

Factors and Solutions for the Low Enrollment of African American students in World

Language classes

Asking the students

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African American students are enrolling in World Language classes much less frequently than their white counterparts (Glynn, 2012). This is an alarming finding because research has thoroughly explored the benefits of studying a World Language and if African American students are not enrolling in World Language classes, they are not able to receive those benefits. The benefits to studying a World Language are extensive.

To begin, students who study World Languages develop great cognitive flexibility which can result in outperformance on math, reading, and writing than their monolingual peers (Glynn, 2012). This cognitive ability can also lead to better achievement on standardized tests from elementary school to college entrance exams (Glynn, 2012, Schoener, 2016). When examining scores of SAT participants, students who had taken 4 years of language outperformed their other peers by scoring higher on the SAT exam than their peers who took 2 or less years of a World Language (Glynn, 2012). Additionally studying a World Language is frequently considered the gateway to higher education (Baggett, 2016). This can have a significant impact on student's futures determining the type of education that they receive. If African American students are not enrolling and staying in World Language classes, they are unable to access these benefits. Having African American students access the benefits of World Language study is crucial to minimizing the achievement gap and ensuring African American students are set up to succeed.

Not only are there academic benefits to studying a world language, there are also cultural benefits. Studying a World Language can help students develop more cultural understanding towards other cultures (Glynn, 2012,, Moore, 2005). World Language studies allow students to become informed citizens and allow them to reflect on their own values and responsibilities as a citizen of the world (Glynn, 2012). If students have the opportunity to develop cultural sensitivity and an understanding of other cultures, they will be able to compete and excel in the

post secondary and beyond level (Glynn, 2012). This can lead to very positive effects on students' lifestyles and how they interact with others who are different from them.

Lastly, there are career benefits to studying a foreign language. The world is very interconnected and countries need people who can speak multiple languages to communicate with peers across the globe (Glynn, 2012). Bilingual professionals have an advantage working not only with professionals across the globe but also with immigrants to the country, advocating and supporting them. African Americans access to these career benefits are limited because they are not enrolling or staying in World Language classes.

Literature Review

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, concern developed around African American students taking a World Language. While looking at World Language enrollment data, they noticed that there were significantly less minority students enrolled in a World Language class, especially African American students (Glynn, 2012, Schoener, 2016 Baggett , 1981, Pratt, 2012). Research was done to explore why this was. Research between then and now has explored if there were extrinsic factors such as economic status, type of school, or intrinsic factors such as desire to take a language and the knowledge of the benefits of learning a World Language. Even though all of these sources explored factors that may have influenced African American low enrollment rate in World languages, none have directly asked the students why they either do not want to enroll or they leave after a few years of study. Asking students is a part of the research that has been missing. Research has explored the factors surrounding African American students but have not asked them directly. This literature will provide an inside lens into why African American students themselves do not want to take a World Language and why they choose to stop taking it after a short amount of time.

What became apparent through this literature review was that despite research observing and making predictions as to why African American students don't enroll or cancel their World Language study, they had a very clear 2-3 reasons why they do not start or continue learning a language. There were very strong common denominators among the research through student responses that indicated there are three main reasons as to why students are opting out of studying World Languages.

The first reason is that the curriculum, textbooks, and texts are uninteresting. Students are not engaged through their classroom resources which ultimately demonstrates to them that there is no benefit to studying a World Language, especially if they are unengaged. Intrinsically, African American students believe they can succeed but are unimpressed and unengaged in the classroom around language study (Pratt, 2012). They tend to find language study to be too grammatically focused and less focused on the cultural and “real” aspects of learning and speaking the language (Moore, 2005, Brigman 1981).

The second reason as to why African American students do not start or end their World Language studies is because they have negative experiences with World Language teachers. Whether it be through very little or zero student teacher relationship or teaching styles that are inadequate at engaging students, these factors ultimately encourage students to stop taking a World Language class.

Lastly, and the most impactful factor from the research was the inadequate counseling from guidance and school school counselors. Guidance and school counselors have a significant impact on student course choice and academic direction in school. Frequently throughout the research, African American students have been discouraged from taking a World Language class. The discouragement came from either the biased belief that African American students are not

capable of taking on the rigor of a World Language course or that it was not practical for them to take due to their assumed trajectory after high school(Schoener,2016). Guidance counselors frequently encouraged African American students not to take a world language, resulting in low enrollment in those schools.

The scope of this review is limited. Most critical literature does not provide specific research on African American students and their engagement and interactions with a World Language. The critical literature also does not have a lot of research on why African Americans themselves do not start or continue to take World Language. A lot of research explores the factors around them without explicitly asking from the source; the African American students. Access to learning World Language is crucial to the long term academic and life success of students. As we are noting the low enrollment of African Americans in World languages, it is crucial to understand why these students have access to the benefits of learning a World Language.

Thematic Factors influencing the low enrollment of African American students

The first step in increasing the enrollment of African Americans in a World language class is to observe the reasons that African Americans students themselves say is a reason they either do not start a World Language or do not continue. The following sections explore a thematic literature review of reasons noted by African Americans students as to why they did not enroll or stop learning a World Language.

World Language Curriculum

One of these factors that are decreasing enrollment of African American student's is the curriculum and resources in the World Language classroom. To begin, using an engaging curriculum can increase motivation in the classroom (Tse, 2000). It can also help students see the

benefits of learning a subject, including World languages (Tse, 2000). When the benefits of learning the World Language are seen, students are more likely to continue studying (Tse, 2000). To Begin, most students believed that anyone can learn a World Language (Brigman, 1981). They did not think that anyone had an intrinsic ability to learn a language, therefore they believed they were capable of learning (Brigman, 1981). Additionally, most students wanted to learn a second language and when not systemically blocked from taking a World Language were excited to do so (Pratt, 2012). This helps to affirm that student motivation was not a factor in wanting to and continuing to take a World Language. There were other factors involved and one of them was curriculum. When students entered the classroom they were excited to learn. Students voiced as they continued throughout the year, that the focus of the class was more on grammar and not other parts of learning the World Language that they were more excited about. They were more excited about making connections to the target cultures (Randolph, n.d). Students were interested in learning about the special characteristics of the target culture and not the grammar (Randolph n.d). We could argue that grammar is important to learning the language but students made an interesting observation about grammar and its practicality in that target culture. Students have different motivations to take a World language but when they do, the ultimate goal for most students is to be able to speak with that target culture. When interviewing students, they noted that they wanted to speak like the target culture and when practicing, noticed that some of those grammar rules don't apply to speaking with different culture languages. Students were finding that they could not speak as well as they thought with members of the target language due to grammar rules they either learned and realized they may not need when speaking with native speakers or never learned which convinced them they could not speak with native speakers (Brigman, 1981). These factors greatly influenced African American students.

Most students, when they communicated this problem, stopped taking classes for their target language. In other studies, textbooks were another source of contention for African American students. Most students found textbooks boring, uninteresting and irrelevant to their studies (Tse, 2000). With no value in the material given in the classroom or the speaking part of learning a World Language, or the lack of connection to the target culture, influenced African American students to not continue taking their target World Language class.

Teachers

Teachers are also a major factor that has decreased African American students' enrollment in World Language classes. African American students noted that their relationship and perceived perceptions of their World language teachers has an influence on their feelings towards the class and eventually continuing to take a World Language. Unfortunately throughout the research and questionnaires that African American students took, a pattern of teacher perception has discouraged them from studying a World Language. African American students noticed that in the classroom they are given less attention than their peers(Pratt, 2012). When interacting with the teachers by asking questions or getting assistance, most African American students noticed that they were getting less than their peers (Pratt, 2012). They also noticed that teachers frequently would ask them if learning a World Language was “too hard”(Schoener, 2016). These actions caused students to think that the teachers did not believe in them, especially since most African American students believed that anyone could learn a World Language (Baggett, 2016, Pratt, 2012, Tse 2000). This demonstrates the power of student-teacher relationships and how having a positive relationship can encourage a student to continue to take a class. Students who were not African Americans and reported having a good relationship with their teacher noted that even when they thought the class was hard or they did not want to take

their target language anymore, continued to do so because of the teacher (Tse, 2000). If African American students lack that student-teacher relationship, they can not use that as a motivation to continue taking a World Language and eventually stop taking it. As I had said before, this can have negative effects on their academic and career success.

Counselors

The most influential and impactful data from the research concludes that counselors have a significant impact on whether African American students take a World Language class. Due to the limited research directly asking students why they chose to not take or stop their learning of a World language, research was brought in from other researchers' perspective of the impact and influence of counselors. Counselors overall seemed to have a deficit view of African American students (Schoener, 2016). Deficit views came in a variety of forms whether they were racial ensure (refusing to see color), paralogical beliefs (deny achievement gaps because one or a few counterexamples), or inherent and cultural lack of motivation from African American students (Moore, 2005, Pratt, 2012, Brigman, 1981 Tse, 2000, Schoener, 2016). To begin, African American students noted that their counselors did not believe they could be successful in a World Language class. Students are often excited to take a World Language class but that motivation decreases due to inadequate career counseling (Pratt, 2012). Many times counselors would tell them taking a World Language would be “too hard” or “impractical” for their perceived trajectory after high school (Moore, 2005). This “benevolent tracking” directs students away from supposedly “hard” subjects which has an impact on their academic and life success (Brigman, 1981). This little belief of success in enrollment, more frequently resulted in African Americans students not taking a World Language believing in the advice of their counselor. These low expectations and biases impact African American students academic success which

ultimately impacts their lives. Secondly, many counselors tended to blame other factors of African Americans' cultures and lives before reflecting on their own role in the low enrollment of African American students in World Language classes. Frequently counselors blamed intrinsic factors of these students, claiming they had low motivation in studying a World Language and found it to be not useful (Moore, 2005, Schoener, 2016). According to African American students this narrative is not true. When African American students were asked, they reported that they noted the career and cultural benefits of learning a World Language (Tse, 2000). Additionally, they noted that they were excited to learn a World Language and that when studied, they were not any less likely than their peers to want to study a World Language (Pratt, 2012). Additionally, counselors would blame African American families and cultural characteristics as a reason for the low enrollment (Baggett, 2016, Moore, 2005, Pratt, 2012, Brigman, 1981 Tse, 2000). This narrative is also deemed untrue. When African American students were asked, they told researchers that their parents encouraged and supported them in taking a World Language and many of those African American students knew someone as a close friend or family who spoke a different language (Baggett, 2016, Moore, 2005, Pratt, 2012, Brigman, 1981 Tse, 2000). This demonstrated that the culture and family of African American students actually celebrated and encouraged studying a World language. When these results are examined, other factors that may have contributed to the low enrollment must be explored. When African American students were asked, counselors were identified as one major reason they did not enroll or stopped taking a World Language.

Principles and Practices

There are principles and practices that have attempted to address these issues. To address the issue of the curriculum, many World language classes have introduced critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy is classroom practice that addresses differences in power, social stratification, or the world (Randolph, 2016, Dhaliwal, 2020). Through this type of curriculum not only is student engagement increased but students also get to engage with the culture of the target language in a meaningful way. Additionally, students are able to resist, reconsider, reflect, and enact change in response to what they see creating active participants in our society who encourage equity (Randolph, 2016, Dhaliwal, 2020). This can be done through a variety of ways. Teachers can use authentic text from others from the target language, they can bring native speakers, and they can include social justice issues in their curriculum.

Practices to address teacher and counselor bias have also been addressed. There has been a major push to teach professionals about implicit biases and have them reflect upon it to actively combat their bias and make intentional moves to be more inclusive. Counselors in specific have taken a real step towards addressing implicit bias through professional development and recent research articles. It has been noted that services provided by guidance counselors were originally designed to assist white students and now they are looking at improving their cultural knowledge of minority students to better serve them (Eliminating, n.d., Meyers, 2017, Rogers, 2014). They are implementing sensitive counselling for minority students focusing on race, cultural, and historical racism (Eliminating, n.d., Meyers, 2017, Rogers, 2014). Additionally, teachers are being asked to reflect on their bias especially around their deficit mindset of African American students and the blame on their culture to combat the bias and be more intentional about supporting students of color (Randolph, 2016, Dhaliwal, 2020). Implicit bias training is extremely important and professionals at schools are taking the step to uncovering them and combating them.

Action Plan

There are two important action steps that I would take to increase the enrollment of African Americans in World Language classrooms. The first would be to have my school principal and director of instruction carry out a mandatory professional development on implicit bias. There would be activities that professionals in my school, including teachers, administrators, nurses, and guidance counselors that they would have to fill out. Once they recognized their biases, strategies would be brainstormed and a few given to professionals to implement in their practice. I think a lot of people do not reflect on their bias which allows them to perpetuate throughout their instruction and world. When given the explicit time to reflect on her bias and given strategy to combat it , they will implement it.

The second action step I would take is having my school require that all teachers implement and be assessed through the year in implementing culturally responsive teaching or social justice issues in the classroom. Due to the times, I think it is absolutely fair to ask professionals to reflect on their practice and become more aware of social justice issues and how they can combat those issues in their role at school. This does not mean that every class has to talk about social justice issues but teachers should be reflecting and implementing small strategies to combat the injustices we see in the classroom or implement strategies to keep the injustice out. With this task, there does come responsibility for administration to provide strategies and adult learning opportunities to give professionals ways to implement into their role. I think these strategies and adult learning opportunities will not be hard to find.

Overall, it is so crucial to increase the enrollment of African Americans in World Languages. There are academic, career, and future benefits to taking a World Language class that if these students are kept out they do not have access to the benefits. Not having access to the benefits therefore decreases opportunities and success for African Americans after high school. It

is our job to engage them, support them, and encourage them to take World League classes. To do that we as teachers and other professionals in the schools counselors need to reflect on our bias and make intentional moves to combat them and support our African American students.

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