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Annual Review of Linguistics

Linguistic Variation and Linguistic Inclusion in the US Educational Context

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Keywords

linguistic variation, raciolinguistic ideologies, linguistic racism, linguistic justice, linguistic inclusion, educational equity

Abstract

This article examines linguistic variation in relation to the critical social institution and social domain of education, with an emphasis on linguistic inclusion, focusing on the United States. Education is imbued with power dynamics, and language often serves as a gatekeeping mechanism for students from minoritized backgrounds, which helps create, sustain, and perpetuate educational inequalities. Grounded in this context, the article reviews intersecting factors related to linguistic variation that affect student academic performance. Empirical and applied models of effective partnerships among researchers, educators, and students are presented, which provide road maps to advance linguistic inclusion in schools within the broader social movement for equity in education.

1. INTRODUCTION: ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

Education is a critical social institution and social domain. Education is a main driver of language policy, and schools are second only to the family/home environment in their direct impacts on language socialization and the development of individuals' linguistic repertoires (Spolsky 2021). From the earliest years of schooling, students bring their linguistic practices, experiences, and ideologies, influenced by their families and communities, to school. In school, students encounter the linguistic practices, experiences, and ideologies of other teachers and students, which are part of the overall educational environment. The educational environment is also shaped by language of instruction and associated curricula, assessment instruments, teacher guidance, and so on, which are often mandated by local, regional, and national-level educational policies (Spolsky 2021). Even where such factors are not mandated, they can work together to operate as de facto language policy (Cushing 2021).

Some students' linguistic practices, experiences, and ideologies closely align with those of their teachers and peers, with curricula, and with existing educational norms and mandates. As demonstrated in the US context, some students come to school already familiar with the conventions of School English—the locally contextualized variety of standardized English used in educational settings, which can include how to address educators, take turns, respond to known-answer questions, solve mathematical word problems, and the like (Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011). This cultural and linguistic knowledge helps these students succeed in school. As students more easily navigate the cultural and linguistic conventions of schooling, their linguistic abilities are often valued by teachers, who may assume that they are ready to succeed, hold higher educational expectations for them, and afford them greater opportunities. These factors compound over time and lead to educational advantages for linguistically privileged students (Charity et al. 2004, Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011).

In contrast, some students do not come to school with linguistic privilege in hand. Because of bias and discrimination, the linguistic patterns of students from historically and systemically underserved social backgrounds are often marginalized and stigmatized. In society and in schools, these languages and varieties are often cast as different and deficient compared with codes that are socially legitimized and that carry favored status (Hazen 2017). As such, language serves as a gatekeeping mechanism for students from linguistically minoritized backgrounds, which helps create, sustain, and perpetuate educational inequalities. As Ladson-Billings (2009, p. ix) notes, these inequalities that students experience are not "achievement" gaps but rather "may be more accurately characterized as cultural gaps—between them [the students] and their teachers (and the larger society)."

Given the centrality of language to culture, cultural gaps are acute in cases where the medium of instruction is not the language or variety used in students' local communities. Barriers to full linguistic access in educational settings are rooted in the colonization process—which is grounded in notions of the supremacy of whiteness and Eurocentric linguistic standards and which has infused traditional research paradigms and practices in the study of language and society (Charity Hudley et al. 2024a,b; Errington 2001, 2008; Leonard 2017; Makoni et al. 2022; Ndhlovu 2021; Ndhlovu & Makalela 2021; Pennycook & Makoni 2020; Severo 2016; Zentella 2017). For example, colonizers delegitimate minoritized languages, deride them as inferior, punish their use, ban them in schools, and even attempt to eradicate these languages and those who use them. Such tactics are also often weaponized as tactics of social oppression; for example, rigged, bogus "literacy" tests were used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to deliberately disqualify African Americans from voting and thereby prevent their democratic participation (Charity Hudley et al. 2022, Feagin 2000).

Education around the world continues to be imbued with power dynamics rooted in colonialism. Educational institutions—intentionally and unintentionally, implicitly and explicitly—often fail to acknowledge, value, and include the abundant linguistic resources and abilities that linguistically minoritized students bring with them to school, thereby limiting these students' full access to and participation in education. The social movement for equity in education thus requires transforming long-standing educational ideologies that tacitly or overtly advocate for linguistic assimilation and homogeneity (see, e.g., Braithwaite 2019, Charity Hudley et al. 2022, Cioè-Peña 2022, Henner & Robinson 2021). Grounded in this perspective, four key sociolinguistic principles frame the discussion of language variation and education in this article.

A first key principle is that determinations about what constitutes standard, proper, or correct language always operate within and serve to support unequal systems of power, historically and in the present day (Bonfiglio 2002, Bourdieu 1991, Lippi-Green 1997). At the root of such determinations is the standard language ideology, a bias toward an idealized standard or normative form of a language used by powerful gatekeepers and institutions as a rationale for language domination (Lippi-Green 1997). This ideology persists even though language norms are situated and contextualized, not objective or factual. Throughout this article, terms such as marginalized and stigmatized, and standardized and privileged, are used to foreground the reality that individuals in power, including policymakers, administrators, teachers, and other "language managers" (Spolsky 2021), make normative decisions about language in ways that directly and indirectly sustain educational and social inequalities.

A second key principle is that the standard language ideology influences how language is taught, and is taught about, in schools and education-related institutions (Cioè-Peña 2022, Cushing 2021, Lippi-Green 1997, UNESCO 2016, Zentella 2017). It intersects with societal-level factors, including systemic racism, xenophobia, classism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of bias and discrimination to perpetuate educational and social disparities that limit full access to education and to positions of power and privilege for students from historically and systemically marginalized groups. As Spolsky (2021, p. 33) notes, there are many stakeholders in global educational systems, from parents to individual teachers to international organizations that are concerned with schooling. These agents hold and manifest ideological beliefs about language that affect educational policies, assessments, curricula, instruction, and teachers' praxes. For example, Cioè-Peña (2022) demonstrates how the ideologies and practices of linguistic standardization and the evaluation of accented language lead to racialization processes that perpetuate the overrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and/or Latinx students in Special and English Learner programs.

A third and related key principle is that language learning is not race neutral, nor is it simply a disciplinary/curricular subject area; rather, language and how it is taught must be seen as a historical-cultural phenomenon and a social process (Charity Hudley 2024, Mallinson & Charity Hudley 2014). The standard language ideology, which influences how language is taught, and taught about, is tied to race via raciolinguistic ideologies—pervasive societal beliefs that view race and language as naturally connected (Flores & Rosa 2015). In the United States, racism and xenophobia directly shaped the ideologies of linguistic standardization and prescriptivism that emerged in the twentieth century (Bonfiglio 2002). Arising from these ideologies, deficit approaches to language use in educational settings have reinforced and perpetuated linguistic, educational, and social inequalities. For example, US educational policies have systematically failed to ensure access to sign language for Deaf students, especially Black Deaf students (Hill 2022; see also Braithwaite 2019, Henner & Robinson 2021). In another example, pervasive contemporary discourse about so-called language gaps or word gaps—the notion that the language of children from low-income families is inherently underdeveloped—pathologizes the linguistic experiences of those with less social and cultural capital and is sustained by white supremacy, settler-colonial

violence, and anti-Blackness (Figueroa 2024; see also Adair et al. 2017, Johnson 2019, Sperry et al. 2019). Thus, there persists "a widespread and inaccurate societal belief that a monolithic, unchanging standard variety of English objectively exists [and] belongs to whiteness"—a belief that originated in and continues to reinforce white supremacist, colonial models of education (Charity Hudley et al. 2022, p. 26; see also Cioè-Peña 2022; Errington 2001, 2008; Makoni et al. 2022; McKinney 2017; Motha 2014; Pennycook 2007; Rajendram 2022).

A fourth key principle is that language variation is a cultural and linguistic resource for students, families, schools, and communities. This principle aligns with critical strengths-based educational and linguistic frameworks, including translanguaging (García & Li 2014), code meshing (Young et al. 2018), funds of knowledge (González et al. 2006, Moll 2019), community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005), and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim 2017). Language is inseparable from culture and identity, and therefore "language teaching and learning is identity teaching and learning" (Charity Hudley 2024). Individual communicative repertoires, local and community linguistic norms, and cultural and social context are all integral to understanding how students use language in schools. Language is culture, difference is not deficit, and variation is personal and meaningful for all individuals, including students. The end product of education must not be cultural or linguistic assimilation.

These four key sociolinguistic principles establish the theoretical grounding for the discussion of language variation and education that follows. Because the topic of language and education in general is vast and covered by other scholarly works (see, e.g., Spolsky 2021, Spolsky & Hult 2024), this review focuses on significant literature and illustrative examples related to English language variation in US educational settings. Nevertheless, these four key principles and the following discussion of linguistic variation and education are pertinent to other linguistic, cultural, and educational settings. Section 2 reviews the intersection of linguistic variation and education in US contexts, tracing the trajectory of research that has sought to uncover the constellation of factors that affect student academic performance. Section 3 covers partnerships for linguistic inclusion in schools, presenting effective models and evidence-based research for engaging educators and students as agents for justice and equity. Section 4 concludes with next steps for linguistic justice and educational equity.

2. HOW LANGUAGE VARIATION AFFECTS STUDENT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Numerous factors related to language variation can affect student academic performance. For decades, much US-based research has sought specifically to understand the relationship between linguistic variation and literacy outcomes, which affect educational outcomes. These relationships do not occur in a vacuum but rather exist within a complex broader social system. As such, the most fulsome explanatory picture for how language variation relates to educational outcomes is obtained when numerous intersecting linguistic and social factors are considered.

The research program of William Labov, beginning in the 1960s, was pathbreaking for US-based sociolinguistics and educational linguistics. As King (2020) describes, early sociolinguistic work by Labov et al. (1968, p. 288) that explored Black speech in New York City "had an educational aim: to document the different language patterns between white and black speakers and ultimately reverse education failures among black urban youth. Documenting the structural differences across the variety and observing the linguistic constraints around particular features helped establish the dialect as grammatical, or rule governed." This work arose within the variationist sociolinguistic tradition, which analyzes how the features of a given language variety vary systematically according to factors related to the surrounding linguistic context, communicative setting, and/or social characteristics of the language users (e.g., gender, racial or ethnic background, social

status, region of origin) (Wolfram & Schilling 2015; see also Hazen 2017). (Language varieties are sometimes labeled as vernaculars, although in this article, the term nonstandardized varieties will primarily be used; for further discussion of this choice of terminology, see Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011.)

Early education-focused studies such as those by Labov (1969) and Goodman & Buck (1973) aimed to understand how African American students' use of culturally influenced linguistic variants affected their academic performance, particularly on standardized measures. According to Labov's (1995) mismatch theory, also known as linguistic interference theory, culturally influenced, structurally variable linguistic mismatches (phonological as well as syntactic) between oral language and English orthography can lead to confusion when children who use African American English are attempting to learn the alphabetic principle—which then leads to greater difficulty with standardized English word recognition and reading comprehension, which leads to lower reading and writing proficiency, which in turn contributes to lower overall academic performance, most notably in situations of assessment and evaluation. Educational materials in the United States have been designed to improve students' reading skills based on this information (e.g., Rickford & Rickford 1995; Labov 1995, 2006; see also Hazen 2017).

Many studies have continued to explore this line of research since those earliest works, but they have not always demonstrated clear findings as to how robust or pervasive linguistic mismatches or interference might be. Accordingly, Gatlin & Wanzek (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of empirical research studies from 1998 to 2014 that investigated associations between language variation and the development of reading, spelling, and writing skills for US students in grades K–6. Gatlin & Wanzek (2015, p. 1314) found that, independent of student socioeconomic background and regardless of grade level, a "negative and moderate relationship between children's dialect use and literacy outcomes" does exist.

Furthermore, Gatlin & Wanzek's (2015, p. 1314) meta-analysis "provides evidence that a more complex relationship between dialect use and literacy exists, one that cannot be explained simply by differences, or mismatches, in speech and print, as suggested by the mismatch/linguistic interference theory." To address some aspects of this complexity, Gatlin and Wanzek looked to the linguistic awareness/flexibility hypothesis (Terry & Scarborough 2011), which posits that a student's ability or inability to shift across linguistic varieties—which depends on their degree of linguistic skillfulness as well as metalinguistic awareness—is a more precise explanatory factor for lower literacy outcomes than their use of nonstandardized linguistic features per se. To this point, Terry (2014) further found that early elementary school students who produced many nonstandardized linguistic features in speech still had considerable knowledge of standardized English forms, indicating no deficiency in phonological representations, and that effects of linguistic variation on reading skill were mediated by phonological awareness. Similarly, Charity et al. (2004) found that familiarity with School English was a better predictor of reading achievement among young African American students than was the use of African American Vernacular English. As these studies indicate, metalinguistic awareness, particularly awareness of standardized and School English forms, has a more significant impact on reading acquisition than does the presence or absence of linguistic variation.

We must also look beyond the level of the individual language user—the level at which the linguistic mismatch/interference and the linguistic awareness/flexibility hypotheses are primarily concerned—to understand the relationship between linguistic variation and the academic performance of racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized students. Before doing so, it is important to unpack some of the assumptions underlying theories of linguistic mismatch/interference and then supplement the linguistic awareness/flexibility hypothesis with research that considers the broader social and educational context within which students use language at school.

One issue with research models that focus primarily on identifying how linguistic mismatches affect academic performance is that they may be problematically grounded in an implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) deficit-oriented framework. In research of this type, the premise for the analysis is the presumed "lower achievement" of racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized students, on which the students' language variation is hypothesized to have a direct causal and negative effect. The often-uninterrogated baseline theoretical assumption is one of language deprivation, or the idea that minoritized students are deprived of verbal stimulation at home—even though sociolinguistic work has completely debunked such notions. For example, an early analysis by Labov (1972, p. 201) demonstrates that African American children from low-socioeconomic-status backgrounds "receive a great deal of verbal stimulation and participate fully in a highly verbal culture." Similarly, de León and García-Sánchez describe formative research (e.g., Cook-Gumperz 1977, Heath 1983, Philips 1983, Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo 1996) that reveals how schools validate communicative practices that are "more aligned with those socialized in middle-class, predominantly white, monolingual homes," thereby illegitimating "the rich interactional patterns of language use that constitute primary socializing verbal input for children from Indigenous, minority, and/or working-class backgrounds" and negatively affecting their academic success (de León & García-Sánchez 2021, p. 429). Assumptions of language deprivation and other deficit-oriented, delegitimizing language ideologies also undergird studies that aim to demonstrate so-called word gaps or language gaps; for critiques of this work, readers are referred to Adair et al. (2017), Figueroa (2024), Johnson (2019), and Sperry et al. (2019). Critical educational frameworks and paradigms, including funds of knowledge (González et al. 2006, Moll 2019) and community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005), also offer broader strengths-based perspectives on educational access and success that interrogate and repudiate deficit-oriented models of language, literacy, culture, and education.

Deficit ideologies may also be embedded in quantitative models used in studies of linguistic variation and academic performance. Often, studies in this vein aim to measure the production of nonstandardized linguistic features in relation to standardized assessments of academic (mostly reading) achievement. Based on statistical findings, the conclusion is often drawn that the greater the presence of linguistic variation in a student's speech or writing, the lower their academic outcomes, at least on standardized measures of achievement—which paints an apparent picture of academic underachievement by students who use minoritized language varieties (Mallinson & Gatlin-Nash 2024; see also Gatlin & Wanzek 2015). It is not surprising that such studies tend to reveal a negative correlation between the two factors: When a researcher sets out to measure the degree to which nonstandardized linguistic features lead to academic underperformance, the starting assumption is often that this association exists and that it is a causal one. Two types of research bias may be at work here: confirmation bias, in which the overall research process is geared at confirming the researcher's preconceived notions or beliefs, and cultural bias, which arises from assumptions that the researcher has about other cultural groups based on the researcher's own beliefs, norms, experiences, and ideologies (Nickerson 1998, Reynolds & Ramsay 2013; see also Ndhlovu 2021). Studies that have directly questioned the presumed causality of linguistic inference include those by Piestrup (1973), Lucas & Borders-Simmons (1994), and Labov & Baker (2010).

Deficit ideologies and premises may also undergird research that focuses on the "confusion" of minoritized students due to dialect interference, which presumably occurs when they attempt to learn the alphabetic principle at school and presumably leads to a host of cascading negative academic outcomes. Framing the problem this way glosses over the fact that English orthography is only loosely related to pronunciation and, moreover, that educators often teach English orthography and the alphabetic principle without attention to community pronunciation (Mallinson & Gatlin-Nash 2024). These insights point to the need to involve both students and teachers in

building students' metalinguistic awareness and linguistic flexibility. If teachers take into account the phonological norms of the community and the language practices of their students, they can teach letter–sound correspondences accordingly and address any apparent linguistic interference. Otherwise, "if standardized English phonology is the sole basis of phonics instruction, then populations who use nonstandardized pronunciations are at a systematic disadvantage" (Mallinson & Gatlin-Nash 2024).

Too often, however, teachers are not equipped with knowledge of community linguistic norms and may not understand, or may hold biases against, their students' language practices (Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011). For this reason, comprehensive research models cannot only focus on language use by students without also considering how teachers are experiencing and addressing students' linguistic variation.

Teacher bias theory asserts that linguistic bias and linguistic racism by educators are key explanatory factors that must be included when analyzing how language variation affects academic performance for racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized students (Cecil 1988, Gupta 2010). Linguistic racism refers to the language-related beliefs, actions, structures, and processes that perpetuate white supremacy and that are both individual and institutional (Charity Hudley et al. 2022). Considerable research has explored teacher biases in the United States, particularly with regard to African American English, documenting the anti-Black linguistic racism, bias, and discrimination that pervade and persist in the US educational system (Baker-Bell 2020). Studies find that preservice and in-service educators routinely hold negative perceptions of and biases toward African American English (see, e.g., Blake & Cutler 2003, Cross et al. 2001, Diehm & Hendricks 2021, Gupta 2010, Newkirk-Turner et al. 2013, Shepherd 2011). Moreover, many educators who use nonstandardized varieties of English themselves have faced linguistic prejudice, which affects their own educational beliefs and practices. This phenomenon has been found in numerous studies in English language contexts, including with African American teachers (Greene 2021), Afro-Caribbean educators in the United States (Smith 2018, Smith et al. 2018), British teacher trainees (Baratta 2017), and Southern US preservice educators (Bissonnette et al. 2016). Additionally, as discussed further in Section 3, educators' attitudes toward language variation improve significantly with linguistic training and instruction, and such improved attitudes may in turn lead to greater inclusion and equity in educational settings (LaFond & Dogancay-Aktuna 2014, Mallinson et al. 2011, Strickling 2012).

What educators believe affects how they teach and how students learn. With regard to African American English, for example, studies find that educators often regard students who use this variety (from kindergarten through college) as less capable of academic success than peers who use standardized English in all or most contexts; such bias leads to lowered expectations for these students, fewer opportunities for success, and, consequently, a trajectory of lower academic achievement (Charity et al. 2004, Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011, Charity Hudley et al. 2022). Research has also found that educators are more likely to deliver lower-quality instruction to students who use African American English (Cunningham 1976–1977, Dreeben 1987, Goodman & Buck 1973; see also Labov 2008). As teacher bias theory posits, educators' raciolinguistic ideologies thus directly affect the academic performance of minoritized students. In this way, students' linguistic variation itself is an indirect (not direct) explanatory factor in models of academic performance.

Delivering instruction of lesser quality to students who use African American English and other ethnoracial varieties is a complex process that may occur for a variety of reasons that, in many cases, the educators and students may not be conscious of. Implicit and explicit bias, discrimination, and racism may be at work. In addition, educators' biases against stigmatized and marginalized varieties can arise from the fact that educators are often unfamiliar with language

variation and linguistic varieties in general and with community linguistic norms in particular. Educators who are unfamiliar with language variation and the structure of linguistic varieties often misinterpret linguistic variations as linguistic deficits and misidentify them as language errors, which contributes to a cycle of systematic language-related educational inequalities for linguistically minoritized students (Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011, Reaser et al. 2017). Such issues arise across content areas—including in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, where reading for meaning is necessary, yet an understanding of language variation in relation to reading comprehension is generally overlooked (Mallinson & Charity Hudley 2014).

In the United States, unfamiliarity with African American English and other ethnoracial varieties is exacerbated by the fact the K–12 teaching force is about 75% white, while students of color compose over 50% of the public school student population (JBHE 2022, NCES 2021). White educators may be unaware of, confused by, or ill equipped to understand linguistic variations used by Black and African American students; they also may not know what to make of students' use of African American English or why their students seemingly cannot or will not use the standardized variety. These issues may cause cultural, social, and academic rifts and resentments as well as unintentional misunderstandings (Kochman 1981, p. 8).

It is also the case that educators of color are not necessarily more linguistically attuned than white educators, and they are not immune to linguistic misunderstanding and bias (see, e.g., Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011, Charity Hudley et al. 2022, Edwards 2010). Such situations are also deeply culturally complex, as demonstrated by Greene's (2021) study with African American educators and Smith's (2020) study with US-based Caribbean and West African Black immigrant educators.

Educators themselves have identified a critical need for more information about linguistic variation. Newkirk-Turner et al. (2013) found that preservice teachers wanted more strategies to address the linguistic needs of students who use African American English, and Gupta (2010) and Diehm & Hendricks (2021) found similar needs among in-service teachers at the elementary and middle-grade levels. In Diehm & Hendricks's (2021) study, the educators report that their schools "encourage them to promote a culture where diversity is valued," yet less than 15% had received training on language variation, and only about 33% felt they had sufficient linguistic training and resources. Thus, as Diehm and Hendricks point out, pedagogical expectations often diverge from actual training that educators receive. Linguistic training must also be locally relevant and specific. Educators need information not just about language variation in general but also about community language norms; this information is crucially relevant for understanding students' language use in everyday settings and in situations of assessment and evaluation (Charity Hudley 2024; Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011, 2014; Gatlin & Wanzek 2015; Mallinson & Gatlin-Nash 2024).

Further complicating matters is the fact that well-meaning educators who are aware of linguistic variation may nevertheless not understand how best to approach students about it. As noted above, the linguistic flexibility theory identifies the importance of students building their linguistic awareness and linguistic skillfulness. Often, however, well-intentioned educators aiming to help their students do so follow a situational code-switching model—which has gained popularity in US educational contexts—that encourages students to shift between home language and school language. There are two main limitations to this approach.

First, the situational code-switching model is touted as practical and effective in classrooms, but too often in practice it pushes students to acquire standardized English in ways that may devalue their language variety—either directly, via overt linguistic bias, or indirectly, by positioning standardized English as the tacit goal or gold standard (Charity Hudley 2024, Charity Hudley et al. 2020). Second, students are rarely taught how to code-switch: Often, educators assert the need for students to code-switch without providing specific instruction, or they may only provide

specific instruction in standardized English forms without providing necessary corresponding details about the features of the language variety that the students use.

As such, the situational code-switching model often reinforces notions of correct and appropriate versus incorrect and inappropriate language (cf. Flores & Rosa 2015) in ways that can perpetuate linguistic hegemony. For Black and African American students, "the message that students glean from the hidden curriculum of codeswitching is that students and educators are best served by leaving African American English at the classroom door—an ideology that can promote internalized racism as well as linguistic insecurity for both Black students and Black educators" (Charity Hudley et al. 2020, p. e217; see also Charity Hudley 2024, Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011, Flores & Rosa 2015, Hankerson 2017, Smitherman 2017). As Charity Hudley (2024) concludes, "this switching and choice-making is highly racialized and a form of white supremacy even if it is ultimately the most realistic reasonable compromise that we have currently in U.S. schools" (see also Sledd 1969, Smitherman 1995). Accordingly, Baker-Bell (2020) advocates that we transition from code-switching and other models centered on "tolerance" toward direct action models centered on linguistic equity and justice (for more discussion, see Section 3).

As Charity Hudley & Mallinson (2011) point out, a comprehensive approach is necessary and depends on US educators having accurate knowledge about their students' language use. In this model, with regard to African American English, educators would guide students to recognize the patterns of the variety and, "while acknowledging and appreciating this language variation, [reveal] how this pattern compares and contrasts with that of standardized English" (Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011, p. 96). Through this process, students learn to use, value, and build upon their knowledge of African American English and standardized English. This approach has been found to be pedagogically efficacious; it also legitimates students' language use in school and helps maintain their full linguistic repertoires (for more, see Section 3). This approach aligns with strengths-based models such as translanguaging, funds of knowledge, community cultural wealth, and culturally sustaining pedagogies, which emphasize the need to incorporate each student's full set of language practices as an educational, cultural, and linguistic resource (García & Li 2014, González et al. 2006, Moll 2019, Otheguy et al. 2015, Paris & Alim 2017, Rajendram 2022, Yosso 2005, Young et al. 2018).

As the above summary has revealed, the question of how language variation affects student academic performance in US educational contexts is profoundly complex; it includes factors such as linguistic mismatches and metalinguistic awareness, educator approaches to instruction and evaluation, and educator bias (both explicit and implicit). These processes cannot be separated from societal-level forces, including racism and racial inequality, which perpetuate the educational inequalities often faced by minoritized students (Labov 2008, Lee 2007, Reardon 2015, Cioè-Peña 2022). For example, Labov's (2008) model asserts that residential segregation, racism, concentrated poverty, unemployment, and persistently underfunded school systems (which primarily serve students of color) directly lead to insufficient and inadequate school resources and instructional quality, which work in concert with linguistic factors to directly and negatively affect educational opportunities and perpetuate educational inequalities.

De León & García-Sánchez (2021, p. 430) summarize the disproportionate impact on the academic experiences of students from racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized groups as follows: "The misrecognition of the sociolinguistics of input variation and the systematic institutional illegitimation of language varieties spoken by nondominant groups" in educational institutions goes beyond being simply a matter of cultural and linguistic disconnection; in fact, it is "deeply implicated in upholding larger systems of racism and social inequality" from the earliest years of schooling through higher education. While the research presented throughout this section and in this article primarily reflects the US context, it must be emphasized that racism and

colonialism, along with ideologies of standardization, are global forces that have deeply shaped the development of education in ways that lead to disproportionately and persistently negative impacts on minoritized students around the world (Charity Hudley et al. 2024a,b; Cioè-Peña 2022; Flores 2013; García et al. 2021; Makoni et al. 2022; McKinney 2017; Motha 2014; Pennycook 2007; Rajendram 2022).

The epistemological and methodological issues raised throughout this section present a clear need for scholars to take decolonizing approaches to research on language and society, including language and education. Decolonizing approaches critically interrogate the imperialist logics and colonialist understandings of knowledge production that undergird the mainstream research tradition and that deeply shape its ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and practices—including in linguistics and across the social sciences (Ndhlovu 2021, Ndhlovu & Makalela 2021, Pennycook & Makoni 2020, Smith 2021).

Regarding the study of language and society, decolonizing approaches repudiate research models that overtly or latently conceptualize language users and communities as sources of data or even as data themselves and instead put forward models that are humanizing, collaborative, community driven, and locally centered. One pathway, as Ndhlovu (2021, p. 199) states, is "forging collaborative research with nonacademic communities as equal partners, whereby social scientists are willing to learn at the feet of ordinary members of formerly colonised communities—the subaltern so to speak—by listening to their stories, and using such stories to generate concept notes to inform new methodological approaches." Charity Hudley et al. (2024a,b) and Heugh et al. (2021) provide some examples of such research models. Regarding research on language and education, decolonizing approaches further motivate work that (*a*) rejects deficit-oriented narratives about minoritized languages and language varieties and the students who use them, (*b*) is situated within antiracist, strengths-based frameworks of cultural and linguistic sustenance and inclusion that center the richness of community language, and (*c*) is collaborative, bringing together researchers, educators, and students in partnership and positioning educators and students as community-based linguistic experts and agents for change. Models for such work are discussed in Section 3.

3. EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS FOR LINGUISTIC INCLUSION IN US SCHOOLS

There are clear opportunities for researchers and educators to advance linguistic and educational justice, equity, and inclusion. Abundant US-based research has explored factors that affect students' academic performance and educators' beliefs about nonstandardized language varieties. The goal should now be the full-on application of linguistic insights for broader educational and social justice and equity. Such work can be more challenging yet also more effective in benefiting student learning and belonging and in advancing linguistic inclusion in schools.

Educators and students are critically important agents of educational equity and inclusion. Linguistic inclusion in schools is effectively advanced through collaborative initiatives that are grounded in antiracist, strengths-based frameworks and that engage educators and students in ways that are relevant, meaningful, and responsive to their needs and priorities. Researchers can also advance linguistic inclusion in schools via open access materials and publicly available learning opportunities for educators, students, and community members. This section presents various models that demonstrate pathways for effective educational engagement and that may be adaptable and applicable to other national, cultural, and educational contexts.

Given the central role that educators play, it is imperative that they embrace positive language ideologies, understand language variation, and use empirically driven information, strategies, and skills to sustain linguistic diversity in schools. Via university-based teacher preparation programs,

linguists are often well positioned to help educators gain these competencies. Even exposure to information about language variation through one university course can improve educator knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and competencies regarding language variation; infusing sociolinguistic information across multiple courses is even more effective (Edwards & Owen 2005, LaFond & Dogancay-Aktuna 2014).

To achieve curricular and programmatic integration in university-based teacher preparation programs, strong partnerships with closely aligned fields—such as education, communications, ethnic studies, language study, and speech and hearing sciences—are essential. By incorporating courses and faculty mentorship from across disciplines, teacher preparation programs can more fully teach the complexities of language, identity, culture, and society and demonstrate the relevance of language to education. Whereas linguistics courses often privilege the theoretical nature of language study, those in aligned fields tend to focus more on professional and applied aspects that can be beneficial to educators (Charity Hudley et al. 2023, Sedlacek et al. 2023). Partnerships can also address common challenges to university-based teacher preparation programs, such as the fact that not all universities or programs offer coursework that addresses linguistic variation and that, even when such coursework is available, it may be limited to just one course and may not be required. In addition, learners, faculty, and administrators may have different perspectives and goals for university-based teacher preparation programs and courses than linguists do (Reaser & Adger 2008), and the success of such programs depends upon the support of these stakeholders (Robinson & Clardy 2011). Importantly, many linguists are housed outside of traditional linguistics departments and programs (Charity Hudley et al. 2023, Sedlacek et al. 2023), and this interdisciplinary footing may help position them as expert liaisons and advocates for such programs (Edwards & Owen 2002). Overall, the most effective university-based models that focus on language variation will not be restricted to one course, instructor, department, or program but will be broadly situated, involving students, invested faculty, administrative stakeholders, and (where possible) community members across programs and departments.

While university-based programs can easily reach preservice teachers, there is also a need for more professional development programs on language variation to reach in-service educators—particularly as most such initiatives focus on other languages (Blake & Cutler 2003). Still, there are examples of successful professional development programs that focus on language variation that have reached pre- and in-service educators across schools, grade levels, and content areas (Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2017, Denham & Lobeck 2014, Mallinson & Charity Hudley 2018, Mallinson et al. 2011, Reaser & Wolfram 2005, Strickling 2012). Virtual and hybrid options for professional development have increased following the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting greater opportunity to convene educators in accessible, functional, and cost-effective ways. For example, Sclafani et al. (2024) describe a 4-day virtual workshop on critical language awareness, held in summer 2021, that drew preservice and in-service educators from across the United States.

Multimedia resources and open access materials are additional pathways for sharing linguistic information with educators, students, and the public more easily and widely than has previously been possible. Linguists have created many public-facing products for students, educators, and public audiences, including podcasts, websites, films, videos, and webinars. For example, Higgins et al. (2012) describe a documentary film project produced by students in Hawai'i that tackles linguistic bias, and Mallinson (2018) presents a short film and podcast episodes about linguistic diversity produced by graduate students. Figueroa (2022) discusses her free linguistics podcast, which is grounded in a dissemination model of public science communication, and Gawne et al. (2024) similarly describe *Crash Course Linguistics*, a free series on YouTube that offers linguistics content at the high school and college levels. The Language and Life Project (2022), housed at

North Carolina State University, has also created myriad public educational resources, including television programs and documentary films.

Antiracism is a fundamental element of linguistic inclusion, and all educational models and partnerships must be informed by critical work on race and racism. Alim (2010) discusses how a critical language awareness approach can help educators understand and confront the power dynamics that underlie language ideologies and that are embedded in standard language teaching. In 2020, Black language scholars issued the *Demand for Black Linguistic Justice*, which enjoins educators to employ a critical language awareness framework to help students develop linguistic insight, understand the pervasiveness of raciolinguistic ideologies in education, and address anti-Black linguistic racism (Baker-Bell et al. 2020). Further, Charity Hudley & Flores (2022) discuss the necessity for scholars in applied linguistics to combat anti-Blackness in educational research and engagement initiatives, Frieson (2022) asserts the need for intersectional approaches to dual language bilingual education, and Smith (2022) emphasizes that the future of applied linguistics must center the pursuit of transraciolinguistic justice.

Educators with critical language awareness are key to guiding students to approach language from an antiracist perspective. Yet, this work is not always easy for educators to immediately understand, embrace, or implement. Godley et al. (2015) found that white preservice teachers in the United States taking a sociolinguistics course struggled to acknowledge and address white privilege as part of understanding the racialized nature of the standard language ideology; confronting these issues was critical to their journey toward developing critical language awareness. J.R. Daniels (2019), a high school English teacher, recounts her journey of learning and reflection after a student identified the harm invoked by her comments about language on their class paper. Upon recognizing the harm and learning about the raciolinguistic ideologies embedded in her writing instruction, Daniels abandoned the use of code-switching and "appropriateness"-based teaching models (cf. Flores & Rosa 2015) and instead adopted a language-critical approach that addressed head-on the struggle for racial and linguistic justice in high school English classrooms.

Educators may not already have the knowledge and skills to effectively implement critical language pedagogies, and there is also not always guidance available to help them translate theory into practice. As Ball et al. (2011) found, few studies specifically address how teachers can implement critical language awareness practices. As a result, teachers may wing it on their own with potentially limited effectiveness. Metz's case study of a white high school educator teaching an African American literature course found that she "demonstrated strong knowledge of linguistic content and strong knowledge of critical language pedagogy but an underdeveloped understanding of how to value student knowledge" (Metz 2021, p. 1463), which undermined her ability to teach critical language awareness to her students. Barko-Alva (2022) asserts the similar need to support dual language bilingual education teachers' metalinguistic awareness and pedagogical language knowledge as they teach content in a language other than English (in that case study, teaching language arts in Spanish).

To build a climate of linguistic and social justice and equity, professional development must therefore equip educators to recognize their own positionality and privilege and to actively challenge and disrupt biases when and where they surface (see also Barko-Alva 2022). As part of this process, it is important for researchers to thoughtfully engage with and address teachers' legitimate concerns about decentering standardized English (Metz 2017).

Although this article's focus on linguistic variation in US schools is highly relevant to K–12 education, such principles also apply to university-level teaching. As Inoue (2019, p. 12) asserts, "We tell our students how much right they have to their languages, how much we care and embrace the diversity of languages that they bring and use, yet we tactically contradict these messages by asking them to wait just a bit longer for us to feel comfortable enough to change our classroom practices,

to change the way standards work against them." Like K–12 educators, university faculty also need information about how linguistic bias can surface, from microaggressions to inequalities in grading student writing (Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2011, 2014; Charity Hudley et al. 2022; Franz et al. 2022). Anne Charity Hudley and Hannah Franz's website, Students' Right to Their Own Writing (**https://srtow.org**), tackles these issues by providing student and instructor guides and other materials to support linguistic variation in college writing; such materials are also useful for K–12 educators. April Baker-Bell and Carmen Kynard's comprehensive #BlackLanguageSyllabus website (**http://www.blacklanguagesyllabus.com**) also provides resources for educators at all levels to counteract anti-Black raciolinguistic ideologies and center Black language and culture.

Students must also be involved as key partners in the collaborative study of their language and their communities. This principle is foundational to Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris & Winn 2014), a framework that aims to sustain the cultural and linguistic practices of students of color in schools and thereby effect social transformation. As Charity Hudley (2024) asserts, antiracist educational linguistics work should frame minoritized students "as experts and celebrate the legacies of resistance their racial groups have cultivated. They should be positioned to help us learn language, not just the other way round." A major educational inequality is that linguistically and racially minoritized students are expected to learn the standardized language and culture, yet students who use standardized varieties are not expected to do the reverse. Like educators, all students need knowledge and understanding about linguistic variation and should be guided to develop positive language ideologies.

Just as linguistically inclusive knowledge, beliefs, and practices are a critical part of teaching, they are central to student belonging and success. Despite much sociolinguistic research on teachers' beliefs and biases, there is comparably little on those of students. Yet, students also come to schools with a wide range of positive and negative beliefs about language that impact the educational experiences of themselves and their peers. Godley & Escher (2012) found that bidialectal African American high school students held varying positive and negative language ideologies, including beliefs about what varieties ought to be spoken in school. Martínez (2013) found that Latinx middle school students in an English language arts classroom had absorbed deficit-oriented language ideologies that shaped their own use of Spanglish and their linguistic beliefs. Metz (2018) similarly analyzed the language beliefs of racially and ethnically diverse high school students in California and found that they were primarily shaped by two factors: students' own linguistic self-awareness and their parents' language ideologies.

Studies of students' linguistic ideologies demonstrate the pervasiveness of negative societal-level messages about language. But these studies also demonstrate opportunities for students to learn, develop, challenge, and change their beliefs. For example, de los Ríos & Seltzer (2017) studied how two secondary teachers at different schools in the United States used autoethnographic and metalinguistic pedagogies to guide Latinx students to draw upon translanguaging practices and question dominant language ideologies. Martinez (2016) reveals how Black and Latinx high school students who possessed critical linguistic awareness were able to push back against linguistically problematic teacher feedback. In a college linguistics course, Sedlacek (2018) found that conversations about language created opportunities for students to recognize, discuss, and critically analyze racism. These studies demonstrate the significance of understanding students' language attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and practices in relation to the broader dynamics of language and education within an unequal society. How best to change and harness students' language ideologies—and how to assess the long-term impact of such initiatives—remains an important area for future research.

Collaborative research-based language awareness programs for students demonstrate positive effects on students' language ideologies and educational outcomes, just as comparable programs

do for educators (Reaser et al. 2017). For example, Bucholtz et al. (2018) discuss the SKILLS (School Kids Investigating Language in Life and Society) academic partnership program, hosted by the University of California, Santa Barbara, that brings faculty and graduate and undergraduate students together with middle school, high school, and community college students, teachers, and mentors to advance racial, linguistic, and educational justice. Student researcher-activists of color are positioned as linguistic experts and carry out original research and community action projects, leading directly to linguistic and educational change. Bissell et al. (2024) present two initiatives led by graduate students at North Carolina State University: the Language Diversity Enrichment Program, a weeklong summer camp for high school students, and College Mentors for Kids, an after-school program for elementary school students. Both programs foster students' excitement about, awareness of, and appreciation for language and linguistic diversity.

Educators themselves have also effectively infused linguistics into their own curricula and classroom practices. Denham & Lobeck's (2014) volume *Linguistics at School* includes contributions from US educators teaching across grade levels and content areas, and Charity Hudley & Mallinson's (2014) *We Do Language* similarly features firsthand vignettes by middle and high school educators, mainly from English language arts. A recent exemplar is provided by A.L. Plackowski (2024), a US-based teacher who created the high school English language arts elective course Linguistics and Media Studies in spring 2021. Plackowski grounded the curriculum in an antiracist, strengths-based framework that centers diverse student voices, varieties, and lived experiences; combats systemic racism by challenging standardized language ideologies; and, via an inquiry-based approach, encourages all students to analyze language variation.

Plackowski (2024) enjoins linguists to invest further in producing readings, media resources, and other materials that educators and students can use; she notes that currently "it takes a great deal of teacher resourcefulness to find and adapt high-interest resources that are accessible to students." She offers strategies for linguists, such as forming direct partnerships with teachers, liaising with professional teacher organizations, and guiding teachers to understand how to infuse linguistics into their curricula across content areas. The Linguistic Society of America's Linguistics in the School Curriculum Committee (currently chaired by Plackowski) provides opportunities to form linguist–educator partnerships and share resources online (**https://www. linguisticsociety.org/resource/language-and-linguistics-k-12-education**); recently, the committee joined with the Linguistics League (**https://www.linguisticsleague.org/**) to host a virtual linguistics college and opportunities fair for high school students.

The models and research presented in this section demonstrate the significance and impact of linguistic inclusion in schools. When educators and students hold and enact inclusive beliefs and practices about language, it fosters the development of students' linguistic agency, supports their linguistic identities, and benefits their academic outcomes, all of which help build positive, equity-centered classroom and school climates.

Although the topic of language and education policy is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that systemic educational change necessitates buy-in and support from levels beyond that of individual educators and students. Efforts to target policy are beneficial in that they can achieve structural solutions. Yet, as Spolsky (2021) points out, national and local governments are influenced by funding models and other power dynamics, including broader societal-level forces and inequalities, that directly affect educational standards and educational policy. For example, Cushing (2021) demonstrates how, in the United Kingdom, the standard language ideology saturates current education policy and is embedded in tests, curricula, teachers' standards, and political framings. Interdisciplinary research that considers language across the disciplines, especially education, is therefore needed (Charity Hudley et al. 2023). In addition, critical frameworks must be applied to the goal of understanding and advancing language policy

(Cushing 2021). In the current era, when education is increasingly under threat globally (see, e.g., **https://www.unicef.org/education-under-attack**), efforts to ensure equitable educational policies are greatly needed.

4. CONCLUSIONS: NEXT STEPS FOR LINGUISTIC JUSTICE AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

The benefits of decades of research on linguistic variation in schools have not always reached students themselves, and the next era of research and application must address this reality. Going forward, research-based efforts must aim to dismantle linguistic bias in all its forms and infuse culturally and linguistically sustaining practices throughout educational settings. These efforts must be informed by up-to-date, interdisciplinary understandings of students' varied, contextualized, and socially and culturally situated language practices, and they must be grounded in antiracist, strengths-based approaches. There is no linguistic justice without racial justice (Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2019).

More professional development initiatives are needed to ensure that educators, administrators, and other school personnel are equipped to recognize and understand linguistic variation, to address issues of bias, mis-assessment, and misdiagnosis, and to proactively build a climate of linguistic inclusion in classrooms and schools—which directly benefits linguistically minoritized students. To be most effective, training programs must provide educators not only with general linguistic information but also with specific information about local language varieties and community norms. Collaborations can be a productive conduit for developing pedagogical models, inclusive curricula, and accessible resources that are relevant to educators and students and that can be used by local communities and the broader public.

For the greatest benefit, students themselves must be engaged in agentive and collaborative language study. When minoritized students' languages and language varieties are supported and valued, they are able to utilize their full linguistic repertoires, draw upon their linguistic capital as a resource, and recognize their linguistic agency, which positions them to thrive educationally. Across linguistic backgrounds, students must also be guided to understand their positionalities as language users within a broader societal landscape, confront linguistic privilege, and value linguistic diversity. Educators have a key role to play by intentionally guiding students to deepen their linguistic self-awareness, increase their knowledge and understanding about language, and combat negative societal-level language ideologies—all of which foster inclusion and belonging.

Student-, educator-, and school-based initiatives are most successful when they are embedded within supportive broader social and educational systems. In addition to the critical need for ongoing investment in effective partnerships, linguists must support the development of equitable and just language policies that support individual students, teachers, and practitioners, as well as families and communities, in building culturally and linguistically inclusive schools.

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