

From Reduction to Empowerment: A Second Look at Access to World Language Education for The African American Student

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Abstract

College readiness policies dictate the number of credits of world language study a student ought to obtain by the time he / she graduates from high school (Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010). However, traditional schooling practices camouflaged by “neutral” education policies limit African American students’ access to quality curricular and instructional discourses (Apple, 1999; Gillborn, 2014; López, 2003). Limited access to enriching educational goods and resources, world language instruction in particular, causes them to question their self-worth and academic identities, decreases their classroom engagement and motivation to learn, and impacts their secondary and post-secondary learning outcomes (Fernández, 2002; Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010; Saffold & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Weinstein, Gregory, & Strambler, 2004). Therefore, this study used critical race theory to examine the high school world language experiences of 17 African American undergraduate students enrolled at a Midwestern four-year university. The participants in this study discussed the impact of school- and non-school-based adults as well as same-race peer networks on their secondary and post-secondary goals. Their counter-narratives not only provided evidence of how African American students break from traditional schooling structures to learn a needed world language, they also show how this particular population of students reject the dominant epistemologies that invalidate their academic experiences. Findings from this study suggest education policymakers critically examine the policies that affect African American students’ everyday experiences as well as challenge teachers and school counselors to adopt culturally relevant practices that meet students where they are.

Keywords: college readiness; culturally responsive; gate keeping; motivation; policy