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Who Gets to Play? Issues of Access and Social Justice in World Language Study in the U.S.

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Abstract

In this paper, we draw on the current literature to argue that access to world language study for students from minoritized groups, students from under-resourced schools, and students with disabilities is a significant social justice issue. This inequitable access is exacerbated by three key issues: the devaluation of students' languages and cultures in schools; the elitist nature of language study; and the one-sided nature of the curriculum. However, in response, we offer four concrete suggestions, at the classroom, school/district, and policy levels, that can disrupt these historic trends and ensure that all students have access to advanced study of world languages and cultures.

Keywords: world language education, minoritized students, access, social justice

Introduction

In this paper, we synthesize recent literature on social justice and world language education alongside the current data on Advanced Placement (AP) test completion to argue that access to world language study for students from minoritized groups is a significant social justice issue in our field. The term *minoritized students* is deliberately used here as alternative to *minority students* and *students of color* because it emphasizes the social construction of minority status or of the action of minoritization that students experience in certain contexts (Benitez, 2010; Stewart, 2013). Minoritized students' inequitable access to world language study is supported by U.S. public school enrollment data and is exacerbated by three key issues: the devaluation of students' languages and cultures in schools (e.g., Valenzuela, 2010); the elitist nature of language study (Reagan & Osborn, 2002); and the one-sided nature of the curriculum (Kleinsasser, 1993). In response to these issues, we offer three concrete suggestions, at the classroom, school/district, and policy levels, that can disrupt these trends and ensure that all students have access to advanced study of world languages and cultures.

More than two decades ago, scholars described the United States as one of the most unequal school systems in the industrialized world. Disparities between White students and minoritized students prevented equal access to rigorous academic coursework and particular programs (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Despite a number of dominant reform models such as high stakes testing and charter schools (Mordechay & Orfield, 2017), relatively

few gains have been made in terms of equity and access for U.S. students (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Howard, 2016). In many schools, it is common to see an overrepresentation of White students and an absence of students of color in college preparatory courses (Farkas, 2003; Welton & Martinez, 2014). World language study is a key example of this phenomenon. Language classes, especially at threshold levels (three years of study or more), are comprised of predominantly White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). When compared with other ethnic groups, African American students are least likely to study a world language and to continue it through year three or beyond at the high school level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). These statistics suggest that in world language study, not all students “get to play.” However, the literature related to access and equity in world language education provides little insight as to why.

Access According to the Numbers

Disparities in access to world language study, particularly at upper levels of study, are evident at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels. In 2014, public school enrollment in the U.S. was comprised of 24.9 million (50%) White students, 12.8 million (25%) Hispanic students, 7.8 (16%) Black students, and approximately .5 million (1%) Native American students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). The population of White students in U.S. public schools is steadily decreasing and is projected to be 45% of the overall school population in 2026. The period between 2004–05 and 2007–08 saw an increase in K–12 public school students enrolled in world language courses, yet, despite this growth, only 18.5% of *all* students were enrolled in world language coursework, compared to other countries where most students study a second or third language (ACTFL, 2011).

To what extent, though, are those few students who *do* take language courses persisting to advanced study, and which student groups are represented? One indicator is student completion of the Advanced Placement (AP) exam, which is taken by students in upper levels of study. In 2016, of all students who took the AP Exam in one of the seven world language options (Chinese, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Latin or Japanese), White students (55,102) completed the exam at a higher rate than other students in most of the seven languages, except for Spanish, in which 104,947 students who self-identified as “Hispanic/Latino” took the exam (The College Board, 2016). Although there were a greater number of Hispanic/Latino students than White students who took the AP exam in languages, it is interesting to note that Hispanic/Latino students were more highly motivated to persist in studying Spanish than in other languages. Only 5,958 Hispanic/Latino students completed the AP exam in other languages. This group of students may have also identified as native speakers or heritage learners of Spanish. When looking closely at three historically marginalized groups from which students who completed the AP exam (Table 1 below) self-identified—American Indian students, Hispanic/Latino students, and Black students—it is clear that these AP exam data do not represent the current demographics of public schools in the United States. The data indicate that 180 American Indian students and 4,516 Black students completed the exam compared to 55,102 White students, meaning that there were more than ten times as many white students than Black and American Indian students combined (The

College Board, 2016).

Table 1

Number of Students Who Completed an AP Exam in Languages in 2016

White	Black	American Indian	Hispanic/Latino
55,102	4,516	180	104,947 (Spanish) 5,958 (other languages)

Unfortunately, there is little empirical work that examines issues of access and representation of students in world language classrooms to explain these phenomena. One study of 7,069 high school students in an ethnically diverse school district in Texas that examined students' enrollment and motivation in world language study suggested that African-American students who enrolled in a world language had the same initial motivation as students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. However, the African-American students' motivation to persist in world language courses and interest in post-secondary study of the language was lower than that of other ethnicities (Pratt, 2012). A 2007 ACTFL post-secondary planning survey of college-bound high school students enrolled in world languages also indicated that African-American students were more likely than students of other ethnicities to state that they would opt out of language study after completing their high school requirement, demonstrating a lower rate of persistence. Additional studies that explore minoritized K-12 students' access to and enrollment in world language study are clearly needed to provide a more detailed explanation for the disproportionality indicated in the data provided by The College Board.

These disparities in world language study persist at the postsecondary level. Between 2007 and 2008, 20,977 U.S. students graduated with a Bachelor's degree in world languages or linguistics; 14,865 of those students were White compared to just 874 Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Comparing enrollment data from 2009 to 2013, U.S. colleges and universities reported a 6.7 percent drop in world language enrollment; this also indicates a decline after a trend of steady increases (Goldberg, Looney, & Lusin, 2015). Of the 142,420 African American students who graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in 2006, only .06% majored in a world language (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2008). This data indicates that African American students, in particular, tend not to study languages.

Additionally, it is important to note that the most recent data on world language course enrollment by race or ethnicity from the National Center for Education Statistics is 10 years old. There is substantial federal and state-level data on student enrollment and performance in the "core," tested areas, English language arts, mathematics, and science, but no recent, relevant data for world languages. In our searches, we were unable to find clear data on P-20 world language enrollment according to gender, race, socioeconomic status, or (dis)ability. The fact that so little data exists about the different groups of students enrolled in language classes demonstrates both a lack of awareness about issues of access in world languages and potentially a lack of value placed on language learning in U.S. schools.

Devaluing Students' Languages and Cultures in Schools

To what extent are *all* students' home languages and cultures explicitly included and valued in world language classrooms? Historically, many students' home cultures and languages have been dismissed or devalued at the macro-level, which trickles down to the micro-level of schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). In the U.S., African Americans were robbed of their cultures through slavery (Kincheloe, 2004), something that has had a long-lasting impact on African Americans in various realms of society, including education. In addition, for many years Native American children were forced into boarding schools that emphasized an Anglo-centric curriculum with contained patriotic propaganda and forced labor. The curriculum at such schools was designed to force children to "think white" and to conform to White culture (Grande, 2004, p. 18). These events are clear examples of how minoritized and marginalized individuals in the U.S. have been forced to adhere to the dominant culture.

In addition to their cultures, students' languages have historically been a point of contention. Baldwin (1979) often focused his writing on the importance and beauty of language and believed that language is exploited as a political instrument in the U.S., turning something that connects people to their culture and identity into something sinister. Many immigrant youth have experienced subtractive schooling, described as when U.S. schools tacitly work to divorce children and adolescents from their culture, language, and community (Valenzuela, 2010). Yet, as Freire (1993) asserted, our class position, character, and relationships with others are part of the language and thought process. He stated, "[w]e experience ourselves in language, we socially create language, and finally we become linguistically competent" (as cited in Darder, 2002, p. 129). In other words, language is a significant part of students' identity and how they make sense of the world.

If students perceive that their language has been devalued by schools, they may form resistance mechanisms that result in negative reactions toward learning and teachers, and may ultimately pull away from school (Delpit, 1995; Macedo & Bartolome, 1999). If students find that their own culture and language have no place in schools, this can lead to two results: (1) students who have no linguistic or cultural knowledge of their own, allowing them to function in their own communities, or (2) students who have withdrawn from school without learning the power codes, that is to say Standard English, necessary to succeed (Delpit, 1995; Fecho, 2004; Hooks, 1994; Perry & Delpit, 1998). This critically situated theoretical work is rarely used as a lens within the field of world language education, but points to the necessity of both acknowledging and appreciating students' own languages while ensuring that students can move between the languages of their communities and Standard English. However, Nieto (2010) asks educators to consider what would happen if African American English (AAE), rather than Standard English, was highly valued in schools. Only teachers with a strong appreciation of AAE would be hired and students who entered the school without knowledge of AAE would be considered "culturally deprived" because they were lacking the cultural capital of the language (p. 142). Nieto offers this scenario as an example of the "capricious nature of determining whose culture becomes highly valued" (p. 142). When students' home cultures and languages are constantly corrected or viewed negatively, it serves to

further marginalize them within the classroom and school community. In an ethnographic study of two diverse secondary schools committed to social justice, one of the African-American students in the study stated, “[b]efore they expect us to learn about their culture, I think first Black people as a whole have to learn more about themselves before they begin to learn about other cultures” (El Haj, 2006, p. 157). El Haj’s study points to the potential connections between cultural identity among minoritized students and their enrollment or success in a world language course.

As educators, we must examine the ways that schools explicitly and implicitly devalue students’ languages and cultural identities and how this might influence their enrollment in or success in a world language course. If students’ own languages and cultural identities have been dismissed and they are expected to conform to the dominant, White, middle-class culture, why would they consider enrolling in a world language course, where they may not find a connection to yet another language and culture?

The Elitist Nature of World Language Study

Are world language classes perceived as open and accessible to all students? Reagan and Osborn (2002) argue that world language in its current form is not meant to be a successful course for all students. Ultimately, language programs tend to be designed to weed out the academically weak students and act as a tracking mechanism to ensure that only the best and brightest are left in the class. Their argument is supported by data that indicates that the first year of world language study attracts 40-45% of all U.S. students (Draper & Hicks, 2002; NCES, 2003), but that percentage drops from one level of study to the next, especially from level two to three (Draper & Hicks, 2002). Few students continue to levels three and beyond; this is problematic because one might assume that those students are more academically successful, perpetuating the elitist reputation of world language study.

In a study of 168 students and their world language teachers, Sparks and Ganschow (1996) found that the teachers’ perceptions of students’ abilities and motivation to learn a language was greatly influenced by students’ abilities in their native languages. This study demonstrated the way in which world language teachers develop assumptions about students’ capabilities, motivation, and attitudes. It also points to the need for world language teachers to recognize the differences in their students so that they are supportive and responsive to all students (Sparks & Ganschow, 1996). Such responsiveness and differentiation are complex and requires more than a one-size-fits-all approach in order to best serve students. As Verzasconi (1995) states:

Teaching all students, it turns out, is much more difficult and time consuming than teaching those who are our own mirror-images. But, if we really want languages to be at the center of the curriculum, do we have a choice – and particularly when we are public servants? (p. 2)

Verzasconi makes the important point: in order for languages to be accessible to all students, those who have an influence on students, such as teachers, counselors, and administrators, must believe that all students should have access to language coursework. In some cases, however, school counselors serve as gatekeepers (Erickson & Shultz, 1982) to course enrollment. In a study of 128 African American students at the University of Texas, students reported that their high school counsel-

ors suggested to them that their time would be better spent in courses that were less challenging than world language (Moore, 2005). This finding was also supported in a study of African American students' world language enrollment in a large, Minnesota suburban high school (Glynn, 2007). School counselors indicated that they do not encourage African American students to take courses such as world language at the same rate as they do White students (Glynn, 2007). Furthermore, administrators and teachers revealed that a policy at the junior high level prohibited students placed in remedial reading classes from enrolling in world language study. This policy was detrimental to the enrollment of students of color in language courses because many of the students in the remedial reading classes were African American, a fact about which the administrators and teachers were aware (Glynn, 2007). Such practices clearly have a negative impact on students' access to and enrollment in world language study, and may be short-sighted given the connections between a threshold level of world language study and an ability to outperform students in mathematics, reading, and writing (Armstrong & Rogers, 1997; Masciantonio, 1977; Rafferty, 1986). Students have also been able to achieve increased academic success even when they have struggled academically in the past (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010) and have enhanced their literacy skills (Garfinkel & Tabor, 1991) due to language study.

In a group interview with several African American students who had never studied a world language, (Glynn, 2007) found that none of the students were opposed to taking a language course and that they all wanted to learn a world language. When asked why they had not pursued language courses, the students responded that no one in the school encouraged them or told them that they could study a world language. Had school counselors or other school stakeholders taken initiative to encourage these students, perhaps their enrollment in world language would have been different. These findings suggest that educators' perceptions about the type of student who can succeed in world language courses is shaped by the view that world language is a challenging course for the best and brightest or for certain groups of students.

A One-Sided Curriculum

To what extent does the traditional world language curriculum serve as an implicit barrier to language study? World language teachers have historically relied heavily on textbooks, which traditionally emphasize vocabulary and grammar exercises. Osborn (2006) offers the following depiction of the contrived language found in textbooks:

Who cares what my school schedule would look like in Germany?
– U.S. students do not go to school there! They do not receive daily weather reports in French, and they do not normally inquire of their Spanish-speaking classmates as to what hobbies they have. (p. 59)

Toth (2004) acknowledges that contextualizing grammar is perceived as a significant challenge by teachers. This is compounded by Kleinsasser's (1993) study of 37 world language teachers that included surveys, observations, and interviews which pointed to the finding that world language teachers receive little feedback from others knowledgeable in their content area. As a result, the textbook becomes the "nucleus of the classroom" (Kleinsasser, 1993, p. 5) and can serve as the foundation for curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Additionally, many world language curriculums have a Eurocentric bias, which can make it difficult for non-White students to relate (Dahl, 2000; Guillaume, 1994; Moore, 2005; Reagan & Osborn, 2002). Therefore, it is important to supplement the textbook with diverse perspectives. Guillaume (1994) asserts that it is necessary to demonstrate to non-White students that the experience of people of color is not just an “American” experience. Rather, people of color have diverse cultures and experiences around the world. The majority of teachers in the U.S., over eighty percent, are White (Billingsley, Bettini, & Williams, 2017) with a critical shortage of Latina/o teachers (Irizzary & Donaldson, 2012). These statistics around teacher diversity indicate that few African American, Latina/o and American Indian students may have opportunities to learn a language from teachers who share their racial or ethnic background. Furthermore, some authors have argued that world language teachers may not fully understand the diversity of the culture and language which they are teaching (Guillaume, 1994; Wilberschied & Dassier, 1995), which may lead to world language curriculums that lack a variety of diverse perspectives. When students of color are not able to connect with the curriculum, they miss opportunities to learn from stories and perspectives that may be similar to their own. They also miss out on opportunities to draw parallels between their own people, language, and culture and that of the target language and culture(s).

Finally, the traditional world language curriculums and both state and national standards have missed opportunities to emphasize issues of social justice, equity, oppression, racism, or other forms of discrimination (Austin, 2016; Ennsner-Kananen, 2016; Osborn, 2016) which Osborn refers to as the “fossilization of our field” (p. 568). Such curriculums neither acknowledge the experiences and worldviews of diverse students in the classroom nor provide an opportunity for students to explore diverse perspectives of the target cultures being studied, in which one-dimensional views of cultures are critiqued or problematized. When teachers draw primarily on traditional curriculums or textbooks to present the cultures being studied, it becomes much more difficult for all students to see themselves reflected in the target culture; students lose out on opportunities to make sense of current topics, engage in discussion, and use critical thinking skills.

Disrupting the Status Quo: Recommendations for Increasing Access

The arguments in favor of language learning for individual achievement (Armstrong & Rogers, 1997; Masciantonio, 1977; Rafferty, 1986), professional opportunities (Bagnato, 2005; New American Economy, 2017), and a globalized worldview (Jackson & Malone, 2009; Modern Language Association, 2012) are unquestionable. But how do we ensure that all U.S. students have access to learn a language other than English? In this section, we suggest recommendations within four contexts, at the school level, within the curriculum, in teacher education, and in policy, that can serve as a starting point for addressing these issue of access.

Examining Barriers to Enrollment in Schools

At the K-12 school level, increasing access begins by administrators, counselors, teachers, families, and students working together to identify the barriers for students of color, students in poverty, students with disabilities, or other students who are not typically represented in world languages classrooms – work that is solely

lacking in our field. This can be accomplished in several ways. First, schools can use components of equity audits (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009) to examine and interrogate school-based practices, processes, and policies that lead to inequalities and issues of access in world languages enrollment and achievement. Second, professional development for faculty and staff should focus on how teachers and counselors may inadvertently discourage underrepresented students from advanced language study through classroom practices, grading practices, and interactions. Finally, steps must be taken to encourage all school stakeholders to consider how world language programs and classrooms can become inclusive spaces where all students can experience growth and success. However, it is important to note that world language teachers themselves have significant agency to support practices that can encourage students to study a language (Wassell, Wesely, & Glynn, in preparation). Although simple, teachers' and counselors' encouragement to begin or continue language study can go a long way in encouraging students to pursue initial enrollment and to persist, leading to more students in upper level language coursework.

Envisioning an Inclusive and Socially Just Curriculum

Within the classroom, teachers may not always have full control over their curriculum (Gerrard & Farrell, 2014) and may be required to use particular textbooks or literature, give certain exams (common assessments, standardized exams), or follow a particular scope and sequence. However, teachers have the agency (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012) to decide how to interact with students and how to adapt curriculum to the needs of students, while still meeting necessary requirements or scope and sequence objectives. Core content areas like math or English do not have the luxury of "weeding out" students; they must find ways to reach and teach all students. Yet teachers must think critically about their implicit biases and the extent to which they inadvertently hold deficit views of students (Battey & Franke, 2015). Today's world language educators must adopt a view that all students should and can learn a language. Around the world, languages and cultures are not limited to just an elite few. People of all different ethnicities, abilities, socioeconomic and religious backgrounds speak a variety of languages and participate in a multitude of cultural practices that reflect their values. Why should it be any different in U.S. schools?

Furthermore, world language teachers must acknowledge the importance of integrating meaningful topics that address social justice issues into all levels of language study (Glynn, Wesely, & Wassell, 2014). It is vital to provide an opportunity to engage in important topics from day one of students' language learning experiences that both reflect and challenge their worldviews. Again, in most cases, it is the individual teacher who decides what approach to take and how content will be addressed. In order to encourage all students to persist in language learning, teachers must believe that all students belong in language study and are capable of success, knowing that success for one student may look different than success for another.

Preparing World Language Teachers to Think Inclusively

Teacher education programs have a significant role to play in disrupting the status quo of language education in the U.S. (Austin, 2009). In pre-service teacher programs, teacher educators have the opportunity to help new teachers develop

strategies for reaching more students, including preparing them to create a classroom environment that affirms all students (Nieto, 2010) and to enact pedagogies that are culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017). This is a key time to help new teachers to examine their own identities and to consider how their identities impact the way in which they will interact with students and families in schools. Pre-service and in-service teachers can also be guided in how to adapt curricular materials to include topics of social justice (Glynn, Wesely, & Wassell, 2014). As noted, sometimes teachers have little control over the scope and sequence of their curriculum, but it is possible for teachers, both new and experienced, to work within the parameters of their curriculum to explore complex facets of the target cultures, compare and contrast diverse perspectives of the target cultures with their own cultures, and examine topics through a variety of lenses. By doing so, students of diverse backgrounds are more likely to see themselves represented in the curriculum and are more likely to find value in the language and cultures they are studying (Glynn, Wesely, & Wassell, 2014). More practically, teachers should not discount the power of word of mouth among students. If curriculum in a particular world language program resonates with diverse groups of learners in a school, other students will hear about it, and they may be more likely to explore the possibility of joining a language class, too. However, all of this begins with teacher education as we prepare new teachers and provide ongoing professional development for in-service teachers to do this work.

Increasing Support for World Language Study

Finally, an additional avenue for increasing access is through state and federal policies that support and reward world language study. Many states have taken a significant step toward rewarding language study through the adoption of the *Seal of Biliteracy*, which recognizes students who gain an advanced level of proficiency in two languages. However, in many states, world language study has been steadily “crowded out” of the curriculum due to an increased emphasis on the tested areas, language arts and mathematics (Walker, 2014). In response, a recent report by the Commission on Language Learning (2017) concluded that the U.S. clearly needs

a national strategy to improve access to as many languages as possible for people of every region, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background—that is, to value language education as a persistent national need similar to education in math or English, and to ensure that a useful level of proficiency is within every student’s reach. (p. viii, emphasis added)

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), adopted in 2015, provides some funds through Title IV, Part A to districts to potentially expand world language programs in an effort to ensure students have a “well-rounded education” (ACTFL, 2016). However, since districts have considerable flexibility in their use of Title IV-A funds, it is not clear how the funding will impact world language enrollment. We are hopeful that schools, districts, and states are able to secure resources to advocate for expanded access for expanded access to world language study for all students..

Conclusion: Policies, Practices and Research to Push the Equity and Access Agenda Forward

In order to provide greater access for all U.S. students to become bilingual and bicultural, we must continue to examine the institutional and individual policies and practices that make world language study open to only a select group of students. This review revealed the small number of empirical studies that have examined advanced world language study – or world language study in general – for minoritized students. This points to an immediate need for additional research from our field that seeks to better understand the issues access and equity in world language education. Although some authors have employed critical frameworks to examine issues in the context of world language education (e.g. Osborn, 2006; Randolph & Johnson, 2017), further empirical and conceptual work that uses theoretical lenses such as critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), intersectional approaches (McCall, 2005), culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), a stance toward translanguaging (García & Leiva, 2014), or decolonizing approaches (e.g., Tejeda, Espinoza, & Gutierrez, 2003) are notably absent in research on access and equity in world language education, and are thus significantly needed. This research is most important at the K-12 levels in order to better understand why minoritized students enroll at lower rates in elementary and secondary language programs, even when presented with equal access to do so. Research questions might examine: (1) How are successful language programs with a high enrollment of minoritized students attracting and retaining students in language programs? How do students in these programs perceive language learning? (2) Why do immersion schools attract fewer minoritized students than white students? How do families of minoritized students perceive language learning and immersion programming? (3) How do minoritized students at the secondary level perceive language learning? Which barriers have prevented them from enrolling in a language course?

In closing, we offer a fitting metaphor. Tatum (1999) equates institutional racism to a moving walkway. Those who are actively walking forward are engaged in overt racist behaviors, whether or not they realize that their actions contribute to institutionalized racism. An example of this is the teacher or counselor who does not encourage African American students to study languages or to pursue college preparatory courses in the same way that White students are encouraged to take these courses. Tatum further describes the people who are standing on the walkway, letting the movement of the walkway carry them along. They are not actively engaging in overt racist behaviors, but still participating in institutionalized racism. We would argue that many in our field of world language education are these bystanders on the moving walkway, either consciously or unconsciously being swept up in inequitable practices that are harmful to both marginalized and privileged students.

Developing a critical consciousness (Freire, 1993) about how the field of world language education ensures that all students have equal access to language study and how we encourage students of all backgrounds to persist in language study is the first step. A second key step is having the courage to bring this issue to light and encouraging explicit conversations in multiple spaces—at school staff meetings, at school board meetings, in schools of education, and at our state and national professional

language education organizations—about this critical issue of access. This requires us to do as Tatum suggests: to turn around and walk the opposite direction on the moving walkway. Although this is a taxing endeavor, the only way to enact change in our field is to actively move away from the status quo and integrate practices that lead to world language classrooms and programs that are socially just.

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