# TOWARDS AN EVIDENCE BASED CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY OF KNOWLEDGE, HOW THE ARUBAN MULTILINGUAL MODEL MAY PROVIDE A SOLUTION

RÉGINE CROES, GREGORY RICHARDSON, MERLYNNE WILLIAMS
INSTITUTO PEDAGOGICO ARUBANO

## Introduction

In an increasingly globalised society where the fostering of strategic partnerships is very important, communication plays an important role. The authors of this paper argue that multilingualism should be encouraged in the Caribbean in order to broaden the evidence based community of knowledge in the region. Despite new forms of information sharing technologies, language still is a major dilemma for the process of communication. The authors present an Aruban multilingual model for primary schools, called the *Scol Multilingual* and argue that the encouragement of multilingualism in the Caribbean region, could bridge important gaps between local identities and cultures and wider Caribbean identities and cultures.

We have recently seen a substantial increase in the information that is presented on the World Wide Web regarding issues that affect the Caribbean. The 2009 Internet World Stats Report has indicated that the Caribbean is home to approximately 9 million internet users. This roughly amounts to 25% of the entire regional population (Internet World Stats, 2009). Presently there are numerous online Caribbean databases that interconnect various libraries in the region, which clearly is an indication that geographical information interconnectivity is on the rise.

However, there are still major concerns challenging our region with regard to the construction of an evidence based Caribbean community of knowledge. Issues such as language comprehension, sibling island rivalry, the colonial mentality, inaccessibility of information and the inability of regional 'funds of knowledge' to enter the mainstream are still obstacles that have to be dealt with if we are to reach our goal of a Caribbean community where knowledge and information is shared in an open, understandable and transparent manner (Allahar, 2005; Lamming, 1991; Meeks, 2010).

Aruba is currently piloting a multilingual model for primary schools where children are exposed to a total of four different languages from the age of 4 (Grupo Modelo di Idioma, 2002). In this particular school children will be taught that communication in different languages is an asset and not a barrier. These children will also discover that as Caribbean citizens we can learn from one another, on the basis of a confidence in our own perspective. By involving the entire multilingual community in the process of sharing oral and written experiences at an early age, we aim to foster a strong sense of self esteem and cooperation, despite our multiple identities. This can be accomplished by promoting active participation by all citizens in the educational process. Based on the particular Aruban multilingual demographic constellation, we describe possible ways of bridging the barriers mentioned earlier. Working together in communities of practice with information professionals, librarians, researchers, educators and the overall community, we can overcome the many obstacles we face as Caribbean people.

In the first section of this article, we discuss the effects of colonial language policies on Caribbean people's perspective on languages. Secondly, some light will be shed on the accessibility of Caribbean knowledge in the region and the world. In the third section we will describe the role of academia with regards to collection and distribution of evidence based information. The prevailing language paradigms in the Caribbean will be juxtaposed in the fourth section. Fifthly, the model of the Aruban Multilingual School will be presented. In the last section we will illustrate the benefits of a multilingual society when it comes to addressing information discrepancies in the Caribbean.

## Colonial language politics and its effect on knowledge distribution

One of the main obstacles that have made sharing of information in the Caribbean difficult is the fact that there are multiple languages competing for dominant status spoken in the region. This has led to the isolation of the transfer of information along metropolitan language lines. The British, Spanish, French and the Dutch Caribbean never fully enjoyed the benefits of having empirical knowledge that could be shared across the boundaries of the linguistic enclaves established by each colonial power in the region. Knowledge of the old man under the tree in the depths of San Pedro de Macoris, or the medicinal recipes of the Orisha *sistah*[1] in the country side of Trinidad and Tobago or the story of Juancho in the traditional Aruban *cunucu*[2] house in the heart of Casibari, has never been disseminated and appreciated throughout the entire Caribbean. Language and access to communication technologies have been of course

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[1] *Sistah* refers to a church sister, who practices Afro Caribbean Orisha worship.
[2] rural area

a major impediment, but even with all the information technology available these days, the above stories still never reach the mainstream.

Regional universities, like the University of the West Indies and Universities in Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico have traditionally catered to students from their own language constituencies. Very few grants or subsidies are awarded to students from outside the region where each university is located[3]. Language politics, heavily influenced by colonialism, has led the inhabitants of many islands to think that 'their' metropolitan language is superior to the others and that standard metropolitan varieties of European languages are superior to the creole languages spoken by people in the Caribbean (Meeks, 2010; Faraclas, 2010; Pereira, 2008; Richardson, 2010).

Colonial policy was geared towards Caribbean cultures being carbon copies of metropolitan cultures; clothes had to be similar, society had to be identical and languages had to be indistinguishable from those of the metropole. The colonies have also adopted European nationalistic philosophies and have emulated these ideas and attitudes. The Federation, Carifta, Status Aparte and the relationship between the Spanish Caribbean and its 'stepbrother' Puerto Rico, have demonstrated the difficulty of Caribbean nations to work together. The language policies that have been implemented over the past few centuries in the Caribbean have all been aimed at the imposition of a single standardized dominant metropolitan language.

Multilingualism has not been encouraged because it has been seen as a threat, first to the political elites from the metropole during the colonial period and then to the local metropolitan-educated political elites after Independence. The reasoning goes like this: If language gives access to knowledge and knowledge gives power, then the more languages a person or group understands and can express itself in, the more power it acquires. Therefore, to preserve the power within a certain limited group, the standard metropolitan language to which that group has exclusive or preferred access is imposed as the only "official" language, while access to higher education in the imposed language is severely restricted. Such psycho-cultural factors as the imposition of monolingualism have played a key role in the imposition of political and economic systems of domination in the Caribbean (Faraclas, 2010). Today, in Europe and in America monolingualism is still commonly seen as a positive ideal. "In America we speak English, not Spanish", is a common slogan of US politicians in their election campaigns. Up to this day, people still expect academic papers in Aruba,

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[3] The University fees of the University of the Netherlands Antilles, the University of Aruba and the University of the West Indies have been set considerably higher for international students, including those from the Caribbean. UNICA, the inter-university organization for the Caribbean, has attempted to put in place agreements that would effectively allow students from any part of the Caribbean to pay local tuition at any other Caribbean university.

Curaçao and Bonaire to be written in Dutch[4]. This imposed monolinguism has had many unfortunate consequences. In the next section we will delve a bit deeper into one of these: the inaccessibility of Caribbean knowledge.

**The accessibility of Caribbean knowledge**
As we have already mentioned, the Caribbean is not homogeneous when it comes to language. But this lack of homogeneity has two aspects. Traditionally, Caribbean peoples have been pluri-lingual and pluri-cultural since before the arrival of the Europeans at the end of the 15th century. But when the Europeans arrived, they began to carve out separate enclaves where each rival colonial power attempted to impose its own language as a language of domination. While this in one sense added quantitatively to the net number of languages spoken in the region, it has had an overall negative qualitative impact, because it has devalued the languages spoken by the non-propertied classes while simultaneously depriving these same non-propertied classes from access to higher education in the dominant language. How likely is it for a researcher from the Spanish Caribbean to browse for evidence based information in the English language and vice versa? Generally speaking, both researchers will most likely opt for what they're most comfortable with. This in practice usually means that the information is limited to what is accessible in the one standardized European language that has been imposed as a single language of instruction on each researcher by the educational system that his/her society inherited from the colonialists. Not only are most Caribbean researchers limited by this linguistic 'enclave mentality' that deprives them of access to information in other languages about the Caribbean from neighboring linguistic 'enclaves', they are also ill equipped linguistically and culturally to grasp the context of what little information that manages to break through these artificial enclave boundaries which remain one of the most debilitating legacies of European rivalries in the region.

As Caribbean researchers, it is of utmost importance that we promote regional partnerships so that we can share our problems, interests, perspectives, projects, and publications with those who are geographically, politically, economically, and culturally closest to us, instead of continuing to look almost exclusively to our distant metropoles for inspiration and recognition. This raises the following question: Is this lack of sharing of regional knowledge a matter of availability, accessibility or mentality?
When analyzing the most popular sources of information on the island of Aruba, one can conclude that a limited quantity of information concerning the Caribbean is presented. On Aruban cable television, there is only one commercial station from the Caribbean, namely Tempo music channel. There are a limited number of radio

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[4] Based on observations of students' theses at the IPA and UNA dissertations.

programs that address Caribbean issues, and local newspapers do not provide much in the way of relevant regional reporting. Obtaining access to quality evidence based information about the Caribbean usually requires determined and conscious effort on the part of the person seeking such information.

Assuming that the requested information is available, what can we then say about its accessibility? At present, the internet is the principal medium for accessing information worldwide, especially for people with limited physical access to major research institutions, which are few and far between in the Caribbean (Durrant, 2006). If we look at the Aruban information infrastructure, we see that there is still a huge amount of knowledge and information that is neither documented nor placed on the World Wide Web. This highlights the urgency of documenting local knowledges and information and making them accessible before they are lost forever.

But Caribbean academics, who have maximal access both to local Caribbean sources as well as to the internet generally tend to seek information from metropolitan sources. This means that apart from matters of availability and accessibility, attitudes play a significant role in the Balkanization of access to information in the Caribbean. Perhaps what we are dealing with here is in part a symptom of our sense of inferiority in relation to all things metropolitan (Garvey, 1986). Perhaps too many of us still feel that the only valid and valuable knowledge must come from Europe or the United States of America, and that knowledge from our own Caribbean region or even our own co-citizens is not as valid or as valuable. In the following section we will focus on the role of research within Caribbean institutions of higher learning, and on how our particular Caribbean cultural, linguistic, psychological, and political realities present challenges and opportunities for researchers in the region.

**Academic institutions contributing to evidence-based information**
The Aruban teacher training institute, *Instituto Pedagogico Arubano* (IPA), plays a significant role as an agent of information collection/dissemination and social change in Aruban society. The Centre for Educational Research & Development (CIDE) is the department of the IPA assigned with the task of assisting students with their research projects. The research department also has responsibility for supporting the educational research infrastructure on the island by conducting numerous studies in the fields of education, language, culture and society.

The CIDE is currently concerned with issues surrounding the publishing and sharing of research based information. These include the creation of communities of practice where teachers and information carriers can work in close proximity, where teachers can share local knowledge with their pupils, where students can gain access to oral and written information on a comprehensible level and where the integration of

Caribbean knowledges into the modalities of information and communication technologies (ICT) is encouraged. These processes are essential if we are to prevent the neo-colonization of our students' young minds that takes place via our globalized channels of information. Many Caribbean children are growing up with American pop stars as their main role models. In an increasingly Americanized world, western images are constantly bombarding us through our television screens.

Many of our children do not see images of people who look like themselves, talk like themselves or think and act like themselves in our information and entertainment media. However, there are also interesting initiatives taking place to bring Caribbean culture closer to our young people. The *Biblioteca Nacional Aruba* recently organized a seminar about *Compa Nanzi*[5], by inviting scholars from the Caribbean to discuss this internationally respected fictional spider from an academic perspective. They also premiered the first *Compa Nanzi* cartoon in Papiamentu (*Kompa Nanzi y su kuminda preferí*, 2010).

There are a number of areas in which libraries, archives, and other data collection centers could play a role in increasing the accessibility and usability of information from the Caribbean. Working together in communities of practice, librarians and other information professionals could play a key role in collecting Caribbean data and making these accessible to other stakeholders. Using this data, curriculum developers could assemble information packages for teachers containing evidence-based Caribbean knowledge. With this same goal in mind, authors of children's books could integrate more Caribbean based information into their work. Given their popularity, the local electronic and print media could begin to strategize as to how best to assist their communities in gaining more access to local and regional funds of knowledge.

In 2008, the University of Aruba started a PhD program, where researchers are trained to look for solutions to the island's contemporary problems. In addition, the IPA is producing teachers who are being trained to conduct action research in their classrooms, schools and *barrio's*[6], thereby transferring vital skills to their pupils in the process. One of the appealing features of these research initiatives is the focus on local and Caribbean perspectives. To help combat our sense of inferiority, it is imperative for our researchers to acknowledge and valorize the Caribbean as the subject/object of transformative research. As educational researchers we deem it our responsibility to set an example in the hope that, in a community of practice with information workers, we can succeed in refocusing the attention of our politicians, policy makers, educators, health specialists, and our entire communities from the metropoles back to the Caribbean.

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[5] *Compa Nanzi* (Papiamento) is one of the most important characters of West African and Caribbean folklore. He is also known as Ananse, Kwaku Ananse, and Anancy; and in the Southern United States he has evolved into Aunt Nancy. He is a spider, but often acts and appears as a man.
[6] In Aruba, a *barrio* can refer to a neighborhood, small district, or suburb.

**Caribbean language and education: Three positions**

From our regional analysis on language planning in the Caribbean and through empirical data on the development of Papiamento/u throughout the years, we have identified three emergent positions on the issue of language policy in education: the metropolitan language position, the native language position, and the multilingual position.

The supporters of the metropolitan language position contend that the language of the metropole is the best option for initial literacy and language of instruction at all levels of schooling. They argue that the metropolitan languages are 'world' languages and they offer greater opportunities than any others for advancement in our globalised societies. They argue that many Caribbean students, upon finishing secondary school, go on to further their studies in the metropoles, therefore they must have the maximum mastery possible of metropolitan languages to succeed academically. However, many Caribbean students are native Creole speakers of languages such as Papiamento/u, French lexifier Creoles, English lexifier Creoles and other non-standard varieties. Although supporters of this position often value their native languages to some extent, they often say that creole languages are limited in their scope, that they are only spoken on a few islands, and that they are inferior in grammar and vocabulary and therefore one cannot advance their careers with these 'inferior' languages.

The second position we refer to is the native language position. The supporters of this position advocate the use of the child's native language as the language of initial instruction and initial literacy. They argue that the advantages to incorporating native languages into the school curriculum include the following: 1) cognitive advantages: initial literacy and instruction in native languages provides a strong foundation that children can later use to learn all other subjects, including metropolitan languages; 2) affective: the use of the native language in school increases children's self esteem and their positive sense of their own language, culture, community, identity, etc.; 3) psychological advantages: children succeed better when they begin their studies in a language that they know and this initial success gives them the confidence to succeed throughout their academic careers; 4) social advantages: when children learn in the language of their community, it allows all community members (especially parents) to become more involved in the education process as well as increasing children's motivation to use their education to play a positive role in their local communities, instead of running away to the metropole as part of the 'brain drain'; 5) pedagogical advantages: the first principle of education is 'use the known to teach the unknown', so that using the native language makes it easier for teachers to ensure that all of their students have mastered all of the skills and competences necessary to succeed in school. Those who take the native language position often see native languages as vehicles of emancipation. They argue that it is important for the local population to

think, reflect and express themselves freely in their own native languages. They see European languages as being synonymous with colonialism and oppression against local populations, and they consider the elites in contemporary Caribbean societies as neo-colonialists who have internalized oppressive language policies in order to expand their range of power.

Finally, the multilingual position attempts to synthesize the valuable insights of both the metropolitan language and the native language positions. Advocates of the multilingual position argue that speaking one's native language as well as multiple second and third languages (including metropolitan languages) is an asset in an ever increasingly globalised society. Thinking, reflecting and expressing yourself in your native language builds the foundation to learn many other languages. And being multilingual could be beneficial for trade relations, tourism and the overall transfer of knowledge. Supporters of this position do not discount the value of foreign languages, but embrace them as essential elements in a child's education, while at the same time ensuring native languages their rightful place in the curriculum. We will now illustrate how the multilingual position can be translated into educational practice by giving a brief explanation of the Aruban multilingual school program.

### *Scol Multilingual* in Aruba

Aruba's language situation is peculiar in the sense that the majority of the population can communicate, at least at the most basic level, in the languages of Papiamento, Spanish, English and Dutch. Despite this admirable fact, there has never been a systematic language planning policy in place to deal with this phenomenon until recently (Pereira, 2008). Aruban multilingualism is a product of political, economic, cultural and demographical processes that have taken place throughout the island's history (Richardson, 2010). Groundbreaking scientific research on Papiamento, multilingualism, ethnic and creole studies by local and international scholars alike have contributed to a mind shift with respect to the place and function of language within the context of education. These studies have questioned the role of Dutch as the language of instruction in Aruban schools (Prins-Winkel, 1973; Severing, 1997; Pereira, 2008; Faraclas, 2010).

In 2007 the *Proyecto Scol Multilingual* was approved by the Aruban parliament. The multilingual schools proposed under this project will feature the four main languages spoken on the island and will primarily focus on Papiamento as the language of initial instruction and initial literacy in Aruban primary schools (Department of Education, 2002). To ensure a responsible evaluation and implementation process, a research team consisting of experts has been assembled from the University of Puerto Rico, the University of Aruba and the IPA. The premise of their research approach can be found in community-based action research theory, which stresses participatory input from the entire society (Faraclas, 2010; Stringer & Faraclas, 1987). The proposed goals of

the multilingual school are firstly, to achieve higher student performance rates at all educational levels and secondly, to achieve an overall improvement in students' language aptitude. The implementation frameworks for the multilingual school in Aruba are presented in table 1.

**Table 1** Multilingual model for primary education in Aruba (Grupo Modelo di Idioma, 2002)

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Grade</th><th>P-1</th><th>P-2</th><th>B-1</th><th>B-2</th><th>B-3</th><th>B-4</th><th>B-5</th><th>B-6</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">**Language of Instruction**</td><td colspan="6">**Papiamento**</td><td>*Transition*</td><td>*Transition*</td><td>**Dutch**</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">**Subjects**</td><td>**Papiamento**</td><td colspan="8">Papiamento remains the **most important language subject** throughout primary education and is the first language in which children develop their vocabulary, sense of grammar and language skills, including learning to read and write</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Dutch**</td><td colspan="5">**Familiarization**: while children are learning to read and write in Papiamento, they develop their oral knowledge of Dutch in a playful, communicative way</td><td colspan="3">**Systematic instruction**: Once children know how to read and write in Papiamento, they start transferring their knowledge and skills to Dutch, expanding its uses and preparing themselves to be able to learn in Dutch</td></tr>
<tr><td>**English**</td><td colspan="5">**Familiarization**: while children are developing both Papiamento and Dutch, they are stimulated in a playful way to keep expanding their oral knowledge of English, acquired earlier through the media</td><td colspan="3">**Systematic instruction**: children transfer and develop their written skills in English, and prepare themselves to be able to use English as a possible language of instruction</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Spanish**</td><td colspan="6">**Familiarization**: children are encouraged from an early age to develop oral knowledge of Spanish, building on encounters with the Spanish language in the Aruban and regional contexts, the media, and cultural expressions (e.g music)</td><td colspan="2">**Systematic instruction**: children now learn to read and write Spanish, expanding their communication skills</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">**Literacy development**</td><td>Preparing for initial literacy in **Papiamento**</td><td>Literacy development in **Papiamento**</td><td colspan="2">Literacy development in both **Papiamento** (advanced) and **Dutch** (initial)</td><td>Literacy dev. in **Pap, Dutch** (advanced) and **Eng** (initial)</td><td colspan="3">Literacy development in **Papiamento, Dutch, English** (advanced) and **Spanish** (initial & advanced)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">**Integration and transition**</td><td colspan="8">**Content Based Approach**: Languages and content areas are integrated in different forms, ranging from integrating the topics of the content areas in the language subjects (e.g. a text about the current geography subject in the English class) to integrating the languages as mediums or sources in the content areas (e.g a Spanish broadcast about a history subject in the history class)</td></tr>
</table>

*Proyecto Scol Multilingual* represents a new approach to language and cultural education. This project is about learning naturally, departing from the knowledge of one's own language. Languages are offered within their local and Caribbean cultural

context, introducing the children to both the form and structure of the language and its uses in everyday life. English for example will not be taught initially using the British varieties for the language, but instead using Afro-Caribbean and American varieties with which children are more familiar, expanding gradually to other variants. The same goes for Spanish where children come to school more familiar with the Latin-Caribbean varieties than with the European varieties of that languages.

## Conclusion: Benefits of a multilingual society

A multilingual society would have many benefits for bringing Caribbean people together. We will now illustrate a few models depicting the various benefits of such a society.
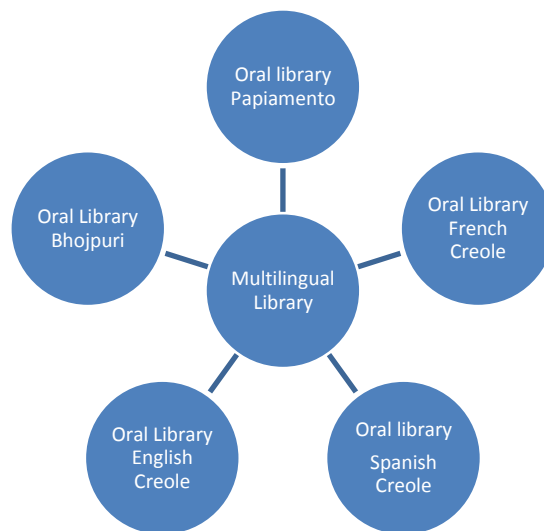
**Figure 1** Model of an extended multilingual oral library

A multilingual society has an extensive oral history, which can be captured and documented in a multilingual oral library. In this extended oral library, local information centers that employ workers who are multilingual could collect information from 'funds of knowledge' in isolated regions. These informants, or as we call them, extended oral libraries, may provide empirical knowledge that could be very valuable for fields as science, pharmacology, etc. A knowledge transfer is facilitated between these valuable informants and the information workers who can then, together with universities and other institutions, analyze, translate (if needed) and digitalize this information for all in the Caribbean and the world to make use of on the world wide web.
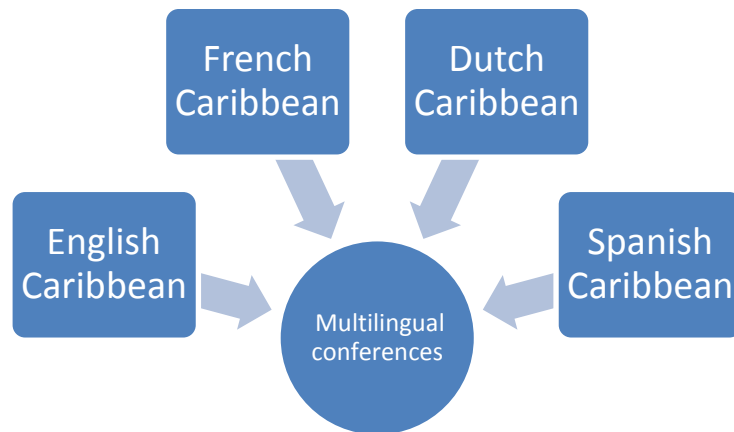
**Figure 2** Model of Multilingual Conferences

With the entire Caribbean region speaking multiple languages, larger numbers of academics could participate in a variety of international conferences. At present, most international meetings in the Caribbean region are attended almost exclusively by speakers of the particular metropolitan language of the territory where each particular meeting is held. But being a multilingual and multicultural community, papers could be presented and read in multiple languages, much to the benefit of all present. Multilingual Caribbean people could become the bridges between the enclosed academic worlds of the metropolitan enclaves, ensuring knowledge transfer across these linguistic and cultural divides. The multilingual resources of the region would begin to be acknowledged and valorized instead of being ignored and undermined. Being multilingual would instill a sense of pride in the inhabitants of the region. Arubans are quite proud to be able to communicate in multiple languages.

While we do not claim to have a strategy for overcoming all of the many existing barriers outlined above to the establishment of cross-Caribbean communities of knowledge, we believe that through the implementation of a systematized multilingual approach in the school curriculum, intra-regional communication and knowledge transfer would be facilitated and the Caribbean region could once again become an important regional and global crossroads where knowledge from different monolinguistic worlds could be made accessible to a greater public.

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