses might have been more elaborate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Wagai</th>
<th>Hayuna</th>
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<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>1 Ladino man</td>
<td>1 Garífuna man</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>4 Ladino women, 1 Ladino- Garífuna woman, 1 Ladino man, and 1 Garífuna man</td>
<td>4 Garífuna women and 3 Garífuna men</td>
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<td>Students</td>
<td>6 Garífuna girls and 5 Garífuna boys: Grades 7–9</td>
<td>5 Garífuna girls and 5 Garífuna boys: Grades 7–9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>3 Garífuna women and 1 Garífuna man</td>
<td>2 Garífuna women</td>
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had they been given the opportunity to express themselves in their home language. I analyzed the data by going through the interview and observation notes to determine reoccurring themes, which were subsequently coded and compared across the two school settings (Maxwell, 1996).

**Settings**

**Community of Wagai.** Wagai is an isolated Garífuna community located a few miles from the closest city, which is accessible by a 45-minute bus ride. With a population of 3,000, the overwhelmingly homogenous community (95% Garífuna) consists of a one-lane dirt road, cement houses, a dance hall, church, hotel, an assortment of pulperías (stands where snacks and home items are sold), and the school, which was rebuilt in 1996. Due to the devastation that the community encountered in 1998 from Hurricane Mitch, most residents still lack running water and reliable electricity.

The pale green school consists of two parallel buildings demarcated by a Pepsi sign that says “Centro Basico de Wagai.” This model school holds the distinction of being the nation’s only rural centro basico (Grades 1–9). The elementary classes consist primarily of Garífuna students, but the seventh through ninth grades bring a more heterogeneous group of students, as Ladinos from neighboring rural communities commute to the school. Approximately 30% of students in Grades 7 through 9 are Ladino; the Garífuna, therefore, remain the majority. The sole administrator, a Ladino man, resides in the community. Ten of the 12 teachers are Ladino, 1 is Garífuna, and 1 teacher is multiracial (Garífuna & Ladino). All the teachers live in the neighboring city and commute to the school by public bus. The infrequent bus service drastically reduces the school day from the 5-hour national norm to 3½-hour days. In the case of Wagai, teaching is a commuter profession, which leads to brief stints in the community and minimal contact with parents and community members, resulting in a lack understanding of local realities (Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005).

Once students have completed the ninth grade, they either have to move to the city to study for a professional career or seek employment opportunities. Thus, very few professionals reside in the community. Men often leave to work in the fishing trade, and women remain to take care of household responsibilities and raise children.

**Community of Hayuna.** Hayuna, a completely homogenous Garífuna community located in the midst of a United Nations designated rainforest protection zone, is home to about 600 people. The nearest city can be reached by boat or plane. Thus, most people rarely leave the village or its surrounding area. The community consists of a church, community center, pulperías, and the school, which has a basketball court in the back. Running water and electricity do not exist, except for a small percentage of individuals who can afford generators or solar panels.

The school consists of three buildings: one for administration, a long building with three classrooms, and a separate hall for the kindergarten class. The school day lasts 5 hour. Until recently, the school housed kindergarten through Grade 6, but now the Systema de Aprezendaaje Tutorial for Grades 7 through 9 is also a part of the school. The all Garífuna staff is made up of 2 administrators, 10 teachers, and 3 Systema de Aprezendaaje Tutorial tutors, the majority of whom reside in the community or in a community within walking distance. The school was designated a model bilingual school for its use of Spanish and Garífuna.
The *Systema de Aprezendaje Tutorial* program originated 20 years ago in Colombia and, due to its success, spread throughout Latin America. The program aims to make education relevant by highlighting the importance of agriculture in rural communities so that students do not view leaving their community for the city as their only option for economic success. Those students who opt out of *Systema de Aprezendaje Tutorial* and choose to continue to study in a traditional school must cross the lagoon to a neighboring community to attend Grades 7 through 9. Students who wish to pursue career training following the ninth grade must move to the city for training. Many return to their home community to work as teachers, doctors, priests, mechanics, and nurses.

**FINDINGS**

Through examples from Wagai and Hayuna, I show how a mutual cultural understanding between teachers and students can play a role in creating a positive learning environment. Similarly, I use counterexamples to illustrate how a cultural mismatch leads to contentious student–teacher relationships and low levels of learning. To begin, I consider the attitudes and beliefs students, teachers, administrators, and parents hold about culture, race, and language within the schools. I then turn to practices and teaching styles. Finally, there is an analysis beyond the walls of the schools that focuses on their relationship with the Garífuna communities they serve.

**Beliefs and Attitudes About Race**

Educators from both Hayuna and Wagai discussed race as an insignificant issue that has little to no effect on daily school life. On the other hand, students in Wagai (where racial diversity was more prominent) identified race and racism as burning issues that greatly affected teachers’ treatment of students. They spoke passionately about examples of unjust treatment of Garífuna students and called for fair treatment based on equality among all human beings. Students from Hayuna (a racially homogeneous school) spoke openly about racism outside of their community, but had little to say about its role in school.

**Teacher perspectives.** During my interviews, teachers and administrators took a wide range of approaches to the topic of their cultural and racial beliefs. In Wagai, the director expressed his feelings on the matter:

The Garífuna really don’t like us [Ladinos]. But at the same time I feel like the community has accepted and cares for me. I show my dedication to the school by working 12-hour days. As far as racism, in this school it’s prohibited to speak about it. They just can’t talk about it, I don’t allow it!

By forbidding the topic of racism, the director attempts to keep it out of the school and out of existence. This “colormute” (Pollack, 2004) method of ignoring racial issues has the potential for severe consequences, as one racially charged event may cause a “blow up” due to the frustration from keeping silent on the matter. Although he attempts to make racism a non-issue, it only serves to ignore or hide problems addressed later in this article.

Another approach used by a Ladino teacher from Wagai was that of difference, yet within equality of opportunity:
Tatyana Kleyn (TK): Do you think there’s racism in the country?
Teacher: No, because everyone has the same opportunity to study.
TK: Is there a difference between the Garífuna and Ladino students?
Teacher: The Lados are different from the Blacks. You can trust them, they are more responsible. If you ask the Garífuna where their homework is they shrug their shoulders. They come to school unprepared.

The teacher’s comments on trusting Lados were demonstrated in the school by the responsibilities certain students were given. Lados, for example, ran the school store and helped the teachers set up bulletin boards after school. Teachers trusted, privileged, and preferred to work with Lados. Her point about equal opportunity does not ensure equal schools, relevant learning, adequate materials, or informed teachers. Furthermore, giving people the same opportunities and resources when they are on disparate levels only serves to perpetuate inequality. Conversely, providing those who are behind with additional opportunities and resources will eventually level the playing field, thereby providing equity over equality.

Finally, teachers and administrators discussed the relationship between students and teachers. Two opposing perspectives that represent the school’s general beliefs came from Wagai and Hayuna:

- The teachers have no special training [working with minority students]. I am looking to find Garífuna teachers who are conscious of differences so that the teaching styles will change. The teachers now don’t like to work, there are days they just don’t show up, they’re not interested or invested in the community. (School director, Wagai)
- All students are motivated because we think education is the key to development. The kids know that teachers like to work with kids and want to be involved. There is a sense of confianza [trust] between them. (Third-grade teacher, Hayuna)

The strength of student–teacher relationships speaks to cultural understanding in Hayuna and cross-cultural misunderstanding in the case of Wagai. Attitudes toward the cultural groups with whom teachers work inevitably affect their motivation and desire to work with their students. In turn, the students view their teachers as either invested or disengaged from their learning.

**Student perspectives.** Whereas administrators and teachers insisted racism did not exist or forbade it, students easily recognized and named it. An eighth-grade student from Wagai spoke about racism in terms of a testing incident that took place in the school the prior year:

- TK: Do you think there’s racism in the school?
  Student: Oh yes.
- TK: Can you give me an example?
  Student: Well, last year three Lado and five Garífuna students failed an exam and had to take a recuperation exam to pass. But the Lado students didn’t have to take the exam and were promoted to the next grade while the Garífuna students still had to take it.
- TK: Did anyone tell the director?
  Student: Yes, but nothing was ever really done about it.

This inaction and disregard of the event relates to the director’s stance on issues of race or racism: a ban on the topic.
Students were able to name multiple instances of racism by way of differential treatment along racial lines. In the following excerpt from a focus group with four Garífuna students in Wagai, the girls reiterated how they saw their teacher’s treatment of Ladinos opposed to Garífunas:

Student 1: The teachers prefer the Ladinos, but we are all supposed to be equal regardless of color.
Student 2: When we do the same quality of work they prefer theirs to ours.
Student 3: There are problems between the two groups. We fight because they don’t like us. It’s strange because they come to the same school as us, but they fight with us.
Student 4: They only work together.

TK: How can the situation be improved?
Student 2: The teachers can put us in groups together.
Student 4: Sometimes we may know something they don’t know so we can teach them.

Although racism is supposedly “never discussed” at the school, the students can see it and describe it in a very clear manner. Their voices reveal “the great challenges and even deep pain young people feel when schools are unresponsive, cold places” (Nieto, 1994, p. 420). However, they speak about a sense of hope in rectifying the relationships with their Ladino peers through a mutual sharing and learning. However, the perspective brought forward by these students in Wagai drastically differs from the teachers and administration, as the school community encompasses diverging perspectives on racism. It is as if the teachers, director, and students are living in completely separate worlds.

Like race, language too can act as a barrier to student–teacher relationships and education, when it is misunderstood. The following section looks at how languages are perceived and utilized across the two schools.

Beliefs and Attitudes About Language

Regardless of the language philosophy of the model bilingual school in Hayuna and monolingual school in Wagai, three languages played prominent roles in daily interactions and instruction: Spanish, Garífuna, and English. Spanish is the language of the textbooks and all instruction in Wagai. In Hayuna, teachers used Spanish as the primary academic language, but occasionally interject Garífuna as a means of clarification or explanation of a concept with which students may experience difficulty in Spanish. Thus, Garífuna was never used to teach lessons in their entirety, but as a “backup” to ensure understanding. The students from both schools used Garífuna among each other, both within and outside of the classroom. English is taught in Grades 7 through 9 as mandated by the Honduran government.

Whereas Wagai has an abundance of Garífunas who visit the village from the U.S. for extended durations and are fluent in English, the school’s English teachers have little knowledge of the language. They mainly teach the language by writing words on the board from the dictionary that students must copy. The multilingual strengths of the community are never brought into the school. A greater understanding and awareness of the community would enable collaboration, especially with the English, and even Garífuna, language.

Teacher perspectives. The monolingual elementary school teachers in Wagai take two positions on their students’ home language. First, they ignore it. During my time observing
in classrooms, I never saw a student punished or reprimanded for speaking Garífuna during class, nor did I ever witness a student acknowledged for speaking it. Teachers turned away and waited for Spanish to resume before communicating with students. Second, teachers viewed the Garífuna language as a problem or barrier to learning. When I spoke with teachers about their perceptions of students’ linguistic abilities, they said the following:

Garífuna students’ level compared with Ladinos is very low because of culture and language. (First-grade teacher, Wagai).

They don’t come to school prepared. Some don’t even know Spanish, only Garífuna. (Second-grade teacher, Wagai).

In Hayuna, where all the teachers are Garífuna or Spanish bilinguals, there exists a separation of the home and school language:

I allow them to use Garífuna in the classroom. How can we tell them not to use it, it’s their mother tongue. But they have to learn Spanish too. (Fifth-grade teacher, Hayuna).

Most students speak only Garífuna at home so at school they speak Spanish. This way when they go to the city they won’t be laughed at by Ladinos and can ask for what they want. (First-grade teacher, Hayuna).

The approaches and attitudes of the teachers in the two schools differ, but their use of both the languages is quite similar, except for the occasional use of Garífuna for the purpose of clarification or explanation in Hayuna. The teachers in Wagai perceive the home language as a problem and as a reason for their students’ perceived lack of preparation to learn the basic concepts, as described by the second-grade teacher who equates ability to learn with Spanish proficiency. This perception directly contradicts with second-language acquisition theories that stress the development of one’s native language and correlate the level of one’s first language to their second (Cummins, 1987). Therefore, speaking (as well as reading and writing) Garífuna would actually support a child’s Spanish proficiency, rather than impede it.

The teachers in Hayuna acknowledged that the Garífuna language plays an important role in the community and home, but felt the school should require the development of the academic and national language. They strongly believed in providing students with adequate instruction in Spanish, so if they left the community, they could easily communicate with Spanish speakers. The first-grade teacher stated that learning Spanish was necessary for communication, opportunity, dignity, and a greater sense of self-worth. Perceptions of Ladinos as lacking acceptance and respect for the Garífuna language were also important motivating factors for teachers in Hayuna. These reasons serve as a rationale for making Spanish a major part of the school day. However, it is important to note that not a single teacher in Hayuna spoke about the Garífuna language as a problem or setback to learning, as was the case in Wagai. Thus, their understanding of bilingualism within the community allows them to see both languages as resources for the home and school settings. The continuum of views of students’ emergent bilingualism places the Wagai teachers at a “language as problem” stance, whereas in Hayuna, teachers see “language as a right,” where each has its own designated use (Ruiz, 1984). Neither setting, however, has fully embraced students’ developing linguistic repertoires to the degree that they are supporting bilingualism and biliteracy.
Student perspectives. Throughout their academic careers, students primarily received instruction in Spanish, and most had grown accustomed to the separation of languages. Some even found it difficult to discuss academic concepts in Garífuna and, therefore, preferred Spanish in the school setting. In Wagai, students used Garífuna for two reasons. First, it surfaced as a tool for students to communicate with one another before, during, and after class. Second, students used it as a means of challenge or resistance. The following examples illustrate this trend:

TK: Do students use Garífuna in school?
Student: I try to speak Spanish when teachers are around, but some do use Garífuna around teachers to talk about them or even curse.

A disagreement between an eighth-grade student and her teacher led to the student’s use of the Garífuna language as a tool for resistance:

Teacher: It’s good to have a technical career. You can have a business that the Ladinos can’t. For example, you can sell pan de coco [coconut bread].
Student: (makes a face) I hate pan de coco!
Teacher: But you can make it.
Student: Yuck! No, I can’t . . . Oh my God. [She starts yelling at the teacher in Garífuna]
Teacher: Well, it was just an idea. Look, if you’re insulting me I don’t understand you.

Coconut bread is a typical Garífuna food, which the teacher assumed students enjoyed, or at least knew how to make. This demonstrates a superficial and stereotypical way to include students’ backgrounds, as the reaction from the student illustrates. The students in Wagai figured out how to use their language as a mechanism of power over the monolingual system that positions the Garífuna language as inferior to Spanish. Thus, the outside views of the language contrast with the Garífuna view of their language as a tool of resistance to Spanish hegemony and false cultural assumptions held in mainstream society.

Teachers’ perceptions about students from minority backgrounds tend to come across in their pedagogy. The next section takes a closer look at what happens in classrooms to either reinforce mainstream views about Garífuna or contradicts negative stereotypes to provide students with valuable learning opportunities.

Practices: Teaching Styles

Although teachers at both sites were equipped with identical textbooks, the manner in which they taught their students differed. Students at the same grade level were expected to read simple words in Wagai and multisyllabic words and complex sentences in Hayuna. The instruction at both sites, however, took the form of rote memorization and repetition, to varying degrees. Teachers also tried to bring in the home culture, but this ranged from stereotypical examples in Wagai, to relevant and meaningful examples that engaged students in Hayuna.

Expectations. Although rote instruction has a limited effect on student learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999), it was the primary method of reading instruction in the early grades. In Wagai, the technique was combined with high levels of repetition. The following example
illustrates the manner in which a first-grade teacher attempted to teach students a combination of sounds, words, and then a sentence:

Students repeated *ma* combination 10 times, then each student is called on individually. Students repeat *mama* 20 times and then individually, then *mi mama me ama* (my mother loves me) 17 times. When their voices start dying down the teacher threatens to take away recess.

In Hayuna, rote learning was also a method used for first-graders learning to read. However, instead of staying at their desks like the students in both classes in Wagai, the students sat on the floor and went over vowel sounds with the teacher. They read in unison from a long list of words displayed around the room. Combinations, for instance, consisted of *ma-mi-mu-mo-me*, *mima-amo-memo-mema*, and *mi mama me ama*. There are 34 such combinations. Usually, each combination was recited once, unless the class was too quiet in reading or misread a section. Of the entire list, some of the more complicated words that students were expected to read included *maquina*, *pescado*, and *palacio*. As the words got more difficult, a few voices read the words or sentences, and the rest of the class repeated after their peers.

In both examples, the students read combinations, words, or sentences aloud, but the frequency of the repetition varied drastically. I asked a few students to read the words they repeated so many times in Wagai, and they were unable read them back. The teacher in Hayuna demonstrated higher expectations by asking students to read sentences and multisyllabic words on a daily basis. Although only a few of the first-graders mastered the words, it sets a tone of the level of learning expected.

*Culturally (ir)relevant instruction.* The national curriculum, as dictated by the government-issued textbooks, allows for little inclusion of the Garífuna culture. Teachers who wished to do this had to go beyond the text and gear lessons around their understanding of Garífuna realities. Although many teachers attempted to do this in the two schools, student impact varied.

In Wagai, a Ladino teacher was talking about the new sewing machines. She explained that they have pedals that cause the machine to slow down and speed up and then related it to punta dancing, a popular form of dance originated by the Garífuna. Another teacher also referred to punta dancing during gym class as she tried to encourage the students to bend lower in their squats.

Although these teachers attempted to make connections to the Garífuna culture, they only managed to do so in a very superficial, and even stereotypical, sort of way that demonstrated the mismatch between themselves and their students. These examples are in direct contrast to culturally relevant teaching that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18). Their focus correlates to the mainstream Honduran perception of the Garífuna culture as an overly simplistic one that revolves around dance and food.

Throughout my time in Hayuna, I observed two examples of relevant pedagogy that related to student’s lives and engaged them from start to finish:

[Systema de Aprezendaqe Tutorial] students came with their books and most with their homework completed. They discussed plants and what helps them grow. Most students actively participated in the discussion. The teacher used the example of mangos in the community that are still green. The
class then began to conduct an experiment looking at different plants that are given more or less of certain nutrients to grow.

All the third-grade students were instructed to take out their notebook, go outside for 10 minutes, and draw something from their surroundings. Some drew the school, their house, plants, and so forth. Once they came back with their drawings, they described them to the class. Then they wrote a story about it.

The first example comes from a Systema de Aprendizaje Tutorial class that has a curriculum crafted around themes relevant to rural life. Because Systema de Aprendizaje Tutorial is an international program, the language of instruction is Spanish. However, although the teacher did not use the Garífuna language, he managed to utilize a relevant aspect of culture with which students are familiar, as many work in agriculture or help grow food for their families. Thus, home language is not a necessity in creating culturally relevant lessons; although it may add a different perspective, it can be done in its absence.

The second example showed the teacher using the local environment to pull students into the lesson. The students’ pictures acted as a starting point for a story that began with the reality of the students, but had the potential to expand outward. In this way, the teacher initiated the activity from the local level, but did not stay there.

Although what occurs in classrooms is a key part of the education process, the way a school is perceived—that is, as either an integral or contentious part of the community—greatly impacts the learning that takes places. The next section investigates the connections between the schools and their communities.

School–Community Relations

The relation between the school and its community is critical in the education of children in a holistic manner. Only a mutual partnership and understanding between the two entities can result in a supportive environment that maximizes learning. To create this level of collaboration, educators must have an understanding of students’ home cultures. The complexities of a home–school partnership became evident in the diverging situations that occurred around milk in the two communities.

In Wagai, students who bring a cup with them to school are provided with federally funded milk. Only a small percentage of the students remember or choose to bring a cup to school. Thus, many students are forced to watch a few of their peers drink milk. In the class of 12 students I was observing, only 2 Ladino and 1 Garífuna student brought in cups. The following was how the teacher reprimanded the remaining 9 students:

Only 3 of you brought your glasses. You don’t have cups at home? You know some children eat only one tortilla for breakfast. . . . This milk has more vitamins than the one they sell in the pulperia; that is pure water.

The parents, on the other hand, sternly warn their children not to drink the milk from school because they have heard that it is spoiled and it will make them ill. They stress that they are allowed to drink milk only at home.

The situation in Hayuna differs drastically. The school director described their approach:
TK: How are parents involved in the school?
School director: We have meetings on Fridays and many parents come. We share what we are doing and ask for their opinions. They are also invited to participate. We discuss learning and economics. This week we will receive the monthly dairy products. The parents and teachers will work together to sort them out and distribute them throughout the community. These nutrients will help our students be well fed and ready to learn as they develop physically and mentally.

Although both schools distribute milk, the manner in which it is perceived by parents varies significantly. In the case of Wagai, students receive conflicting messages from home and school. The teacher took it one step further as she implied that what pertains to the community is inferior. Such messages on both sides illustrate distrust between the community and school. Conversely, the parents in Hayuna take an active role in the distribution of dairy products, which forges an alliance between the community and school. Such a bond allows for the school to bring in parents for parent–teacher conferences and even adult literacy classes on a regular basis. Both of these relationships demonstrate the level of cultural understanding between the teachers, administrators, and the parents within the community and how that affects students and the learning process.

DISCUSSION

Cultural mismatch, a concept that prevails in the United States, is also quite salient in Garífuna settings in Honduras. Teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and practices are perceived by students as either respectful and affirming, or harmful and demeaning. When a cultural mismatch is present, the danger lies in the increased potential for academic failure and life-long opportunities. However, this does not have to be the case if educators work against the grain of larger sociopolitical influences to understand, advocate for, and incorporate their students’ realities into the classroom.

Although the two sites presented here resembled one another in a variety of ways, the cultural understandings that exist across and within the members of the school community resulted in decidedly different learning environments. In Wagai, the teachers lacked an in-depth understanding of their students’ cultural, racial, and linguistic background. In Hayuna, the teacher–student co-ethnicity has made it easier for the educators to better understand their students and the core elements of the Garífuna culture. However, this match does not automatically ensure a culturally relevant education, as many individuals from non-dominant groups are formally educated within a mainstream framework, so much so that some may experience internalized oppression and perpetuate stereotypical beliefs and lowered expectations in their teaching (Nieto, 1998). However, in the case of Hayuna, the teachers were products of the local Hayuna schools, which are geographically isolated; as a result, they may have been more protected from negative external beliefs. The combination of insulation and shared backgrounds likely influenced their sense of cultural understanding and the caring they exhibited, which emerged through their attitudes, beliefs, and relevant teaching practices and, which, in turn, served to motivate students. Thus, the way culture is incorporated (implicitly or explicitly) to either improve or impede learning often plays a significant role in academic success, precisely the outcome hindered by cultural mismatch.
When cultural mismatch is present, student learning can be stifled on various levels. It is bound in systems that work to perpetuate local and national hierarchies to the benefit of the dominant group. Accordingly, Gay (2000) argued for an approach where “teaching is anchored in caring, commitment, cultural competence, and an understanding that school performance takes place within a complex sociocultural ecology and is filtered through cultural screens that both students and teachers bring to the classroom” (p. 70). Therefore, although cultural mismatch is prevalent both in the U.S. and Garífuna communities in Honduras, educators can counter this reality through understandings related to their students directly, as well as those of larger societal systems that work to maintain the cultural mismatch, rather than create a relevant and powerful education for all students.

Looking ahead, one must think about how teachers can use the culturally relevant knowledge to make education for Garífuna liberatory and transformative. To this we can look to Paulo Freire (1970), who advocated “education for liberation,” called concientización. Freire stressed that education for Indigenous groups who suffered through the colonization of their land, language, and culture should not reproduce the colonizer–colonized relationship. To counter such possibilities (and realities), the relationship between the student and teacher should be one of mutual learning and teaching, rather than the unwavering role of the teacher as possessor of knowledge and the student as the receptacle of it. He proposed a problem-posing method to education where dialogue concerning the reality of the learners, followed by reflection and appropriate action, leads to transformation and liberation for students.

**Implications**

In an effort to eradicate cultural mismatch, scholars provide a range of suggestions. First, teachers must feel comfortable and grounded in their own cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, as it is very difficult to learn about others before developing a solid foundation of self (Bartolome & Trueba, 2000). A priority is also placed on each teacher’s cross-cultural understanding, including the historical and cultural aspects of their students’ backgrounds.

To move toward a culturally relevant education for Garífuna students across Honduras, I provide a range of recommendations, based on this study’s findings, for teacher training institutes, schools, and educators. All students training to be teachers should learn about the Garífuna, as well as other minority groups, and how to include and teach these populations in their instruction. This would not only include teachers who plan to work in Garífuna communities, but also those who will teach Ladino students. This would help ensure that all students better understand the nation’s diversity as they unravel their own misperceptions and stereotypes that perpetuate hierarchies.

Schools with Garífuna populations should review their curriculum and consider meaningful ways to incorporate Garífuna culture, as well as spaces for open discussions related to areas of inequities students may experience in and out of school. In addition, schools can think about the implicit and explicit messages students receive about the Garífuna language and whether it is permitted or dissuaded. Ways to include and build on students’ home language, to the extent possible, should be included in classroom practices. On the individual level, teachers need to critically examine and confront their own beliefs that may negatively affect Garífuna students, as well as how they contribute to or combat stereotyping. In the classroom, teachers should
observe and talk with Garífuna students about their perceptions of schooling, taking the students’ perspectives into account to improve their education. Spending time in the school community and speaking to family members, with the goal of improving understanding and collaboration, can improve relationships, build trust, and serve to improve students’ overall education.

Clearly, changing the education of Garífuna students involves transformation at many levels. The education system cannot work alone in countering mainstream societal beliefs and hierarchies. Nevertheless, educators from all backgrounds have the power to influence change, starting at the local level and gradually working their way up from there.

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