

The State of the Black Child in the The World Language Classroom

A WHITE PAPER

PREPARED BY

KAMI J. ANDERSON, PHD



kami@bilingualbrownbabies.net
www.bilingualbrownbabies.net

Executive Summary

We all know language is an empowerment tool. To discuss and expound on how we can use language in order to empower Black children and students in ways that will give them a competitive advantage over their peers is paramount to the discussion for academic achievement in the world language classroom.

The United States is way behind in this when it comes to language. Bilingualism is used as both a tool to disenfranchise and a tool to set up exclusion. There is a power in us being able to connect through the Diaspora through language. This white paper briefly introduces some of the problems facing the Black student in the world language classroom and offers a guidepost to begin to mitigate the issues of language hegemony, implicit bias, and microaggressions that occur in the world language classrooms.

This white paper is not intended to provide an exhaustive list of problems and solutions but rather to bring the discussion regarding academic success and the Black child as it relates to the world language classroom into public discourse amongst educators, parents, and community partners.

Introduction

With the rise of language immersion programming across the United States, the increasing interest and understanding of the impact of world language acquisition on academic achievement and career success have moved to prominence within this country. However, due to privilege, equity, and power practices within academia, what should be seen as a universal approach to cognitive ability has instead been placed into elite and unattainable categories reserved only for those who can afford the opportunity.

What does this mean? There is still disparity when it comes to a beneficial curriculum model for students of color, due to educational access, and lack of equity from district to district. This is the age-old battle Black students, particularly in major cities, have faced since suburban flight in the late 20th century.

Lack of equity in, for example, language immersion programs, runs the risk of maintaining the achievement gap status quo. The emergence of bilingual

education, in particular dual immersion, is a development that further separates and distinguishes the middle class economically and racially as it is believed that bilingualism is not a collective asset within the Black community in the United States. Those Black middle-class families that are able to afford their children dual immersion education thus separate themselves from the general Black community. Ideally, bilingualism is an asset for all of society and there must be ways to introduce it to all classes through the educational system. However, it is not.

There is minimal discussion about African American world language learners. This could be why there is an even smaller collection of research about African American bilinguals.

Problem Statement

Education is NOT colorblind, too many world language teachers have been perpetuating that myth already, this ruling just gave them the out to go back to the "old ways." That is not the place we want to be, trust me it's only safe for the teachers, not the students.

Too often, especially in the world language space, non-BIPOC teachers assume that they know it all about students of color in their classrooms. Thus, when hit with the possibility that may not, the reaction/response is dismissive, disrespectful, and INCORRECT.

Current discussions around bilingualism reflect these issues:

- the marginalization and trivialization of bilingualism among English Language Learners
- the elitism of monolinguals seeking to become bilingual through the education system
- the dialectical tension between these two

What is typically absent from this conversation is the Black child. Why is this important? There are arguments from both sides that directly impact the Black world language student in ways that are very different from the current discourse.

The imbrication of anti-Blackness, language elitism, and supremacy happens right smack dab in the middle of the world language classroom for the Black student.

They enter the classroom, wearing the societal bias that comes with the use of African American English (AAE). They sit at the desk to learn a language that fostered colonialism in the West. They are rarely shown the images of the folks who look like them within the colonial language they are learning and who have their own version of an Africanized standard that probably meshes better with their understanding of language which could thereby make them more successful in bilingualism.

It's anti-Blackness taught through colonial languages using anti-Black strategies.

Although Blacks and language have been studied since Dow Turner's seminal work on the Gullah language in the 1940s, there has been little research on the impact of praxical ways Black language studies can be applied to the ways in which Black people speak languages other than English. Given the rich linguistic history present in Black English, it can be asserted that this same richness can be found in the languages of the Diaspora where there were enslaved Africans. (Anderson, 2023)

When discussing pedagogy for the African American child, some attention has been given to centering the historical experiences of African Americans. The research has been relegated to African American scholars with little inclusion and integration into the overall conversations of teaching and learning. This has done African Americans a disservice.

We have seen, researched, and discussed the gaps that persist regarding race and education. Some scholars have mistakenly attributed this to academic achievement, but if we're honest, we are teaching from within systems passed down. In my book, [*The Color of Language: Centering Students of Color in World Language Acquisition*](#), I discuss how the education of Black students was designed to prepare them for servitude and domestic work. This new ruling ensures that antiquated goal.

The deficits that already exist in the world language classroom may be exacerbated by this ruling in k-12 education. Black students already only make up about 4% of those students enrolled in advanced language classes, classes

that are usually deemed acceptable in college readiness and admissions. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are decreasing funding to world language departments at an alarming rate. Where praytell, is the drive for Black students to continue in a language now?

Meritocracy has not benefitted the Black child as we might have hoped.

We have been told since our first day of school that we need to be 200% better in order to even be noticed by those who do not look like us. The recent Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action has now added the unnecessary burden on children, no less, of asserting our identity without acknowledging that identity is beautifully Black in the process.

What has been the deficiency is a desire for the rest of the citizens of this country to acknowledge the fullness of our beings, and the classroom is not excluded from that. Black children should have the expectation of seeing their identity in the classroom. This has already been a concern in the world language classroom because Afrolatinx voices in particular fall ignored and silenced in the classroom in favor of hegemonic notions of "who should be speaking a language." Giving teachers permission in this ruling to essentially, ignore race in "an affront to the dignity of those students for whom race matters" (Jackson, 2023, p. 15), can potentially set back culturally sustainable practices that have absolutely benefitted ALL students in the world language classroom.

Bilingual Brown Babies Has a Solution

In the world language classroom, cultural mismatch is practiced through teaching materials and methodologies that ignore the Black presence and diminish the Black voice in the course materials and the classroom.

Cultural mismatch is also the lack of Black world language teachers in the classroom. The most recent report of DataUSA on the number of teachers who identify as Black is 3.27% and white teachers represent over 50% of the degrees awarded in world language education (DataUSA, 2016). In fact, African Americans only account for 4% of world language degrees regardless of whether they enter the teaching workforce (Anya, 2018). These practices are oppressive at best and oblivious to the noteworthy contributions Black bodies have within the content area of languages and also in the classroom through the voices and participation of Black students.

In the world language classroom, the practices imposed on students of color are oppressive in that they impede success in the classroom. The absence of African descendants in Spanish language culture and history, the assumption that students of color enter the world language classroom already at a deficit due to perceived inadequacies in the English language (Bereiter & Englemann, 1966; Deutsch, 1967), and underrepresentation of Black world language teachers are poignant examples of the need to introduce liberatory practices in the world language classroom.

There is a need to acknowledge the cultural self in the classroom, EVERYBODY'S cultural self. Too often, world language teachers are told that by the simple fact, that culture and connections are tenets of world language pedagogy, culture is addressed every day, but:

- How many of your world language teachers showed you the Black people that lived in Honduras?
- How many of your world language teachers made it a requirement to study a Francophone African country as a part of your French learning process?
- How many of your language teachers made it a point to include as an interdisciplinary lesson the history of the Moorish occupation of the Iberian peninsula WITHOUT suggesting that Moors did not come from Africa?

Cultural language adaptability takes a level of activism few folks want to dive into but, in my position as an Afrocentric language activist, Bilingual Brown Babies will continue to put our culture on an equal playing field in the world language classroom, not just with pictures of Afrolatinx people in books, but authentic representations of who we are in languages.

Bilingual Brown Babies' Language Action Plan for Black Students

AAE is not a marker for remediation, Black voices are not a dismissal of non-Black voices, Afrocentric pedagogy is an educational tool that is REQUIRED for Black student success in the world language classroom.

This would require the world language classroom to acknowledge and incorporate not only anti-oppressionist ideologies but the use of linguistic varieties in both languages in order to demonstrate true investment of Black

identity with language use and to acknowledge the womanist concept that “language learning is a complex social practice that engages the identities of language learners in ways that have received little attention” (Potowski, 2007, p. 3) This can be achieved by including practices such as Afrolatinx examples of speaking and Afrolatinx history and culture as a part of the content. These practices should not be presented as an afterthought but rather embedded in pedagogical content in ways that are seamless and fluid. This will demand a sort of unschooling, not just for your students, but for you.

Part of the unschooling process demands we let go of what “has always been done” and embrace “what needs to be done.” Movements in history like Black Nationalism and Negritude, although falsely intimidating by nomenclature, are the very arms we should run to in order to adapt pedagogical practices that benefit and take advantage of Black English language use. Negritude scholar Ngugi wa’Thiong’o (1986) asserts “we can appreciate each other’s languages And the question of being uncomfortable about our languages goes away”.

I wholly agree with the ten framing ideas for an Antiracist Black Language Education and Pedagogy put forth by April Baker-Bell (2020). It is my hope that I do her right with the ways I am able to interpret her charge as it relates to the world language classroom. Following I offer what is my understanding of these framing ideas and use them as guideposts to begin our discussion more intimately about Black children and world language learning.

- As a world language educator, you critically examine the role white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism play in world language pedagogy.
- Dismantle white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism through ontological methods.
- Center the linguistic needs of Black children in world language pedagogy.
- Use Black language research traditions when examining issues in world language pedagogy.
- Reject notions that Dominant American English and dominant target language use as adequate tools for empowering Black students in world language.
- Understand that Black language is intrinsically linked to Black experiences and ways of being, knowing, and doing.

- Use language as a liberation and empowerment tool in the world language classroom.
- Teach critical inquiry of language hegemony.
- Intentionally learn about and incorporate the sociocultural and political history of Black language from both the US and target language perspectives.
- Centers the use of Afrocentric oral traditions to demonstrate the contributions of Black language to our multilingual world.
(Anderson, 2023)

For a more detailed discussion about these framing ideas you can get a copy of my book, [*The Color of Language: Centering Students of Color in World Language Acquisition*](#).

Conclusion:

The fight to push for bilingualism in the African American community is activism. I see myself trying to increase the strength in the number of African American children who are able to speak more than one language as a direct challenge to the school-to-prison pipeline. I see it as an adversary to the notion that all Black boys are inherently misbehaved in the classroom and need special accommodations or to be removed from the classroom. I see it as (part of) the answer to the academic achievement gap that folks like to spit out when talking about our Black children despite countless examples of contradictions to that statement.

Further public discussion around this topic is necessary. The current climate of the state of education is further marginalizing Black students and it is our job to bring them back to the center of the educational discourse in ways that are empowering and promote their genuine success.

If you found this information valuable, I encourage you to share it with your colleagues and connections who might also find value.

If you would like Dr. Kami J. Anderson and Bilingual Brown Babies to facilitate further discussions with your school district or organization, please contact us at kami@bilingualbrownbabies.net.

References:

- Anderson, K. J. (2023). *The Color of Language: Centering the student of color in world language acquisition*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers
- Anderson, K. J. (2022). *Raising Bilingual Brown Babies: Everyday strategies to become a confident bilingual family* (2nd edition). KDP Publishing
- Anderson, K. J. (2021). "The Beloved Language Community: A Call for Womanism and Language to Address the Racial Academic Achievement Gap". In *Womanist Ethical Rhetoric: A Call for Liberation and Social Justice in Turbulent Times* (A. D. Madlock Gatison & C. L. Glenn, eds.) Lanham, MD: Lexington Press
- Anderson, K. J. (2015). *Language, identity and choice: Raising bilingual children in a global society*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Press.
- Anderson, K. J. (2009). *Black Away from Home: The Shifting Character of the ethnic and social identity of African American sojourners*. Berlin: VDM Verlag Publishing.
- Anya, U. (2018). *Racialized Identities in Second Language Learning: Speaking Blackness in Brazil*. New York: Routledge
- Asante, M. K. (1998). *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity and Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Castagno, A. E. (2008). "I don't want to hear that!": Legitimizing Whiteness through silence in schools. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 39(3) 314-333. doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1492.2008.00024.x
- Collins P.H. (2000). "Black feminist epistemology" in *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge
- Deutscher, G. (2010). *Through the looking glass: Why the world looks different in other languages*. New York: Metropolitan Books

Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks*. New York: Grove Press.

Jackson, K. (2023) *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc v. University of North Carolina*, US 20-1199, Dissent 21-707.

Potowski, K. (2007). *Language and Identity in a Dual Immersion Classroom*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters LTD.

Rosa, J. and Flores, N. (2017) Unsettling race and language: Toward a raciolinguistic perspective. *Language in Society* 46, 621-647. doi: 10.1017/S00474045117000562

Senghor, L.S. (1993). "Negritude: A humanism of the twentieth century." *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory* (Williams & Christman, eds). London: Longman, pp. 27-35.

wa Thiong'o, N. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature*. London: Heinemann.