

Book Review

April Baker Bell, Linguistic Justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy, New York: Routledge, 2020. 148 pp. ISBN: 9781138551022 £34.99 (pbk)

Those of us doing social justice work in early years spaces will be all too familiar with the counter-arguments that emerge when we emphasise the need to critically engage with the power of language. Whether this is in the context of disability (e.g., challenging ableist language use in terms like ‘special needs’), or in understanding and challenging racism – as is the overarching focus of this book. We hear comments such as “language is the very least of the problems that marginalised and minoritised communities contend with.” Such pervasive discourse implies that a focus on language is somehow less valuable, and indeed, *separate*, from the oppressions experienced by those ‘othered’ in our social hierarchies. April Baker Bell’s book provides an in-depth, insightful, well-theorised and (perhaps most importantly) an accessible consideration of language as a site of power, struggle, belonging and joy – ultimately highlighting how and why, language *does* matter.

For international readers, the book first provides a clear ‘window’ into the nuanced geo-political US context of Detroit, Michigan. In addition to providing several useful clarifications of key linguistic and contextual concepts – the initial chapter of the book essentially clarifies ‘who’ the book is for (practitioners, educators, activists and scholars), and ‘why’ it has been written (to combat Anti-Blackness Linguistic Racism). It is worth noting that early childhood professionals are not the central audience for this book – with the ‘ethnographic snapshots’, strategies and tools for practice focusing on secondary school ‘English Language Arts’ classrooms. However, the underlying themes and concepts discussed in the book are relevant and significant for those working in early childhood spaces. The (necessary) contextual specificity of the work means that it is particularly relevant to US audiences, however, much of the theoretical insights presented have the potential to resonate across international contexts, and the book raises several thought-provoking questions for language, literacy and linguistic practices more widely.

For early childhood professionals, the book encourages critical examination of the language/s we might teach children to use (or not to use) – and the impacts of this on children’s identities and self-esteem. Reminiscent of reconceptualist approaches in early childhood, Baker Bell emphasises how the use of White Mainstream English (WME) – what is often understood and socially constructed as ‘Standard English’ – has become a dominant discourse which

positions Black Language (BL) or African American Language (AAL) as inferior, ‘bad English’, and/or ‘slang’. Challenging this view, the book draws on linguistic scholarship to demonstrate that BL/AAL is a language in its own right – and, therefore, a ‘mother tongue’ for many children in the US. From this standpoint, rather than encouraging ‘code switching’ or the suppression of BL/AAL in favour of WME in order to ‘succeed in life’, Baker Bell challenges (white, middle-class notions of) ‘success’ and advocates for the valuing of BL/AAL as a force for empowerment, community and resistance against Anti-Black Linguistic Racism in contemporary US society. In doing so, Baker Bell argues that:

“the policing of Black Language and literacies in schools is not separate from the ways in which Black bodies have historically been policed and surveilled in U.S. society, and the ubiquitous assault and murder of Black bodies is not independent of the symbolic linguistic violence and spirit-murder that Black students experience daily in classrooms... linguistic in/justice is fundamentally intertwined with all other forms of justice” (p. 12).

Deep diving into the socio-cultural, political and historical conditions that have led to the “marginalisation, colonisation, exploitation, policing, and stereotypes associated with Black Language” (p. 11), the second chapter centres ‘Anti-Blackness’ using a Black critical theory lens to underpin thinking. In doing so, the chapter presents multimodal examples of the depth and breadth of Anti-Blackness Racism in the US. Subsequently, honing in on education systems, Baker Bell discusses how dominant approaches to language pedagogy perpetuate Anti-Blackness Linguistic Racism. After explaining and justifying the need for a distinct Black-centric approach, Baker Bell concludes the chapter by providing one such pedagogical framework and language artefacts for practicing ‘Anti-Racist Black Language Pedagogy’ – thus fulfilling Giroux’s (2018) call for pedagogies that bridge critique with radical and subversive hope.

The subsequent chapter introduces the reader to ‘research site’ where the study reported on in this book was conducted – i.e., the school and classroom, and to the central protagonists – i.e., the students, the classroom teacher and the author. What is noticeable from the outset of this book is the clear positionality of the author, bringing to life hooks’ (1989) contention that ‘the personal is political’. Also worth noting is the manner in which the author “speaks” with (and therefore positions) the reader throughout – inviting dialogue and questioning, whilst simultaneously, encouraging perspective-taking through counterstorying the perspectives of

the learners. The use of composite character counterstories is particularly powerful in ensuring accessibility and in demonstrating consistent attempts to ‘do justice’ (i.e., remain accountable) to participants and their thoughts, feelings and worldviews. Through these counterstories, the chapter demonstrates how learners experience internalised Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and ‘double consciousness’ (i.e., a love-hate relationship with BL/AAL) - and the impact of this on learners’ ways of thinking, being, doing, and their identities. Thus, the chapter contextualises and emphasises the need for Anti-Racist Black Language Pedagogy.

The fourth chapter explores the implementation of the Anti-Racist Black Language Pedagogy put forward by the author. Positioning the reader as a co-learner, the chapter explains the emergence of BL/AAL as a counter-language that bloomed in the shadow of slavery, and despite socio-political mechanisms for displacement - such as ‘language planning’ (i.e., ‘divide and rule’ strategies which disallowed shared language use amongst slaves). The author thus sheds light on the connections between language and race, enabling the reader to develop their own critical linguistic consciousness by ‘re-meeting’ history in the present moment – i.e., to “look again at what has been and to see it in new ways that provoke us to act and to see differently in the present” (Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 147). This provides necessary context for understanding where ‘Anti-Blackness Racism’ (and Anti-Blackness Linguistic Racism more specifically) has come from, how it is distinct from racism experienced by other minorities, and what ‘Anti-Blackness Racism’ looks like in the ‘here and now’. By presenting the distinct linguistic features of BL/AAL (e.g., grammar, syntax, pronunciation), the chapter simultaneously legitimises BL/AAL as a complete language. Weaving through counterstories from student protagonists, the chapter also provides pedagogical examples, and highlights suggested activities for consciousness-raising.

Chapter five invites the reader into celebrations of BL/AAL and provides ‘closure’ through reflective summaries of key protagonists’ varied experiences of developing Black Linguistic Consciousness through the Anti-Racist Black Language Pedagogical Framework outlined in the previous chapters. These counterstories highlight the ongoing tensions that emerge in learners’ lived experiences within and beyond the school gates. Baker Bell acknowledges these complexities, and the incompleteness of any pedagogical approach in bringing about ‘total’ transformation, noting:

“An Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy alone cannot solve Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and white linguistic hegemony. We must continue to think about how we can work toward changing the structures, systems, and institutions that perpetuate linguistic racism and language subordination” (p. 97).

Beyond embracing BL/AAL as “heritage and culture” (p. 97), this chapter outlines ‘ways forward’, and calls for introspection on one’s own racism (and internalised racism). Notably, given that participants in this study primarily shared Black or African American identities, questions about what such a pedagogical framework might ‘look like’ in more diverse classroom settings also emerge. Acknowledging this, Baker Bell explores pedagogical possibilities for solidarity – highlighting the need to examine experiences of “linguistic and racial violence across communities of colour” (p. 87). What such pedagogical approaches might ‘look like’ in other homogenous (e.g., predominantly white) settings, and diverse early childhood settings, would no doubt also make for rich investigation.

In the final (bonus) chapter, the author provides an ‘epilogue’ that takes place five years after the stories shared in the previous chapters. Shifting the focus to higher education contexts, the chapter provides a framework for embedding linguistic justice - outlining provocations, examples and activities for use with pre-service teachers. Although the chapter’s key suggested resource for critical analysis is a book written for young adults (‘The Hate U Give’ by Angie Thomas), the chapter also invites readers (perhaps particularly those working in higher education) to consider possibilities for social justice work that encompasses scholar-teacher-researcher-activism. Offering practical examples, Baker Bell generously shares her own experiences of what such work has involved (and the impacts of this for students in her context). Such an ending ‘passes on the torch’, thus inviting readers to start (or re-start or extend) our own journeys towards seeking linguistic justice.

References

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