DEI in World Language Education: Are We Really Committed to Advocacy *and* Action?

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ABSTRACT

The terms diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice have become ubiquitous in schools, institutions, and professional organizations. Yet the extent to which the ideals behind these words are realities in today's world language classrooms is less clear. Are our world language classrooms equitable and accessible to diverse learners, particularly given the new social, emotional, and academic needs of students in our post-pandemic society? In this article, we seek to engage leaders and educators, both within and beyond NECTFL, to think critically about policies and practices in their schools, districts, communities, and states. Using two composite vignettes, broad understandings from recent literature, and findings from a recent study that examined the perspectives of world language educators, we describe and interpret key issues that currently impact world language programs, teachers, classes, and students. These issues include a lack of access to world language study related to students' race, socioeconomic status, and disability; world language teacher shortages; and a need for a more culturally relevant, engaging world language curriculum. The article concludes with recommendations to actualize language educators' support for diversity, equity, and inclusion specific to world language education contexts.

Keywords: leadership & advocacy; student experiences; planning & program design

Introduction

DEI. JEDI. EDI. DEIB. These acronyms, which refer to the words diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging, have become ubiquitous in PK-12 and higher education contexts. Schools, institutions, and organizations, including our national and regional world language education associations (e.g., ACTFL, 2023), have made explicit commit-

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ments to the core ideas behind these acronyms. These commitments resonate with language educators, many of whom entered the field because of their passion for content and classrooms that are multilingual and multicultural. As language educators, we have read, attended sessions, listened to podcasts, and tuned into virtual meetings to learn about how we should strive to create and sustain spaces for students to learn in diverse, equitable, and inclusive settings.

What do we actually mean by diversity, equity, inclusion, and privilege? *Diversity* refers to the characteristics that make an individual or a group different and unique, and includes a variety of elements, such as race, ethnicity, language, gender, age, socioeconomic status, disability, etc. We draw on Skrla, McKenzie and Scheurich's (2009) definition of *equity*:

> the educational policies, practices, and programs necessary to (a) eliminate educational barriers based on gender, race/ethnicity, national origin, color, disability, age, or other protected group status; and (b) provide equal educational opportunities and ensure that historically underserved or underrepresented populations meet the same rigorous standards for academic performance expected of all children and youth (p. 3-4).

Our definition of inclusion is informed by ACTFL's *Core Values* statement on inclusivity, which is ensuring that "all people feel welcomed, engaged, and valued, to champion diversity, equity, and inclusion, and to increase transparency in our processes. [It also includes fostering] a culture of mutual respect and understanding" (2023). This is a broad definition of inclusion that comprises students with disabilities, students with different racial or ethnic identities, students with diverse gender identities, and beyond. We draw on McIntosh's (2020) definition of privilege, that some individuals and groups in society benefit from unearned, and often unacknowledged benefits or advantages as a result of their identities. Although McIntosh initially wrote about white privilege and male privilege, others have expanded the concept to consider other domains, such as sexual orientation, age, religion, socioeconomic status (SES), and disability (Black & Stone, 2005). Privilege related to SES and whiteness in schools has had a bearing on resources; schools in primarily white communities with higher family incomes typically have more resources than schools in communities with larger numbers of students of color and/or communities with lower family incomes (Calarco, 2020; Epstein, 2011).

Questions related to DEI in world language education have inspired top scholars in our field to call for further research on access, opportunity, representation, and community engagement (Anya & Randolph, 2019). In this article, we seek to engage leaders and educators, both within and beyond NECTFL, to think critically about our own schools, districts, communities, and states, and to commit to advocating for deliberate changes in policies and practices to make world language education contexts more diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

Using New Jersey as an Example

Both of us–Beth and Julia–are educators in New Jersey (NJ). Julia teaches high school French, Beth teaches the world language methods course in a teacher preparation program. NJ has the advantage of being one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse states in the U.S. As of 2022, NJ had the fourth highest diversity index[1] with a population that is almost 50% Hispanic/Latino, Black, and Asian, and was designated the second most

1. The US Census Diversity Index https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2021/dec/racial-and-ethnic-diversity-index.html shows the probability that two people chosen at random will be from different race and ethnic groups.

linguistically diverse state in the US (Insider NJ, 2022). Despite its racial and linguistic diversity, many NJ students experience gaps in equity, access, and opportunity (Weber & Baker, 2020). Although the examples we share stem from NJ world language educators and contexts, they are representative of issues that impact the field of world language education in the U.S. more broadly. To illustrate these issues, we begin with two composite vignettes that demonstrate how diversity, equity, inclusion, and privilege have the potential to play out in different contexts. The vignettes are not descriptions of actual districts in NJ. They are fictional composites that were written to illustrate a wide-range of issues that we have observed in different contexts. We then draw on the vignettes to discuss the equity issues that they illustrate in connection to the extant literature and to a recent study that highlighted the voices of PK-12 NJ world language educators.[2]

Illustrations of DEI in World Language Education: Two Vignettes

School A is situated in a large district with over 20 schools in a racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse urban community in NJ. The city is rich in cultural and language diversity with speakers of languages from almost every part of the globe. Neighborhoods in the city are home to families that have lived in the area for generations as well as families who are recent arrivals to the U.S. The most recent Census figures indicate that about 90% of the population is Black, Latinx, or biracial while the remaining residents identify as white, Asian, or American Indian. The school district has a mix of newer and older school buildings and other new physical resources, such as technology and playgrounds, but it faces consistent challenges due to a lack of resources among all schools, high teacher turnover, and a significant percentage of the population living in poverty. Approximately 10% of students have a documented disability and IEP (Individualized Education Program), which is lower than the national average of 15%. Some educators observe families within their school that lack food, clothing, housing, or other basic needs. In a few schools, teaching positions have gone unfilled due to a dearth of qualified candidates, particularly in world languages, despite the fact that there are many native speakers of other languages who were educated in their home country. A revolving door of educators makes for a lack of continuity and connection for the large student body. Because of teacher shortages and other challenges related to scheduling, the district offers only two language options at the high school level. Some years, they are unable to staff upper-level sections, such as levels III, IV, or AP (Advanced Placement). Despite the fact that the majority of students in the district speak or are exposed to another language in their home or community, only a handful of students apply for the *Seal of Biliteracy*.

School B is situated in a smaller PK-12 district in a suburban area outside a major metropolitan area and is home to six schools. The community is composed of mostly monolingual, English-speaking students and the majority of the population is white. The median income of the town it serves is significantly higher than the state average. The district is often able to lure talented teachers away from other schools because of the smaller class sizes and other resources accessible to educators there. For example, teachers receive financial support from the schools' active Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) to pursue professional development and to create learning opportunities outside of the classroom for their students. However, some teachers have left the district because of the culture of "helicopter parent" family involvement in which parents question teachers' decision-making or their children's grades. High test scores and a rhetoric of the community having the "top" public schools make the community desirable to families. This is particularly salient for families

2. Supported by the ACTFL Research Priorities Grant program.

with children with disabilities because of the perception that classrooms are inclusive and there are adequate resources to support students' IEPs. Property taxes are high in the town the district serves, and there are few affordable housing options available. Students begin a world language in kindergarten and can continue through 12th grade. The high school offers four different world languages through the AP level, language-specific honor societies, and annual trips abroad that are partly sponsored by local businesses and non-profit organizations.

These two vignettes demonstrate the complexity of diversity, equity, inclusion and privilege in world language programs, and within their surrounding school and community contexts. They also suggest different challenges and opportunities. In the section that follows, we situate these issues in the current empirical and conceptual research literature.

Access, Resources, and Privilege

Access and opportunity for world language instruction is not inherent in all NJ schools. In the vignettes above, School A does not offer a wide variety of language courses and levels. In a recent study that examined equity in world language education (Wassell, Glynn, Baroudi, & Sevinc, 2022), NJ educators indicated that a lack of representation of Black and/or African American students in upper-level language classes was a key local issue. In schools that did offer higher level courses, the racial and ethnic diversity of the classes was not representative of the diversity of the community's population.

A number of participants in the same study (Wassell, et al., 2022) also suggested that the type and number of world language offerings in a district was a function of the socio-economic status and demographics of the community it served. The educators perceived that more world language resources were available in districts with larger populations of affluent or white students. Even within districts–particularly those with multiple schools–participants noted differences among the schools and for different groups of students, depending on their location (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) and racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demographics. This included access to different types of world language programs, such as early language learning and dual language programs. While some schools offer world language education as early as preschool or kindergarten, others do not begin until middle or high school.

The current teacher shortage was also identified by study participants as a major issue impacting world language offerings. According to the U.S. Department of Education's report of teacher shortage areas, NJ has had a world language teacher shortage each year since 2004, a trend that has been similarly sustained and significant for world language education across the U.S. (Swanson & Mason, 2018). A search on NJ's hiring website for public schools in early October 2022 revealed that there were more than 25 open world language teaching positions for either permanent or long-term substitute positions, meaning that many schools had begun the year without qualified teachers.

Vignette B, on the other hand, demonstrates the resources and privileges that are common in some school communities. Students can choose from various language offerings and can work toward advanced proficiency at upper levels, and in some cases, can earn college credit. However, for districts like the one in vignette B, a perceived virtue in the form of financial resources and community affluence has the potential to mask inequities that exist within them; the schools may suffer from insidious structural racism or other forms of discrimination (Hagerman, 2020; Sánchez Loza, 2020). Tacit or taken-for-granted policies or practices may be the result of complacency, past precedent, or tradition. As Sánchez Loza (2020) suggests, schools get categorized as "bad" or "good" based on student popula-

tion and resources–schools with more students of color or with limited resources are seen as bad, while schools with predominantly white students and higher traditional measures of academic achievement are categorized as good. "This not only positions some students in 'bad' schools and as continually and perpetually lacking and . . .it conversely results in positioning other schools as 'good,' as superior and successful spaces and whose academic achievement serves as a model and the standard to which all must strive" (Sánchez Loza, 2020, p. 380-381).

Gatekeeping–or controlling access to particular courses or academic tracks–often masquerades as academic rigor; as Smith (2011) suggests, school counselors have the potential to serve as "mediators of opportunity" (p. 792). As a result, minoritized students, emergent bilingual students[3], and students with disabilities may be discouraged from taking advanced courses by teachers, counselors, or school tracking or policies (e.g., pre-requisite class requirements). In some cases, certain students, such as students with disabilities, may not be excluded from world language study. For example, in a recent analysis of the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) from the 2017-2018 school year, Gage and van Dijk (2022) found that students who identified as Black and or Hispanic were significantly less likely to take AP courses, which is typically a marker of advanced, rigorous study of a particular content area. In addition, they found that enrollment was essentially non-existent for students with disabilities.

Gatekeeping for world language study may be particularly salient in the case of Black students (Anya, 2020; Glynn, 2012). For example, Anya (2020) described Black students' experience in immersion programs and the perceptions around students' home language: African American English. She explains:

> Unfortunately, deficit ideas that African American students will not do well in immersion programs because they have "enough difficulty already speaking English" still persist…. They are one of the reasons teachers, administrators, and other institutional gatekeepers—couched in a concern for not burdening black children with educational challenges they supposedly cannot meet—use to justify racist beliefs and practices that exclude them from equitable participation in language immersion programs. (p. 107)

In a recent study of NJ educators (Wassell et al., 2022), participants confirmed that Black students were often "missing" in their upper level world language classes. Ebony[4], a world language supervisor in an urban school district, explained, "We had offered AP Spanish, and I don't know whether that might have been a breakdown in the program itself or they're just not interested in going to the higher levels…we haven't had any African American students in our AP course or in our higher-level classes." Another participant linked the issue to representation within the teachers at the school: "We have 2 Latinx teachers and no Black teachers in a department of 10 teachers, while the student body is roughly 45% students of color." Whether it is related to gatekeeping, the teacher shortage, class offerings, or, as Anya (2020) suggests, racist beliefs and practices, the underrepresentation of students of color and students with disabilities in world language studies is a significant issue, particularly at the advanced levels of language study.

3. Although many sources use the term "English Language Learners" or "English Learners" as a label for students learning English in school, we purposefully use "emergent bilingual students" to suggest the additive, asset-based nature of their language learning and development.
4. Pseudonym

So What?

Recent scholarship in world language education more broadly has suggested that the issues we describe are not just a problem in NJ. And to be clear, the ideologies, or sets of conscious or unconscious beliefs, surrounding world language study have historically been problematic. World language education has long been considered an elitist and imperialist endeavor, targeted toward students with ample resources (Macedo, 2019). Other commonplace practices in world language education more broadly, such as tracking (Anya & Randolph, 2019) and world language curriculum materials that are disconnected from students' identities and cultures (Herman, 2007), have exacerbated issues of equity and inclusion for language learners in the U.S. However, in collaboration with our professional organizations, world language teachers and administrators have the power to change the systems, policies, and practices that have given life to these barriers. We conclude with specific leadership and advocacy practices that we can use to move beyond the rhetoric. As a field of language educators, we must take significant steps to ensure that our classrooms, programs, and schools are living examples of what we actually mean when we say we are committed to DEI.

Next steps: Leadership and advocacy to support diversity, equity, and inclusion

1. ***Ask questions***. Which students are missing from language study in your classroom, or for administrators, in your program? Ask for the demographic data for your students, including disability/IEP or 504 status, gender, home language, socioeconomic status, race, or other elements of student diversity. To what extent do the racial, socioeconomic, and gender demographics of your school in aggregate "match" those that are in all levels of language study in your school? Look specifically for gaps in access, equity, or opportunity and communicate these discrepancies to the administration, counselors, and the Board of Education. Talk to administrators, counselors, colleagues, and School Board members to advance the message that world language study is *for every student*. Find out if academic or linguistic gatekeeping is occurring in your school–learning another language should not be restricted to students in a particular track or with a particular academic profile. No student should be labeled as "bad" at languages. Encourage your administration or Board of Education to revise school policy to require all students to take world language courses.
2. ***Leverage community members.*** Leverage community members as school leaders, as educators, and as language supports. For example, districts in Minneapolis-St. Paul created cohorts of aspiring teachers who were native speakers of heritage languages largely represented in the community (Dernbach, 2023). The cohort model allowed for easier navigation of teacher certification pathways and addressed a significant representation issue in their public schools. Targeted hiring of community members also ensures that minoritized students are more likely to interact with adults of a similar race, ethnicity, background, or socioeconomic status. Speak with administrators or those charged with hiring to organize an open house in your district or county for community members interested in teaching. Invite local university teacher preparation programs, alternate route programs, and state licensure representatives to meet with candidates and support them to navigate the licensure requirements. However, it is important to recognize that meeting licensing or educational background requirements can be a significant barrier to even the strongest candidates. Speak directly with representatives of your state world language association to ask what advocacy efforts they are undertaking with legislators or the state department of education to make pathways to teaching more accessible.

Update the curriculum.

Make inclusive, culturally sustaining curriculum a non-negotiable component of world language courses. Language educators may be missing opportunities to engage students of color and encourage them to continue language study by using culturally sustaining curriculum and pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017; Glynn, Wesely, & Wassell, 2018). "Students need to be empowered to understand that while they live in an oppressive, stratified society, their cultural identities are in fact valuable, worthy, and legitimate" (Borck, 2020, p. 383). For example, for Spanish teachers, there are a number of great examples of curriculum that center Afro-Latinx culture, language varieties, and literature (e.g., the Incorporating Afro-Latino Culture in Spanish Classrooms Facebook group). Connect with colleagues at conferences or on social media who are incorporating inclusive, antiracist, or social justice approaches into world language curriculum and instruction; for example, a membership to ACTFL's Critical and Social Justice Approaches Special Interest Group (SIG) is free for ACTFL members. Advocate for state or regional language organizations to create banks of units and lessons that are inclusive, culturally relevant, and engaging–resources that are accessible to teachers and that make planning more efficient. Involve students in curriculum redesign; their voices are important and should be part of the process.

Advocate for additive and sustained program designs.

Some schools offer world language programming weekly as early as kindergarten, while others begin in later grades. All students should have the same access to high quality programming beginning in the early grades. World language should be as important as other content area learning, such as mathematics, literacy, science, social studies, art, or music, from the start of students' educational journey. Reach out to your district's Board of Education to share research on why early and sustained language learning is critical (e.g., see the *Lead with Languages* website for excellent, user-friendly resources: https://www.leadwithlanguages.org/why-learn-languages/early-childhood-elementary/). Advocate for dual language programs, considered the gold standard of language learning programs. Dual Language programs begin at the PreK or Kindergarten level and designate instruction in a predetermined mix of English and another language. In this model, students who may be linguistically marginalized in other contexts are experts in school in their home language. Monolingual English speakers gain not just additional language skills, but intercultural competence.

Recommit.

Recommit to deeper learning about the communities you serve and to drawing on the assets, rather than deficits, of your learners, their families, and their communities. We spend our days teaching our students that cultural and linguistic practices and perspectives that are unfamiliar are not bad or weird, but rather aspects to be affirmed and celebrated. We welcome the opportunity to explore points of view that enrich our lives and teach us empathy. We have tremendous power in our daily interactions with students: we can choose to either encourage or discourage; to build students up or to shut them down; to meet them where they are at or to write them off. *Every* student should have the opportunity, access, and support to become proficient, interculturally component bilingual citizens: what can we as educators do to ensure this becomes the norm?

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