

Lolita Ndabahagamyé-Vieux: So multilingualism is cultural awareness, and expanding the world around you.

Jennifer Saldana Whyte: I see multilingualism as a secret code. I tell my kids, we're detectives. We go undercover, and we get to listen to conversations that maybe other people can't understand, and can't gather.

Montserrat Garibay: Welcome to this two-part podcast hosted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, OELA. We're here with Kristin Simonne, Education Program Specialist at OELA, and today we will be listening to a conversation with four exceptional African-American and Afro-Latin educators about supporting and celebrating multilingual and multicultural students and educators that was held in celebration of Black History Month.

I am pleased to introduce Jennifer Saldana Whyte, a Spanish teacher at the Donoho School in Anniston, Alabama, Dr. Alex Marrero, the superintendent of Denver Public Schools, the largest school district in Colorado, Lolita Ndabahagamyé-Vieux, a multilingual specialist with Austin Independent School District, and Dr. Margarita Machado-Casas, a full professor in dual language and English learner education department at the University of San Diego.

In Part 1 of the podcast, the panelists will share the meaning of multilingualism for them as Black educators, discuss what and who inspired them to become educators, reflect on what can be done better to retain multilingual educators and educators of color, and share their own experiences of incorporating cultural diversity of Black students and families into their practice.

In Part 2 of the podcast, the panelists will discuss some of the English and multilingual resources that they can recommend, professional learning opportunities that they've found effective to help them serve diverse student populations, provide suggestions on creating a welcoming environment that allows Black families to be active partners in their kids' educational process, and offer advice for educators and multilingualism advocates.

Please note that in this podcast, the term "English learners" and "multilingual learners" are used interchangeably, and refer to the population of students defined as English learners in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act.

Let's get the conversation started.

Kristin Simonne: And welcome everyone. Bonjour, hola. Thank you to our panelists, again. We're so excited to get to have this conversation with you.

So we will move over to our first question, so the question is, what does multilingualism mean to you? And how does it tie into your identity as a Black educator? Margarita, can we start with you?

Dr. Macahado-Casas: Hello, hello, everybody. Thank you so much for this opportunity. I have to say welcome, and [foreign language 00:03:26.009]

Well, my identity as a Black educator is totally linked with the multiple languages that I speak. It's part of who I am. My linguistic identity does not exist as a vacuum that interacts with, you know, with...that exists as a vacuum, but interacts with all my other identities. And when I think about who I am as a multilingual educator, and as a Black educator, I think about my family, I think about, you know, how I grew up in a space with over seven languages being spoken. I think about being multilingual, bilingual, and ready to mingle from Sunday to Domingo. It has to do with my personality, with my family, with everything that I do.

In the case of me being an Afro-Latina, I always think about how, as Black people who are also Latinos, oftentimes we're excluded. And so, you know, this whole idea of "hyphen," right, that we've lived in a hyphenated reality, that we are this, or we are that, for me, I'm not Black and Latina, I'm a Black Latina. And I think that that kind of, you know, composes everything that I am, and the multiple realities that we live in, because we have [foreign language 00:04:41.820] one foot in one, and another foot in another, but we're standing together, strong, as multilingual, bilingual and ready to mingle from Sunday to Domingo.

Kristin Simonne: Every time I hear you say that, I love it. And wow, seven languages growing up. That's amazing. Alex? Oh, I see you...

Dr. Marrero: Yes, surely. Well said, Margarita. Well said. As an Afro-Latino, I also share with a whole lot that was just shared out loud, but the way that I coined it here, it's my superpower, it being multilingualism. I carry this little button. As superintendent, we don't have the gold stars that we all used to love giving our students, but this is my version of the gold star. So as I engage, and spark that curiosity and that creativity, I believe problem solving, and greater flexibility, and control of decision making happens when you're multilingual. It opens up the world of curiosity, and allows students to pursue their passions.

So as I float around the 200-plus schools, and even in the community, I'm always wearing these, and as soon as I engage, whether it's with a student or a staff member, and they prove that they are multilingual, I give them one of these. So, it's [foreign language 00:05:56.638]

Kristin Simonne: Wow. That's awesome, that you get to give them to the students and the staff as well. Thank you, Alex. On to you, Lolita.

Lolita Ndabahagamyé-Vieux: Good afternoon, everyone. So multilingualism, for me, means engaging with different languages, more than one language, but also expanding your culture, your world view. I'm from Burundi, which is in Central East Africa, so most people where I'm from speak at least two languages, which our native language is Kirundi, and French is also spoken there, and some people speak Swahili. So I did grow up surrounded by different languages, which was a norm for me. And later in life, I learned English, I learned Spanish, so multilingualism is cultural awareness, and expanding the world around you.

Kristin Simonne: Yes, I love that, multilingualism as the norm. Merci beaucoup. Jenniffer?

Jenniffer Saldana Whyte: Hey, everybody. Thank you for being here. I'm so excited to be here with you. I'm Jenniffer Whyte. I'm originally from the Dominican Republic.

So for me, multilingualism is really important. I speak Spanish, and I see multilingualism as a secret code. I tell my kids, we're detectives. We go undercover, and we get to listen to conversations that maybe other people can't understand and can't gather. And as an Afro-Latina, you know, I didn't always know that I was Black. You know, we have this thing that we're not really Black, we're brown, or we're other things. But I learned, after watching a documentary with Dr. Henry Louis Gates, "Black in Latin America," I realized, wait a minute, so I'm Black?

And when I realized that, which took a while, when I finally realized and admitted that I was a Black Latina, then I was kind of like, free. I was able to soar. I was able to finally come into a skin that I enjoy even more. And I was able to teach my students how to come into my world, as a Latina and as Black. So when they hired me, they hired two people. They hired a Latina, and they hired a Black person. So I think it's been a benefit for me, to just embrace multilingualism.

Kristin Simonne: That's beautiful. And the fact that you encourage your students to be detectives in their multilingualism is really great, too.

So thank you all for that first question. I'm going to move on to our second question, What or who influenced you to become an educator? Back to you, Margarita.

Dr. Macahado-Casas: Muchas gracias. I think that what influenced me is not a who, it's the fact that I came here at the age of 14, crossed the border undocumented. I came in as a multilingual speaker, to a space where Blackness was not recognized. I really lived in the discourse of invisibility because I pass, right? I'm light. And so in the social reality of the United States, social historical reality of the United States, I'm a Latina. So it wasn't until I came in here to the United States that I became a Latina. Before that, I was a blufilena, I was a Caribbean woman. And so I came in here, and then I started realizing, wait a minute, I don't belong here with the Latinos, and I don't belong here with the Blacks, and I felt that I was just lost, really.

And so what really influenced me to become an educator was the fact that there was no representation, absolutely, until I got to college, from people like us.

And not to say that we did not exist, that we weren't... I had colleagues, I had friends, people that were Afro-Latinos, right? But they were never really out, if that makes sense. And certainly not in the curriculum, not in everything, anything that I read. And it wasn't until I got to college that I took a class, a multicultural education class I think it was, or maybe ethnic studies, and the professor, you know, had a reading on Blacks in Latin America. And then I said, oh, man, that's me. What's up, right? And I knew it. And I remember vividly crying, raising my hand, and just saying, you know what, y'all? I'm Black. I knew I was Black. My family is Black, you know? We speak Creole, Garifuna, [inaudible 00:10:22] there's different languages that I was exposed to, but none of that was represented, nor did I feel comfortable sharing that in schools.

So going through that experience really was what led me to then become an educator and devote my entire life, really, to looking at Afro-Indigenous, looking at students of color in many, many, many aspects so that there is representation for people like us.

Kristin Simonne: Muchas gracias. Thank you. Thank you for your story, thank you for your devotion, and thank you for being that representation.

Alex?

Dr. Marrero: Yeah. So similarly, it's more of a what. Sometimes I can't believe, although I love it, that I'm an educator, a lead educator, if you will, superintendent of the largest school district here in Colorado. And my connection to the transformative power of education is deeply personal, like I'm sure the rest of the panel, and those who are in attendance.

From a young age, I've had a profound understanding that education is the foundation of success. So gracias a mi mamá, la familia, similar to Jenniffer, Santiago, Santo Domingo, but we're from Monte Cristi, a border town from the Haitian border. So that's where my Afro-Latino comes from, so it was instilled in me. But it was the fact that life happened, and tragedy happened, and I found myself, as a young, young youngster in the Bronx, having no one after mom passed. And if it wasn't for the educators up in Fordham Road, those of us who know New York and Fordham University, who said no, not you, Alex, I went

from being groomed to be down in Wall Street, and I was a business student, to transforming into education, allowing me the opportunity to give back exactly what was given to me when I was absolutely in my pits.

So that's why I'm an educator, and I believe things happen for a reason.

Kristin Simonne: Powerful. Thank you for sharing your story of tragedy into transformation, and for being the leader that you are. Thank you.

Lolita?

Lolita Ndabahagamy-Vieux: Yes, just like Alex and Margarita, it was more a what for me. I did not think about being a teacher until I was in my mid-20s. I studied advertising, and I didn't really know anything about the field of education, but in my mid-20s, I really felt like I needed a career change, and I needed... I was like, I want to use my languages. I want to use what I know about children. I had worked with children, but not really as a teacher. So that's when I decided I was going to change career, and become an educator, and I have no regrets. So from advertising to teaching, the education field, yes.

Kristin Simonne: Amazing choice, the career change into teaching. Thank you.

And Jenniffer?

Jenniffer Saldana Whyte: That is all awesome. It's definitely a what for me as well. I think that as long as I can remember, I grew up in Miami, Florida, and as long as I can remember, I remember wanting to be a teacher, dressed up on dress-up days to be a teacher. And as I grew up, and went to Miami Senior High School, that's where I graduated from, they have a center for the teaching profession, where they prepared us to start teaching in high school. And there I met this lady, she was a white teacher, and she was really hard on me. She was really hard on me. I thought, this lady's racist. She just keeps picking on me. Her name is Ms. Smith. Now she's Ms. Smith-Moise.

But then, you know, I didn't know why she was picking on me. Later on she told me, "I did it because I believed in you." And what she did for me... And put me in competitions, always having me compete all over the place with

speaking, and I was so shy, I just didn't like speaking in front of people, and she took that out of me. She saw gifts in me that I didn't know.

But really, the what in this is that Ms. Smith taught me that I don't have to be the same color as my teacher in order to be influenced, to be propelled forward. So even though she's a white teacher, that means that I can influence any kid, any color. The majority of my students happen to be white, American, in the rural South, but I happen to do my best to encourage them to be diverse, to love diversity, to go beyond their neighborhoods. And this is my what, and my who.

Kristin Simonne: Yes, that was a what and a who. So thank you. Thank you to the teachers like Ms. Smith, who are an inspiration. Thank you all for sharing these stories of your what and your who, who have influenced you.

On to our third question. And this one is for you, Margarita, What can be done to better retain effective multilingual teachers, and teachers of color?

Dr. Macahado-Casas: This is a really, really, really good question, and it's a really critical one, because we know that retention of teachers of color is critical, and also recruitment of teachers of color is critical. I don't have exact stats, but I know that recruitment of our teachers of color, it's been increasing. The need is so, so high that we have more demand than supply.

Number one, our field is still predominantly white, okay? Our teaching force is still predominantly white. And we have to do a better job in securing, and making sure that once somebody comes in the field, that we retain them, especially if they're multilingual, ready to mingle from Sunday to Domingo, because there are several things that they bring into the space.

So there's a couple of things that I would like to address. Number one, the idea of really welcoming and accepting this idea of being multilingual and bilingual from Sunday to Domingo. And I say the whole day, every single day, 365 days a week, and that's why I say from Sunday to Domingo, because we don't stop this. This is not something that you stop one day, and you say all of a sudden, I'm not this. This is something we live. This is something we breathe. This is who we are.

And when a school and a community says, this is a teacher that I am accepting, you're accepting us with all of that, and that is the number one resource that schools, administrators, school districts should take into consideration, and should take advantage of, and use and leverage, is that ability to have someone that can help representation, and represent multiple cultures and multiple languages, and use that to increase diversity, to increase efficacy, multilingual efficacy in the classroom, and to increase the environment itself of the classroom.

I think the second thing would be creating a positive and inclusive school environment, really aligning school cultures, the climate with the values brought by the teachers, especially teachers of color, who are professionals, and identifying them and respecting them as multilingual professionals who have that additional thing to support, and that it's attractive, right, I think. Really thinking about teachers of color as people who value the connection with communities, so provide those spaces for them to connect to the communities that they represent. It's so, so critical.

Also, really avoid this idea or this practice of schools as spaces of rejection, right, as spaces where you are one thing only, as spaces where we are represented, and we have to click that one little box. Anytime I had to do that for any census, it was so hard for me, y'all, because I'm like, am I this, am I this, am I that? And I would just put "Other," and write it down, you know, because I'm not all of that, I'm everything, right? And so when schools really practice, you know, are spaces of rejection, then we really need to...you know, teachers who have to practice what I call the pedagogy of the chameleon, right? The pedagogy of the chameleon, which is moving in and out of spaces, and oftentimes not being your true self. And then, you know, this idea of Blackness as invisibility in the schools, we need to really revert that.

And you know, one thing, as I was thinking about this, is that if you think about it, and if you look up in the dictionary, the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term "Afro-Latina" is not included. Afro-Latino is not included. Think about that, y'all. I mean, that tells you everything, right? That tells you a lot about what is happening within our community [foreign language 00:18:48.781] we're still invisible, and we're not seen. And I think that when we think about school

districts, and we think about retaining teachers, our job as educators is making the invisible visible. It's the role of education, and of our teaching function, and it should become really focused on development, the development of teachers of color, of all our teachers, through the lens of our identities and who we are.

Another one is making sure that there's strong school site leadership. Creating those positive and inclusive school culture that requires strong site leadership is so important your leaders [foreign language 00:19:26.321] They need to understand who you are. You need to get to know your teachers. You have to build those relationships, right? Teachers of color really benefit from leaders who empower them, who advocate for them, who advocate on behalf of students, of the teachers. Strong leaders provide teachers with the autonomy, you know, to be who they are, and to empower their own classrooms. Strong leaders really demonstrate leadership roles to staff, and really value staff, and really value teachers for what they bring, and that's really critical.

Make sure that there's a bit of classroom autonomy. You know, we are in the stage of a whole bunch of curriculums, and a whole bunch of things, but think about it. These teachers have so much to offer, and it's particularly teachers of color who bring innovative and culturally diverse teaching practices that we should be definitely using.

Strong induction and mentorship programs, ongoing and strategic professional learning opportunities, early career opportunities for our teachers. It's so critical for our teachers of color, [foreign language 00:20:33.877] the support, grabbing them by the hand to make sure that we make it through, with all of the hurdles that we have in our current field.

And then also, creating organizations, partnering with organizations like, you know, student organizations, when they're in colleges and universities, such as, like, the Bilingual Education Student Organization. They create pipelines, right, for our teachers of color to come into the field, and really creates a community of support so that we can retain them.

Kristin Simonne: Thank you so much, Margarita. Thank you for those strategies that you shared.

We are going to move on to the next question, which is, Share an example of how, under your leadership, you have incorporated the cultural diversity of Black students and their families into your lesson planning, your curriculum work, or instructional practice. And Alex, we'll start with you for this one.

Dr. Marrero: Sure. Thank you. So under my leadership, we've had to truly define what we mean by quality instruction. Some of us have heard of the pobrecito and the [inaudible 00:21:38] syndrome. The bar is here, right? Now, we maybe think that we're catering, the bar is here, and this is the bar of excellence. So this has included developing a vision, and revising on how we ensure high-quality instructional materials are in the hands of every educator. So we're intentional in seeking the perspective of our Black students, and families when developing that vision, and continue to seek their perspective when finalizing the curriculum selection, and developing professional learning opportunities across our system.

I also want to acknowledge the criticality of the external partners that we have. We have ACs, ACs stands for Advisory Councils, Black Family Advisory Council, we have our Latinx Advisory Councils. We also have internal liaisons, like family engagement specialists, Black family engagement specialists, Latino family engagement specialists. And at the school level, we've leveraged our infrastructure of our Black Excellence Plans. And I want to give credit to our Board of Education. Before I arrived, they created Black Excellence Resolutions, No Justice, No Peace Resolutions, and as a result of that, we have Black Excellence Plans in every single one of our schools. And in those, with those advisory councils, we seek input on items that contribute to the quality of the learning experience for our Black students, and their families.

We also have a Black Student Success Initiative, which takes one of our best, best principals, which is usually taboo, when you take a great principal out of a school, but he has proven to really eradicate those gaps that exist, and now he's doing it for the entire system.

Another initiative, I know you asked for only one, but the power of our scholars cannot be overstated. We have a No Justice, No Peace initiative. Again, a resolution that now is woven into the curriculum came about when our students

went on a trip to Washington, D.C., visited the African American Museum, came back empowered because they didn't see themselves in the curriculum, and as a result, they got in front of the board, the board had no choice but to listen, but more importantly, create policy. So that's one way that our students are truly, truly embedded.

There's a lot more in terms of how our policies have shifted. We have our Young African and American and Latin Leaders. It's called YAALL, Y-A-A-L-L, a centerpiece of student voice and leadership. And every, every spring, they come up, while using the critical civic inquiry model, and create policy as if they're on the legislative floor, and much of that has yielded some changes in the city, but also in our system.

So I have a saying, too. It's not as flashy, and it doesn't rhyme like Margarita's, but if we're preparing our students for jobs and careers and experiences that don't yet exist, then who are we to instill our past and our present on the student, unless our present is truly that, the gift of them telling us what they need. So that's some examples.

Kristin Simonne: Wow. Just amazing. Thank you. Not only examples of your leadership, but examples of student leadership as well. Just so powerful. Thank you.

Lolita, would you like to answer this question next?

Lolita Ndabahagame-Vieux: Yes. So I was a bilingual classroom teacher for 18 years, and the first 14 years, or 15 years in the community where I was teaching, there were absolutely no Black students in the bilingual classroom. So after 14, 15 years, they tried to invite more Black families to join bilingual classrooms, and I had the first Black students, African-American, a few students from Africa to join my classroom.

It was not easy at first, because everybody wasn't really buying into it. It was very separated. The bilingual classroom were for the Hispanic Latinos, I did not have any Afro-Latinos in my classroom, and the other classes were for the other students. So it was a change in the mindset. It was very important to build

relationship with those families, and getting their trust, and letting them know, yes, it's going to be difficult at first, but it's going to work.

So I had to change my curriculum. I had to get, definitely, more literature, showing more diversity, more Black students, elevating their stories, their experiences. And that was definitely a shift in our school and in our community, because the classrooms were still pretty segregated. And it took a while. It's been maybe now five years that in that school we've had more Black students joining the dual language classrooms. Yes.

Kristin Simonne: Thank you, Lolita. Thank you for pioneering that. And it's great to hear that it's been five years, and still moving forward. So thank you.

Jenniffer?

Jennifer Saldana Whyte: Yes, so in my classroom, I make sure that I incorporate Afro-Latino culture the whole year. We have... I teach Spanish, so as I looked for resources years ago, I did not find anything on Afro-Latinos, and I was really frustrated, because there was nothing. So I started researching myself, and I started a group on Facebook, called Incorporating Afro-Latino Culture in Spanish Classrooms, and it has grown immensely, because I wasn't the only teacher that didn't even know how to do this. We only had what we had in these textbooks, and that's it.

Once I started incorporating that into my regular curriculum every day, then I started branching out to my school community. So I'm just a Spanish teacher in the school, but I had to try to teach to the whole community. And that's how I started the Black History programs. There was one student that said, how come we don't celebrate Black history here? And sadly, in my community, we're the only school that celebrates Black history. The only one, the only one that's a middle school and high school.

So I started doing interactive Black history events, such as, what is Black hair? And I invited a hair salon, and they started teaching the kids what is it, what are cornrows, the history of cornrows, that they're maps on their head, you know, all kinds of stuff. The kids were able to actually touch people's hair who were locked. I mean, I had my hair locked just last year. So they had locks in their

hair, they had a hair competition, who can braid the fastest? It was a way where I can see my Black...my white students in a Black world. It was just a beautiful thing.

After that, I went ahead and contacted an HBCU, and said, hey, can you guys come over here and teach my kids how to step dance? And as I incorporate step, like El Zapateo in my class, from Mexico, then we did the African-American step dance for my whole community. They love to do step. Now they want to join an HBCU. I don't know how that works, but you know, my students that are not of color wanting to go into this world.

And this year, just yesterday, I'm so exhausted because just yesterday we had the History of Soul Food. My kids love food, but they don't know the significance of where macaroni and cheese came from, or where yucca comes from, or where that sweet potato pie or those hush puppies came from. So I had them do a big research on dishes, and yesterday, I had the whole school community come in, and they got to try all these dishes, but also know where these dishes came from. They're not just Southern. It's not just Southern food, it's soul food. So I love the fact that everyone was there, and they were able to partake and eat into that.

So me, it's hands-on, hands-on experience, not just a speaker. Because a speaker, sometimes kids tune it out, and we're in this age of technology, and we have to do hands-on things. So I think this has worked for me immensely.

Kristin Simonne: Wow. Thank you for teaching the community, teaching the culture, from hair to dance to soul food. That really sounds just amazing. Thank you.

Montserrat Garibay: A big thank you to our panelists for discussing the important topic of supporting multilingual and multicultural students and educators of color. The information, reflections, and experiences that you shared today will certainly help educators support this population of students. You have given us many useful ideas to think about as we continue to serve English and multilingual learners across the country.

Please listen to the second part of this podcast, that will feature the same panel of experts. We also encourage you to visit the NCELA website at www.ncela.ed.gov, and check out the many educator resources available there.