Nobody said it would be easy: ethnolinguistic group challenges to bilingual and multicultural education in New York City

Tatyana Kleyna* and Sharon Adelman Reyesb

aDepartment of Childhood Education, City College of New York, 160 Convent Ave., NAC 6/207B, New York, NY 10031, USA; bDiversityLearningK12, P.O. Box 19790, Portland, OR 97280, USA.

(Received 24 March 2010; final version received 3 July 2010)

New York City sets itself apart from many locations in the USA due to its citizens’ unparalleled diversity. The degree to which schools either build upon or suppress the backgrounds of their linguistically and culturally diverse students is dependent on the degree to which they can provide an education that is both bilingual and multicultural. This qualitative study considers the challenges to teaching bilingually and multiculturally for Chinese, Haitian Creole, Russian, and Spanish bilingual teachers in New York City. The study considers the challenges specific to each ethnolinguistic group, which are based in their cultural ideologies, transnational histories, immigration experiences, and views of US schools.

Keywords: bilingual education; multicultural education; New York City; bilingual teachers

Introduction

New York City (NYC) has been referred to as the crossroads of the world, bringing together people from different cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds, to name only a few of the many social and human differences encompassed by the city’s residents. The schools within the city mirror this extreme diversity, albeit in mostly segregated enclaves. The ways in which students’ languages and cultures are either brought into or kept out of school programming and instruction can either strengthen or diminish the unparalleled diversity of NYC. This paper argues that bilingual education and multicultural education are both equally important for students of all ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Yet, in NYC, significant challenges stand in the way of the implementation of each due to a combination of group-specific ethnolinguistic ideologies as well as policies that negatively impact all groups.

Bilingual and multicultural education are two fields that came into being to address the increasing diversity of US schools, as this diversity has been largely suppressed due to sociocultural, political, and economic forces that favor the dominant group while positioning everyone else as inferior or ‘other’ (Bennett 2001; Nieto 2002). The nation’s history has thus forged an uphill path towards the creation of linguistically and culturally inclusive classrooms. In spite of the range of languages and cultures present in NYC, there are many obstacles to incorporating them in the
creation of an education that is both bilingual and multicultural. This collective case study of bilingual teachers from Chinese, Haitian Creole, Russian, and Spanish ethnolinguistic groups aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What challenges to the implementation of bilingual and multicultural education are unique to specific ethnolinguistic groups in New York City?
- Which challenges can be met through initiatives at the local (site-based) and cultural level, and which challenges are best addressed through policy reform?

**Literature review**

Although public education in the US has been referred to as the ‘great equalizer’, schools have generally done more to maintain and reproduce systemic inequalities than eradicate them (Anyon 1981; Oakes 1985). Traditionally marginalized groups, including immigrants, students of color, and those of lower socioeconomic status have not reaped the benefits of the nation’s education system to the degree of those in the majority (Nieto and Bode 2008). This phenomenon has been attributed, at least in part, to culturally irrelevant practices (Gay 2000). Students outside of the dominant group have been perceived as deficient, and they often find their experiences and realities excluded from many facets of their education. This history illustrates that as a nation ‘we do not know how to educate a diverse population well’ (Sleeter 2005, 5). However, studies have shed light on strategies and approaches that lead to better outcomes for students who typically fall in the bottom half of the so-called ‘achievement gap’. The common denominator lies in the affirmation of their identities, which encompasses culture, race, and language, to name a few factors, as all are salient aspects of schooling (Ladson-Billings 1994; Nieto 2002; Noguera 2001).

Multicultural education emerged during the 1950s and 1960s, as the Civil Rights movement gained momentum, to provide equal opportunities for racial and ethnic minority groups (Spring 2000). Its initial focus on race and culture has broadened over the subsequent decades to include socioeconomic class, gender, language, immigration, dis/abilities, and, by the 1990s, sexual orientation (Ramsey 2004). This expansion has led Ladson-Billings (2004) to question if one phenomenon can encompass all these areas, which intersect yet compete for political attention, funding, and representation. Nevertheless, if multicultural education is regarded as a philosophy and a process, it may indeed embrace all facets of difference under the umbrella of social justice and academic achievement.

Definitions of multicultural education differ in the aims and boundaries of the concept (Banks 2001). Multicultural education is often perceived in relation to the education of racial, linguistic, and cultural minority students rather than as a philosophical approach to education for students of all backgrounds that increases their academic achievement while creating an equitable and just environment (Bennet 1999; Gay 1994; Nieto 1999). For the purpose of this study, we adopt the following definition from Nieto (2002, 29–30):

Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of
discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates the schools' curriculum and instructional strategies as well as interactions among teachers, students, and families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning.

Bilingual education has existed for over 200 years in the US. Its roots date back to German bilingual education, which was eradicated in response to the prevalent xenophobic and anti-German attitudes following WWII (Crawford 2008). However, this educational model was not formally acknowledged until the Bilingual Education Act of 1968. Since that time, bilingual education has faced a great deal of ‘ideological drama’ reflective of the nation’s changing social, political, and economic climates (Moran and Hakuta 1995).

While multicultural education is broad in scope, relevant to entire school communities, bilingual education is more narrowly defined (Nieto and Bode 2008, 245) as:

... an educational program that involves the use of two languages of instruction at some point in a student’s school career. ... The cultures associated with both the native language and English are generally part of the curriculum as well. This approach, sometimes called bilingual/bicultural education, is based on the premise that the language and culture children bring to school are assets that must be used in their education.

When it comes to the implementation of bilingual and multicultural education, each field faces a series of challenges, most of which reflect political opposition or resistance to diversity (Crawford 2008). States with significant populations of emergent bilingual students have been moving away from supporting and incorporating their home languages in the classroom. For instance, California, Massachusetts, and Arizona have passed legislation that bans bilingual education programs in public schools (some bilingual programs have continued in those states though overall numbers have dramatically diminished).

Beyond these explicit policies, there are implicit policies or practices put in place to deter bilingual education programs from developing or continuing. These less evident, yet often equally harmful, policies revolve around standardized testing and the language(s) of the tests, which implicitly determine the language(s) of programming and instruction (Menken 2008; Valenzuela 2004). There are also ground level challenges in the form of human and material resources necessary to support bilingual education. The availability of teachers who are both bilingual, biliterate, and certified as bilingual teachers has been an obstacle in certain states and for specific languages (García and Trubek 1999). A dearth of academic materials to support development in the language other than English has stood in the way of providing access to grade level content and helping students become biliterate (Menken and Kleyn 2010). These challenges to bilingual education are many, and they vary across states, cities, and ethnolinguistic groups.

Multicultural education has its own set of obstacles; however, they differ from those in bilingual education due to the lack of codification, or formal mandates, in the field. Because multicultural education in its truest form is a philosophical approach, as opposed to a programmatic model such as bilingual education, it is difficult
and even contradictory to create top-down policies related to its implementation. As such, there are no explicit policies to either counter its implementation or to promote it.

Implicit decisions pose particular challenges to multicultural education, which are also based in the political views and values centered on diversity, standardized testing, curriculum and pedagogy for all students (Gay 2000). For instance, the standardization of curriculum encourages what Sleeter (2005) calls the ‘content standards-textbook-test trilogy’ that narrows opportunities for the inclusion of non-prescribed content (10). Furthermore, curriculum that privileges the experiences, views, and knowledge of certain groups, while silencing or slanting the experiences of others, challenges the inclusion of diverse groups and multiple perspectives as a regular part of instruction. This exclusion not only stems from the standardized tests and curricula adopted by states or cities, but also from resources that limit students’ exposure to varied ways of thinking (Apple 1990; Meier 2002). Pedagogical approaches that call for ‘teaching to the test’, rote instruction of basic skills in the absence of creativity and higher level thinking, and scripted programs that take away teacher professionalism and ability to modify instruction for student needs chip away at opportunities for an education that is multicultural (Banks 2005). Furthermore, the widening gap between the diversity of the nation’s student body and the overwhelming majority of white, middle class, female, English-dominant teachers adds another layer of challenge (National Center for Education Information 2005). The demographic gap becomes problematic because teachers, whose realities differ from the students they teach, may hold a deficit ideology concerning students who come from minoritized racial, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds, which can translate into lower expectations (Gay 1993; Valenzuela 2002).

The challenges to bilingual and multicultural education are further complicated by federal and state mandates that stress standardized policies governing all students over policies that take linguistic and cultural diversity into account. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law in 2002, relies heavily on assessment and accountability as ways to improve overall academic performance. While Title I and Title III of NCLB specifically create a system of high-stakes testing for emergent bilinguals, they do nothing to address the limited capacity of many school districts to serve these students, including a severe shortage of valid and reliable assessments tied to state standards. The law does allow for a degree of local flexibility in the choice of pedagogical approaches, but the focus remains solely on academic achievement in the English language, overlooking the validity and importance of students’ home languages (Crawford 2004). Additionally, NCLB requires states to set academic content and performance standards (outputs) without any mandate for opportunity-to-learn standards (inputs) that would ensure a level of educational resources and facilities sufficient to provide all students equal opportunities to meet the benchmarks (Elmore and Fuhrman 1995). In other words, while all students are expected to get to the same place, there are no guarantees that their different academic needs will be met. Similarly, each state remains free to adopt its own policies on bilingual education and multicultural education, yet other federal mandates limit their flexibility. For instance, the Race to the Top (RTTT) competition, initiated by the Obama administration, has offered incentives to states to expand high-stakes testing, for example, to close ‘failing’ schools and establish
merit pay’ systems for teachers. Critics have warned that both policies could lead to more pressures for standardization at the expense of addressing diverse needs.

New York State has several policies to prepare teacher candidates and in-service teachers. They include college coursework on human relations, which focus on intergroup and interpersonal relations and address issues such as sexism, racism, prejudice, and discrimination (New York State Education Department 1992 as cited in Gollnick and Chinn 2002). In comparison to other states, New York has relatively comprehensive requirements that call for an education respective of difference, including culture, race, socioeconomic background, and home language. While these policies address areas that are part of multicultural education, they do not use the term at all. This absence of ‘naming’ the concept serves to reinforce its devalued position and invisibility in policies, tertiary programs, and K–12 schools. Additionally, the courses offered under the umbrella of multicultural education, although not referred to as such, are ‘add-ons’ to core classes, which positions multicultural education as an additional and peripheral program requirement, rather than a lens to use in all academic areas.

The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) has clear policies in place to address the needs of emergent bilinguals based on the services and programs available in schools, ranging from English as a Second Language (ESL) to bilingual education programs. While federal policies stemming from Lau v. Nichols dictate services, in NYC each school must create its own Language Allocation Policy (LAP) to outline its approach to serving emergent bilinguals (New York City Department of Education 2008). Furthermore, the city has procedures for identification and program placement of emergent bilinguals, and orientation sessions to assist parents in choosing a program for their child. Yet, while detailed procedures are in place for bilingual education, no such policies exist for multicultural education.

Our focus in this article is on the combination of bilingual and multicultural education; this combination is important, as one area does not necessarily imply the other. A conscious effort to teach bilingually and multiculturally must be made by each teacher, because one can teach through two languages while only focusing on dominant knowledge and perspectives. Conversely, it is possible to teach through a multicultural lens in an English-only manner that ignores issues of linguistic and dialectical diversity in the classroom and beyond. Decisions related to bilingual and multicultural education are dependent upon national ideologies about which languages and cultures are most valuable, as well as the views of specific ethnolinguistic groups on such issues. The pull toward a monolingual and monocultural education is a strong one that is rooted in complicated local, national, and transnational circumstances. This article attempts to unravel those obstacles in NYC that stand in the way of the rights of students from four ethnolinguistic groups to have their languages and cultures embedded in their school experiences.

Setting
This study took place in the multilingual capital of the world, New York City (Garcia and Fishman 2002). Linguistic and cultural diversity presents itself within the city’s public schools, where in 2009, 14.3% (153,338) of the students were classified by the NYCDOE as ‘English Language Learners’ (referred to here as emergent bilinguals,
unless referencing their status according to city policy), approximately half of whom were born outside the US (Infante 2010). The majority of emergent bilinguals are placed in monolingual school settings with ESL support; others take part in a range of programs under the umbrella of bilingual education that serve their varied needs. For example, during the 2005–2006 school year, 28% of emergent bilinguals were in Transitional Bilingual Education programs, while 3% attended One or Two Way Bilingual Immersion (or Dual Language) programs (NYCDOE 2006).

At the time of this study, four languages other than English were used as the medium of instruction in NYC public elementary bilingual programs. These languages, with the exception of Bengali (in which there is no elementary bilingual program), correlate with the top five ethnolinguistic groups represented in the school system: Spanish (67.9%), Chinese (10.8%), Bengali (2.6%), Haitian Creole (2.3%), and Russian (2.1%). Table 1 shows the number of bilingual programs across NYC schools for each language group in this study.

The teacher participants worked across the spectrum of programs within bilingual education. One Russian, two Haitian Creole, and four Spanish teachers worked in one- or two-way bilingual immersion programs. These programs aimed to develop students’ language and literacy skills in both languages throughout elementary school (if not beyond), even if they tested out of ELL status. Three of the Russian teachers taught in a gifted bilingual program where students had to first pass a test for acceptance into the program and did not necessarily have to be classified as ELLs. Russian, however, was a native or heritage language for all of the involved students. The Chinese teachers all worked in early-exit or transitional programs, where mostly newly arrived students took part in the program only during their duration as ELLs. Despite these differences in program models, all 16 teachers used more than one language for instruction within a classroom population primarily made up of emergent bilinguals and/or immigrant students.

### Methods and participants

The qualitative study was primarily conducted during the 2005–2006 academic year. A multiple-case study approach was used, involving ‘an exploration of a bounded system or a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information in a rich context’ (Creswell 1998, 60). More specifically, through a collective case study, multiple cases were considered to illustrate the commonalities and differences of a ‘phenomenon, population, or general condition’ (Stake 1998, 89). This qualitative study looked at the phenomenon of bilingual and multicultural education as exemplified by four groups of bilingual
teachers in New York City. The data from the study came from observations and in-depth interviews with teachers to get at the ‘historical, attitudinal, and behavioral issues’ (Yin 2003, 98) associated with education that is both bilingual and multicultural.

**Interviews**

A series of interviews allowed the voices of the teachers to emerge and to present a perspective that deepened the observations. Interviews allowed insight into the areas that could not be observed. More specifically, feelings, thoughts, intentions, and understandings of multicultural education and bilingual education were explored, as well as behaviors that impacted each area. This clarified how teachers organized and assigned meaning to their worlds, thus illuminating their viewpoints (Patton 1990). Semi-formal interviews primarily consisted of open-ended questions guided by an interview protocol, and were scheduled with each teacher (Merton et al. 1990, as cited in Yin 2003). The use of the protocol was important because it ensured that the participants addressed similar questions and topics for a baseline comparison.

The comparative qualitative research design was selected using a stratified purposeful sampling approach. Cases were selected within four sub-groups to facilitate comparison (Patton 1990). The cases selected were ‘similar enough and separate enough to permit treating them as comparable instances of the same general phenomenon’ (Ragin 1992, 1). Each of the information-rich cases paralleled the others in terms of geography (NYC), program type (bilingual), grade levels (K–6), and population (primarily immigrants), which allowed for cross-case comparisons. The cases were selected to show similarities and differences within and across ethnolinguistic groups. Under the umbrella of bilingual education in NYC, these cases represented the greatest degrees of variation based on the racial, linguistic, and cultural background of the teachers and their students.

A total of 16 bilingual teachers, all referred to by pseudonyms, were selected through recommendations by principals, university professors, and supervisors. The teachers came from the most prominent racial/ethnic groups in the US: White, Asian, Black, and Latino. The teachers worked with students from the following ethnolinguistic groups: Russian, Chinese, Haitian Creole, and Spanish. Four bilingual teachers from each of these ethnolinguistic groups were included in the study. Although participants did not constitute a representative sample of all bilingual teachers within the represented groups, some variety within each group was visible. Participating teachers were selected with certain criteria in mind in order to have a basis for comparison. Common teacher characteristics follow:

- Have taught in a NYC public school for at least three years
- Have taught in a self-contained bilingual class in grades K–6
- Have taught a majority of students who are immigrants
- Have taught immigrants with ethnolinguistic backgrounds similar to their own

In addition, all selected teachers were deemed ‘successful’ based upon at least two of the following criteria:
Ethnolinguistic group-specific contexts and challenges

When students enter the school system in NYC, their families must fill out a home language survey. If there is a language other than English spoken in the home, students are given the LAB-R (Language Assessment Battery-Revised). The results of this assessment determine if students are eligible for Bilingual Education or ESL services. Families are required to receive information about each program in order to make an informed decision about the best placement for their children (i.e. ESL, Transitional Bilingual, or One/Two Way Immersion Bilingual programs). In spite of a consistent and increasing number of emergent bilingual students coming into the school system, the number of bilingual programs in NYC has decreased significantly in recent years, while ESL programs have increased (Menken 2008). While numerous factors influence programming decisions, specific ethnolinguistic group ideologies about languages, the immigration experience, and their views of schooling dictate decisions about the type of programs children enter. Each group’s historical, political, and sociocultural position in their country of origin and the US also play a key role in determining the extent to which bilingual programs thrive or decline in NYC.

Spanish – differing perceptions and intra-group diversity

Spanish bilingual programs are by far the most prevalent in the city, due to the high numbers of native Spanish speakers. However, bilingual educators often encounter an uphill battle when encouraging parents to enroll their children in such programs. Parents’ primary concerns are for their children to be successful in this country, which for them translates into high proficiency in English, the language of power in the US, without regarding Spanish development as a necessary part of that process. They also see Spanish as something their children already possess or as a hurdle that will delay attainment of English. Adults (and children alike) receive the message rather quickly that Spanish is a second-class language that does not warrant time in schools. Placement into English-only programs is a decision or outcome that students may eventually regret, especially once they reach college or adulthood. Sometimes programming decisions can be taken out of parents’ hands or choices can be limited to the programs available within a given school. For example, Cristina, a Spanish bilingual teacher who was placed in a mainstream English classroom upon arriving in the US from Puerto Rico, discusses the consequences she faced due to her placement as she reflects back on her educational opportunities:

I always say if I would have gotten the opportunity to be in a bilingual setting, I would have excelled a lot more. I made it and I went to college, but how much further would I have gone if I would have been given the opportunity to continue doing some of the content area, the history, and the sciences? I missed a lot in that transition.
However, not all Spanish bilingual programs experience difficulty when it comes to recruitment of students. Two-way bilingual immersion programs, where English- and Spanish-dominant students are combined into one classroom to receive instruction in both languages, have recently received increasing numbers of students from affluent families with high levels of formal education. These children are often put on a waiting list, while educators simultaneously struggle to fill a class with native Spanish-speaking Latino children. An educator in one such program explains:

We work hard to maintain a linguistic balance in our dual language classes with a priority of serving Spanish-speaking families first. We accept all students that come from Spanish-speaking homes and then consider the students from other linguistic groups. The majority of these children are from middle class, English monolingual families who see two languages for their children as an enrichment opportunity. These families perceive fluency and literacy in Spanish as a necessity for their children’s futures. Due to the demographics of our community, we often have two applications from middle class English-speaking families for every one application from a Spanish-speaking family. This can be a challenge because we really need the strong Spanish-speaking kids to make the program work well and, in some ways, these are the kids that benefit most from the model.

The stark differences in Spanish bilingual program enrollment create a dichotomy in terms of whose bilingualism is valued. Students from poor, immigrant and Spanish-speaking homes are often viewed as needing bilingual education as a remedial program. At the same time, Spanish-dominant students are necessary for two-way bilingual immersion programs to succeed. Since two-way programs are also viewed as enrichment education by many middle- to upper-class English monolingual parents (Kleyn 2010), program designs and goals will depend upon whom they are intended to serve.

Unlike some bilingual programs where students come from one or only a few countries, Spanish bilingual programs in NYC are made up of students from North, Central, and South America. The largest groups come from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, with a high percentage of US-born students as well (Bergad 2009). However, all Spanish-speaking countries across Latin America are represented in the student population, inclusive of indigenous students who speak languages such as Mixteco, Zapotec, and Garifuna.

The challenge for educators is to include the languages, ethnicities, and cultures of the diverse Latino student population in their school. César, a Spanish bilingual teacher, explains how resources matter in terms of the inclusion and affirmation of students’ languages and cultures: ‘We try to get books that are not just from Spain; we try to get books from Central America, or from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, so more Caribbean Spanish.’ The onus is on teachers to create a counter-narrative around the myth of a monolithic ‘Latino culture’. Instead, teachers must bring in the range of cultures that people from the many countries of Latin America bring to the US, including those born and raised in this country, as well as the hybridity that develops over time while living in the US (Kleyn 2008). Clearly, this is no small feat. Cristina explains how she approaches multicultural education within a bilingual program: ‘When you’re in a bilingual program, you work with that [multiculturalism] every single day. So it’s not just like one moment; it has to become part of your teaching. And when you plan, you have to look at that aspect, too.’
Chinese – multiple dialects and a push for ‘English mostly’

While Chinese bilingual programs exist in NYC, their numbers are small in proportion to the number of Chinese speaking emergent bilinguals living there. The ‘bilingual’ label for the Chinese classrooms oversimplifies a rather complicated linguistic environment. The Chinese language encompasses over 50 dialects, many of which differ from one another significantly. The placement of speakers of different dialects into the bilingual classes is problematized by one of the teachers:

Actually, the school, they don’t understand, but I don’t think they know. Whoever comes in, they ask you [to fill out] the home language survey if they say they speak Chinese, ‘OK, send them to Chinese bilingual, it belongs to you.’ They don’t care. And I know some teachers they are Chinese, but they don’t speak different dialects.

Diversity of dialects can make it difficult for speakers to understand one another, although the written form is the same. Multiplicity of languages and dialects creates a multilingual and multi-dialectical classroom environment. Of the four Chinese bilingual teachers in this study, three spoke two or three different dialects. Most of the students within their classes spoke either Mandarin or Cantonese, but one classroom had speakers of four different dialects.

In addition to teaching in two languages and multiple dialects, Chinese bilingual teachers often teach two or three grade levels in one class. Since students are constantly moving out of bilingual programs, which tend to be transitional, their numbers do not stay consistent from grade to grade. This situation creates a need for multi-grade or bridge classes. The teachers, therefore, face a variety of challenges in planning for languages, dialects, and content.

Similar to the Spanish-speaking community, most Chinese families also regard their children learning English as a major function of schooling. Typically, they do not see their native language as a part of that process. Chinese bilingual teachers may face strong pressures from parents, who are immigrants struggling to learn English themselves, to acclimate the students to a new society. Because they often suffer the economic and social consequences associated with limited English proficiency or literacy, they hope English schooling will open the doors of opportunity for their children that have often been closed to them. Tung, a Chinese bilingual teacher, summarizes this sentiment about English instruction:

I just see my role as teaching them English as a major, major... I see that as the most important thing I have to do, to help them acquire the language. It’s also what their parents want, and it’s also what I want. So a major part of my teaching is on [English] language acquisition.

Since most Chinese bilingual programs in NYC are subtractive in nature, they have a goal of moving students into mainstream English classrooms as quickly as possible. Therefore, teachers feel a great deal of pressure to acclimate students to mainstream American culture. Hua, another Chinese bilingual teacher, explains:

We teach more American aspects to the kids because we want the kids to fit in the society. I think most of them will grow up to be working in the mainstream society, so we want them to learn the culture, the manners, whatever they need to know.
Thus, while learning English becomes a priority, so does learning about US culture. As a result, Chinese culture may be set aside as teachers aim to prepare their students for English-only classrooms that may or may not have significant Chinese student populations. Students’ futures in English classrooms and in the US in general drive the language and culture of instruction. Below, Hua, a Chinese bilingual teacher, explains the dilemma she feels as a bilingual educator in NYC as a result of pressures from the administration and parents to make learning English the priority:

My ideal bilingual class would be where both languages are used and taught. We should support kids learning their native languages. Here we are using their native language to help them learn English. It’s like a learning cane, it’s a support. Actually, we are not encouraged to use too much Chinese.

For teachers like Hua, the ideal view of bilingual education and the realities of external pressures to learn mostly English and the ‘American’ culture get in the way of providing students with a comprehensive bilingual and multicultural education. Yet, in spite of the conflicted role of schools in teaching the Chinese language/dialect(s) and culture(s), the language is still valued by the immigrant community, albeit outside of the traditional school day. Parents commonly seek out weekend or after-school Chinese programs that stress Chinese language and culture, rather than developmental forms of bilingual education during the school day. To illustrate this point, Xi, a Chinese bilingual teacher, shares how she educates her own children: ‘In my family, we still keep the culture. We still speak Chinese. My own children go to a Chinese school. I make them learn. At least we can have the roots.’

**Haitian Creole – linguistic hierarchies and ethnic e-race-ure**

Understanding the socio-political challenges to Haitian Creole bilingual programs in the US requires a glimpse into the history and politics of languages in Haiti. French was declared the sole official language of Haiti in 1918, while the country was under US occupation. It was not until the Constitution of 1987 that Haitian Creole attained co-official status with French. However, this change did not spur its use in schools until many years later. It is primarily in the last decade that Haitian Creole has started to make its way into elementary schools in Haiti. Thus, parents enrolling children in US schools are often surprised to find that Haitian Creole, a language devalued in their country of origin, is the target language in bilingual programs in NYC. When parents hear the word ‘bilingual’ their initial expectation is to find programs that use French and English for instruction. Many have a hard time understanding why their children would benefit from a program in Haitian Creole, a language they still view through a lens of inferiority. Yet, Haitian Creole is the predominant language families speak at home and consequently the language with which they feel most comfortable.

In Haiti, those who spoke standard French came predominantly from the upper classes. Jacques, a Haitian Creole bilingual teacher, explains: ‘Everybody wanted to identify themselves with French even though many did not speak French or only spoke it to a certain degree.’ Marleine, also a Haitian Creole bilingual teacher, recalls a strict separation between the two languages in terms of socioeconomic status while growing up in Haiti: ‘Haitian Creole was the language we used with the lower class. You used that with the cleaners and cooks. When you went to school, you had to
speak French.’ These deep-rooted views of Haitian Creole have resulted in its inferior status across the Haitian diaspora. Gerard discusses the intra-group stigmatization of the language, regardless of its place as the dominant language in Haiti. He explains this situation:

Educators [in Haiti] would frown upon students that spoke Creole. There were certain schools where if you spoke Creole you’d be chastised… [In the US] the language itself has been more of a reprimanding one. So when they need to reprimand each other, they use Haitian Creole. It hits you in the heart because that’s your home language.

When looking beyond language to culture, the Haitian Creole bilingual teachers interviewed speak to the overly simplistic, black-and-white view of diversity issues in the US. Categorized as ‘Black’ but not African American, Haitians can, and often do, fall out of the multicultural conversation. Because of the false assumption that ‘Black’ is the same thing as ‘African American’ within the US, the unique immigration and linguistic experiences, as well as the transnational identities of Haitians, are lost under the cover of the overarching label of ‘Black’. Because of this disregard for their group, the teachers interviewed felt the responsibility to acknowledge the racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their Haitian students. Gerard discusses how he, too, learns as he teaches: ‘I’ve learned a lot about my culture because a lot of it was not taught to us as far as in our schools. We were products of French-oriented educators.’ Yet, bringing in the topic of race, along with native language and culture, requires an extra effort on the part of many Haitian Creole bilingual teachers, who are often the products of a biased education in their own country.

**Russian – geo-political changes, anti-Semitism, and the mainstream**

The Russian group had the lowest number of bilingual programs of the four groups examined in this research study. While this can be due to smaller numbers of Russian-speaking emergent bilinguals, there are also some geo-political events that factor into the lower prevalence of such programs. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is one such event. Following this historical milestone, newly re-formed nation-states went back to pushing their national languages (such as Latvian in Latvia and Ukrainian in the Ukraine) through officialization policies while deemphasizing the use of Russian in public spaces such as government, schools, and business. This phenomenon has reduced the number of Russian speakers immigrating to the US from nations that once comprised the Soviet Union (Laitin 1998), as the numbers of Russian speakers in these countries steadily decreases.

Furthermore, for some Soviet Jews the Russian language has come to be associated with anti-Semitism. In official Soviet documents Jews were viewed and explicitly labeled as a separate ethnic and national group (Remennick 1998). There are many Russian-speaking Jews in the US who do not want their children to learn a language that for them is tied to anti-Semitism. However, in the case of the Russian bilingual teachers from this New York City study, all four were either Jewish themselves or had a Jewish parent or spouse. This likely helped mitigate how Russian Jewish parents viewed the bilingual program.

Dina, a Russian bilingual teacher, connects the Christian/Jewish dichotomy in the former USSR to the US: ‘We didn’t have Black and White, but although I didn’t
grow up here, I think it’s similar to what we had to deal with.’ She sees a similarity between the racial hierarchy in the US and the religious divisions and inferior treatment she experienced first hand in the Soviet Union. Fanya recalls how among students there were discussions to distinguish between Jews and non-Jews based on their last names and appearance. To avoid the Jewish label, she had to lead a ‘double life’ to conceal her identity and remain safe:

Something I had to do was the role-playing, like a double personality. I had to be somebody else. I couldn’t say my father was Jewish, because Novasibirsk’s [her home town] are very anti-Semitic. You could not expose your beliefs or opinions anywhere else except for your family and your very close friends. And you never know, there were times when people were losing jobs and my father was a writer, so he had a really tough time.

Although they were marginalized as Jews, these Russian bilingual teachers themselves were products of schools that inculcated students with socialist communist propaganda through highly censored textbooks that highlighted national political perspectives and little else. The teachers and resources within schools reinforced or, according to Fanya, ‘brainwashed’ students to see only the negative aspects of anything beyond the national system, including that which related to the US.

The one-sided or monocultural education and daily restrictions placed on many of the Russian bilingual teachers growing up in the USSR could spur them to either repeat this cycle or to advocate for and implement a multicultural education that departed from their own experiences. Although the teachers mentioned addressing aspects of the Russian culture in their instruction, they generally stayed within the traditional canon (Banks 2001). Perhaps this is because the Russian bilingual teachers and their students are primarily viewed as White in the US, and thus perceived as part of the mainstream – particularly in a city like New York, which also has a large and powerful Jewish community. This means they experience significantly less discrimination, which could also decrease the urgency to infuse multiculturalism within the curriculum. In their interviews, none of the Russian bilingual teachers explicitly mentioned their students’ cultural or ethnic backgrounds in relation to the curriculum. Possible explanations of this absence could be linked to teachers who saw their students as a part of the mainstream and thus did not require a ‘specialized’ curriculum or to the view that curricular and instructional approaches of US schools are already multicultural, especially in comparison to their narrow Soviet education.

Areas of convergence across ethnolinguistic groups
Each ethnolinguistic group had a unique set of challenges to providing students with a bilingual and multicultural education. Although group-specific ideologies, histories, and views of US schools differed, there were three themes that emerged as challenges across two or more groups. These are addressed below.

Many of the groups found themselves fighting the imposition of a monolithic or homogenous view of their culture. For the Spanish bilingual teachers, there was a need to resist being perceived as one Latino nationality, as opposed to a group from a wide range of countries, with different languages, dialects and cultures within each. The Chinese bilingual teachers faced the challenge of students speaking multiple
The Haitian Creole bilingual teachers saw themselves on the one hand as fitting into the US Black racial label, and on the other, as having their own history and culture. Thus, each ethnolinguistic group is negatively affected by external misperceptions that either erase the diversity within each group or misrepresent group members.

The history and status of each group’s native language(s) in their country of origin also impacts the way bilingual and multicultural education are approached. In the case of the Russian bilingual teachers, negative experiences with anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union did not deter their desire to teach in both Russian and English, despite the association of the Russian language with anti-Semitism that may be held by some families. The status of Haitian Creole in Haiti as an inferior language associated with lower socioeconomic classes makes parents think twice about enrolling their children in a program where it is the language of instruction. A new life in the US does not erase views towards languages, but only repositions them in transnational ways that often reinforce their status from one nation to another.

The immigration experience and the desire for emergent bilingual students to succeed in a new country and learn English spurs the move away from bilingual and multicultural education and toward monolingualism and monoculturalism in schools for certain ethnolinguistic groups. The pressure from Chinese parents to equip their children with English skills and knowledge of ‘American’ culture overpowers the inclusion of Chinese dialects and culture in the regular school day. The belief that children either already know Spanish or that it is a barrier to learning English keeps many students out of Spanish bilingual education programs. All communities want to see their children grow up to be successful contributors to US society. Yet the power and ever-present push for English within schools and society is so strong that it acts as a barrier to the maintenance or development of the bilingualism and multiculturalism students already bring to school.

**Implications**

The data from this study shows that more needs to be done to ensure that all students receive an education that is multicultural and bilingual. In order to move this mission forward, NYC educators can take a variety of steps to change current systems that dissuade each approach in the city’s schools.

While challenges to bilingual education in NYC schools are many, policies and programming in this area are far more developed than that of multicultural education. For example, all NYC schools are required to create a Language Allocation Policy (LAP) each year that outlines the way they plan to serve emergent bilingual students. The schools could also be required to create a similar document that could be called the ‘Multicultural Education Plan’. This could push schools to look beyond linguistic diversity in the education of their student body, by requiring site-specific planning for the inclusion of multiple differences, perspectives, and instructional approaches. At the same time, this plan would need to be broad enough to allow individual schools the freedom to decide on culturally responsive and contextually appropriate practices.

The NYC Department of Education holds sessions for parents to be informed about the educational options for their emergent bilingual students. These large-scale events are for parents from any cultural and linguistic group to learn about programming options and ways to support their children academically. As an
addition to such an event, there could be sessions specific to different ethnolinguistic groups held in the native languages of the families that go beyond program descriptions and delve into the specifics of why bilingual education programs are either embraced or rejected by the local community. These conversations could get to the root of cultural views of program decisions and help to breakdown misunderstandings about educating emergent bilingual children in the USA in the twenty-first century. Open dialog that takes into consideration local cultural views, transnational ideologies, and perceptions of schools will allow for more nuanced understandings of bilingual educational programs and how they can enhance the educational and future opportunities of all students.

These are just two ways in which NYC could work to have its schools reflect the diversity of its students in meaningful ways. Such policies would focus the energy of NYC educators on providing children and youth with an education that builds on who they are, what language(s) they speak, and where they come from. Bilingual education and multicultural education are two frameworks that allow students to validate their identities, achieve academic success, and become citizens of a global world. As the crossroads of the world, NYC could and should be a model for cities around the nation to effectively and equitably educate culturally and linguistically diverse students.

**Conclusion**

The perspectives of Chinese, Haitian Creole, Russian, and Spanish bilingual educators in NYC have been discussed. Furthermore, the unique challenges of each ethnolinguistic group have been described, as well as those that cut across all four groups. It is evident that even in a city with unprecedented diversity, the implementation of bilingual and multicultural education is not an easy goal to accomplish. In spite of the fact that NYC still allows programs that are bilingual, and the languages of these programs are expanding, perspectives about which languages should be taught and whether they should be a part of the ‘regular’ school day still stand in the way of the city’s students becoming bilingual and biliterate. The city’s policies around bilingual education allow for its place in the school system. Parental choice provides opportunities for students to be taught through two languages. Policy, however, does not dictate the choices parents make in either selecting a bilingual or an ESL program for their children. Local policy around multicultural education only mandates its presence at the college/teacher education level, with no formal policy about how multiculturalism should be actualized in K–12 schools. Therefore, individual parents/family members and educators often determine the presence or absence of bilingual and multicultural education within the city’s schools. While NYC does not take a strong stance against bilingual and multicultural education, neither does it advocate for its occurrence.

Multicultural education is not an easy framework from which to approach the teaching and learning process, even under the most ideal circumstances. It requires teachers to have an in-depth knowledge of their students’ backgrounds, learning styles, and the communities in which they teach. Furthermore, teachers must incorporate these components into their instruction to allow students access to a curriculum that connects to their realities and broadens their understanding of the world. This alone is a difficult feat for teachers, most of whom have been the products of a monocultural educational system themselves.
While state and federal policy impacts virtually every aspect of teaching and learning, educators do not have time to wait for policy changes to occur before they find ways to meet the needs of their students. Working toward ways of addressing these challenges will help educators to better understand the backgrounds of families and what factors impact their decisions to enroll students in bilingual programs. It will allow teachers greater freedom to include languages and cultures of students, as well as to modify curriculum to better accommodate them (Torres-Guzmán 2009). We suggest, therefore, that teachers address the bilingual/multicultural concerns unique to their educational contexts every day in their classrooms, while taking an advocacy stance to create changes at the policy level that will potentially cut across cultural groups and make education more equitable and meaningful for all students.

Notes
1. Often immigrant students and English language learners are conflated into one group. However, these groups do not always intersect, as immigrants may come to the US with English proficiency and ELLs may be born in the US and grow up speaking a language other than English.
2. Currently, there are also bilingual programs at the elementary level in French and Korean.
3. Although the majority of the bilingual programs are on the elementary level, some figures may include middle and high school programs.
4. Self-contained bilingual classrooms at the elementary level have one teacher who conducts instruction across the core content areas in two languages.

References
García, O., and J. Trubek. 1999. Where have all the minority educators gone and when will they ever learn? *Educators for Urban Minorities* 1, no. 1: 1–8.


Infante, A. 2010. English language learners (ELLs) in New York City. Presented at Strengthening Educational Partnerships Forum, NYU, May 14, in New York City Department of Education.

Kleyn, T. 2008. ‘Garífuna es nuestra manera de ser, es lo que somos’: Enfoque de identiades e hibridaciones en la transculturación [“Garífuna is our way of being, it is who we are”]: A focus on identity and hybridity within transculturalism. In *Escrituras, polimorfias e identidades* [Writings, Polymorphics and Identities], ed. F. Nájera and P. Vitrullo, 63–85. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Libros del Rojas.


