

RESEARCH ARTICLE

African Americans in World Language Study: The Forged Path and Future Directions

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Abstract

This article examines the history of African Americans in the academic study of world languages and presents an overview of inquiry on the topic. The paper focuses on the impact of race in second language acquisition (SLA) as exemplified through the experience of black students in language education and study abroad. It discusses objectives, policies, instructional priorities and strategies, conditions, and materials related to how black students have in the past, are currently, or should be engaged in language learning. The article examines the path forged by African Americans in world language study, signals gaps in the present body of knowledge, and suggests future directions for investigations into this important topic in the field of applied linguistics and SLA for *ARAL*'s 40th anniversary.

This article presents an overview of inquiry on African Americans in the academic study of world languages¹ and examines the impact of race in language learning through the experience of black² students in language education and study abroad. African American lives are powerfully mediated by race and fundamentally shaped by racialized consciousness and identities, and experiences in learning a new language are no exception to this reality. Of course, in terms of universal cognitive processes, blacks do not learn languages any differently than anyone else. However, the individuality of the black experience makes for unique sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives in language learning, and we should take this into consideration if we seek to encourage African Americans to participate and thrive in our field, which, so far, we have not done successfully.

Research on African Americans in world language study (WLS) shows troublingly low rates of participation and advancement when compared with other minoritized counterparts and whites. For example, at the postsecondary level of classroom-based language learning, black students are represented among the introductory and required language courses in numbers commensurate with their overall population at a given institution, but then their presence drastically reduces, or they entirely disappear at intermediate and upper-level language learning, the program major, or minor (Brigman & Jacobs, 1981; Charle Poza, 2013; Davis & Markham, 1991; Gatlin, 2013; Moore, 2005; Watterson, 2011). Blacks hold only 4% of undergraduate degrees in world languages; however, in comparison, they earn close to 11% of all bachelor's

degrees and represent 12% of the U.S. population (Carnevale et al., 2016; Murphey & Lee, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2018a).

The underrepresentation of African Americans in college language programs is not due to their inherent deficits and cultural disadvantages, such as the inability to excel in language-based subjects. Bereiter and Englemann (1966) and Deutsch (1967) claimed that speakers of African American Language (AAL) were doomed to suffer due to the incompatibility of their supposedly rudimentary, unstructured dialect with more complex and cognitively demanding standardized forms. However, sociolinguistic research eventually made it clear that a background in AAL does not hinder black students' success in any academic subject as much as racism, elitism, and social stigma against their linguistic heritage (Baugh & Hymes, 2002; Perry & Delpit, 1998). On the contrary, coming from a minoritized racial, cultural, and linguistic background makes African Americans especially adept at exercising the flexibility and adaptability necessary for multilingual intercultural communication, since they do it all their lives navigating mainstream American culture (Anderson, 2015). Additionally, no one who observes the lyrical artistry, syntactic and lexical ingenuity, and astounding verbal deftness of the hip-hop generations can credibly claim that black children suffer from a poverty of language.

Lack of desire and motivation also do not fully explain the low rates of participation of African Americans in WLS, because black students express positive attitudes toward this area and are not any less driven to achieve success in it than other groups (Davis, 2000; Glynn, 2012; Pratt, 2012; Watterson, 2011). Their underrepresentation originates from a history of systemic exclusion and marginalization in U.S. education, because black students at the K-12 level are more likely to attend schools or be tracked into programs where world languages are not available, and they complete the fewest number of high-school credits in this subject (Baggett, 2015; Finn, 1998; Schoener & McKenzie, 2016). Schools that many blacks attend also map onto indexes of broader socioeconomic disparities between neighborhoods and districts, and they typically struggle with the availability of funding for language programs.

In schools that do offer languages, black students are frequently placed in academic tracks without them, and institutional gatekeepers (e.g., teachers, counselors, administrators) with deficit notions of their supposed linguistic and cultural disadvantages and their families' purported lack of value for education encourage black students to pursue "less intellectual" or "more practical" subjects (Davis, 2000; Palmer, 2010; Pratt, 2012; Schoener & McKenzie, 2016). In addition to these systemic and institutional failures, what happens in the instructional environments where African Americans study world languages has great bearing on their underrepresentation in our field. Davis and Markham (1991), Davis (1992), and Moore (2005) found that both secondary and postsecondary students were motivated and held overall positive attitudes toward learning new languages. However, they also reported negative classroom experiences, citing poor instructional environments, unfavorable (and racist) teacher and classmate attitudes and perceptions, low expectations, and curriculum and materials they deemed unappealing to their interests and cultural identities, contextually inappropriate, and irrelevant.

The near absence of African American scholars in applied linguistics and SLA is another worrisome result of the underrepresentation of black majors and minors in language fields. Bhattacharya et al. (2019) raised concerns about the inequitable representation of scholars of color in our field's largest and most influential professional organization, the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL). They

exemplified the isolation black scholars experience in AAAL with an anecdote describing how an African American graduate student rushed to approach “the only other black guy” he saw at the 2017 conference, thinking, “Oh my God there’s someone else here!” (p. 1). Reading that account, I profoundly related to the graduate student’s joy to see another black face, because I was the only black student in my upper-level undergraduate and graduate-level Spanish and Portuguese classes. I never had a black colleague when I taught languages, nor did I have a black classmate or faculty member in my applied linguistics doctoral program. Today, as a scholar in applied linguistics and language education, I often attend gatherings where I see no, or very few, black faces among hundreds.

This underrepresentation of African Americans contributes to the dearth of research on the experiences, differences, and concerns of blacks in new language learning. WLS and language teacher education scholars James Davis and Zena Moore included in their publications personal narratives describing similar experiences of “being the only one” as students and scholars, and they cited their experiences of isolation as a main reason why they examined the problem and sought solutions. Davis, Moore, and I were all undergraduate language majors. Black language program graduates like us typically become language educators and scholars, and they may choose African Americans as research participants due to greater access, understanding, and affinity. Additionally, many scholars of classroom-based language learning—black or otherwise—recruit study participants from their own or similar programs and institutions, and, in these programs and institutions, African Americans are scarce.

However, the paucity of research on African Americans in WLS is not solely the result of a broken academic pipeline. It can also be traced to the dominant psycholinguistic theoretical orientation of applied linguistics and SLA that prioritizes the search for universally applicable cognitive mechanisms and processes of SLA, even though learners do not exist nor engage in language study stripped of individual and group experiences of social identities like race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and social class. With the “social turn” of the 1990s and the more recent “multilingual turn” of the field, the preference for cognitive approaches theorizing static relationships among learner attributes, language input, interaction, intake, information-processing, output through formal testing and controlled experimentation has definitely been challenged. However, as Flores and Rosa (2019) argued, the field should, but still, has yet to make a meaningful reckoning of race in SLA. This may be attributed to the continued resistance in SLA against openly addressing polemics such as racism, xenophobia, and colonialism, which are uncomfortable topics that arise on any close examination of the experiences of racialized and minoritized groups in language learning.

This Review

The main objective of this literature review is to present an overview of inquiry on African Americans in the academic study of world languages, examining the impact of race in language learning through the experience of black students in language education and study abroad. Though scarce, studies addressing language learning among African Americans are most often found in the field of education—especially from researchers at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs)—where there is more diversity among scholars, established inquiry on race, and an identifiable record of blacks as a primary research subject population. Literature selected for this review all have in common some description of the black experience in WLS. They discuss

objectives, policies, instructional priorities and strategies, conditions, and materials that have bearing on how blacks have in the past, are currently, or should be engaged in language learning. They examine the path forged by African Americans in WLS, signal gaps in the present body of knowledge, and suggest future directions for investigations into this important topic in the field of applied linguistics and L2 research for *ARAL*'s 40th anniversary.

Some History on World Language Study at HBCUs

The history of education of African Americans has been marked by formidable resilience against significant barriers. During slavery, blacks risked torturous disfiguring lashings and imprisonment to break antiliteracy laws, secretly learn and teach others to read, and found schools. After the Civil War (1861–1865), one of the first things African Americans did upon creating new communities was to build schools with support from federal and state agencies, land grants, philanthropists, and churches. They also frequently had to rebuild or relocate the schools and colleges when white mobs burned them down or threatened mass violence. These mortal risks African Americans suffered showed their culture of profound value and sacrifice for education, which persisted in the face of violent white resistance during school desegregation and today in blacks' continued investment in public education despite systemic disenfranchisement.

HBCUs grew from the "freedmen's schools" in newly liberated communities to become primary providers of higher education for African Americans, who, until mandated school desegregation with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, were by law or in practice barred from attending most predominantly white institutions (PWIs). They began as teaching, agricultural, and technical colleges, grew to 121 institutions in the 1930s, and currently number at around 100. Throughout their history into the present, HBCUs have struggled with considerable budget constraints, because laws guaranteeing equal funding for public HBCUs and PWIs were never applied equitably in the actual distribution of federal and state resources (Davis, 2000). Nevertheless, despite these challenges, HBCUs educated the majority of African American college students and graduates of institutions of higher education in the United States until the 1970s, and today they continue to produce the largest number of black graduates in many fields where they are least represented (see Brooks & Starks, 2011 for a comprehensive history).

The first authoritative study on African Americans in WLS was published by Rivers (1933), who examined faculty, students, curricula, staffing, leadership, and educational resources at 30 HBCUs, specifically, the state and suitability of language instruction materials, equipment, libraries, and academic resources. His findings showed difficulties supporting black student success in WLS due to scant funding, lack of up-to-date materials, facilities, and effective instructional methods. Nyabongo (1948) followed with a similar, larger study and found that World War II increased the desire among blacks (many of them GIs returning from overseas) to study world languages. However, the majority of HBCUs where they would go for WLS struggled to fulfil the demand due to acute financial pressures. Staffing constraints Nyabongo found, for example, showed that the smaller institutions employed only one overextended world language instructor, who not only divided time among French, Spanish, and sometimes German, but was often also required to teach English literature.

Miller (1954) replicated and expanded Rivers and Nyabongo's foundational studies to include 70 black colleges. He discussed the same issue of limited resources and also

addressed institutional and ideological mandates for HBCUs to train blacks in “more practical” areas necessary for socioeconomic independence. Miller reported in 1954, and decades later Clowney and Legge (1979), Bostick (1985), and Davis (1992, 2000) also confirmed that HBCUs typically cut world language programs entirely or merged them with other departments like communication and humanities. Unable to prioritize world language programs beyond basic level instruction, and to ease the burden on staffing, resources, and services, many waived language course requirements altogether or for certain majors. This was accompanied by student attrition from the steep decline in world language programs during the 1970s and 80s throughout the U.S. (Bostick, 1985; Murphey & Lee, 2019). Later studies found a quarter of HBCUs offer a major or minor in WLS, which remains the same today.

Unlike in other areas like medicine, where HBCUs produce the most African American graduates in fields where they are underrepresented, HBCUs do not currently offer the most numerous opportunities in WLS at the upper level nor do they produce the most black graduates in this area. Georgia State University and the University of Maryland, College Park (both PWIs) have done so for the past decade. However, the HBCUs that have world language programs, such as Howard University, with its strong tradition in language, literature, and cultural studies education and renowned contributions to the field, have so far graduated and/or employed the most scholars investigating the question of blacks in WLS. These scholars, their graduate students, mentees, and research colleagues have contributed the most significant body of work on the topic, including the national studies I discuss in the next section with hundreds of African American participants at institutions of various demographic profiles.

African American Students’ Attitudes and Experiences in World Language Study

For most African American students, WLS happens in a K-12 or postsecondary classroom, and the greater part of the research on their experiences in these classrooms has been conducted from a distance through enrollment and achievement records, interviews, and surveys that rely on participants recalling and retelling. Rare are the studies where the actual language-learning interactions and activities of black students and their instructors are directly observed over an extended period and presented with analysis of how daily episodes illustrate key processes, problems, and possibilities for growth in research and practice. Nevertheless, the large surveys provide a necessary broad view of similarities across this population. They also identify key areas for other studies to conduct close and in-depth examinations.

Attitudes toward World Language Study

The foundational and largest study of the modern era on African American students in WLS was conducted by Davis and Markham (1991), who surveyed approximately 770 black students (out of a total 801) at 53 HBCUs to investigate their views on learning new languages, their schools’ world language programs, and the courses’ cultural material. Of the 53 institutions in the study, fewer than half (46%) of the institutions offered majors in world languages, and 14% had no world language requirement. Davis and Markham found that 80% of black college students surveyed generally felt positively toward WLS, were interested and eager to succeed, communicate with target language speakers, travel abroad, fulfill career goals, and to compete for more lucrative jobs. A critical finding in the study, however, was that when asked if they viewed the cultural

content presented in their world language classes as interesting, appealing, or personally relevant to their African American identities, many did not feel any special affinity with this aspect of their experience, and 40% reported that their courses would be more relevant if African or Afro-descendant themes were more emphasized in first- and second-year segments where the majority had their only experiences in postsecondary WLS.

Lucas (1996) surveyed 160 African American students of introductory French and Spanish, and Charle Poza (2015) compared 110 black students in beginner levels of Spanish language instruction with those who advanced onto intermediate to analyze their beliefs and anxiety regarding language learning and their reasons to continue or terminate study in this area. Both found that the ones who would not continue expressed higher levels of anxiety regarding the grades they expected to receive in world language courses, rated their language skills much more poorly than classmates who planned to continue, and were more likely to believe that they were not “naturally” nor academically good at languages. Additionally, as Davis and Markham (1991) previously reported, black students Lucas (1996) surveyed who planned to leave after one year or after fulfilling the world language requirement did not feel that the cultural content and presentation of the communities of target language speakers were personally relevant or appealing in terms of their cultural and social identification with the African Diaspora.

Moore’s (2005) study on the attitudes of African Americans toward WLS was motivated by her concerns as a black world language education professor observing the low number of African American preservice teachers in her university’s credentialing programs and the total absence of blacks in world language teaching division. She surveyed 128 black students at a PWI majoring in varied academic disciplines on their attitudes toward and experiences in WLS plus their recommendations on how to enroll and retain black students at the upper level. Moore found that, while 99% of participants studied world languages in high school (which was a prerequisite for admission to the university), only 45% chose to do so when they arrived on campus. Of those who did take world language classes in college, 89% reported that their decision was motivated by the need to fulfil requirements of their academic unit.

A key finding in Moore (2005) on the reasons why African American students chose not to continue with WLS was also their negative classroom experiences at the secondary level. They complained that their high-school language classes were boring, irrelevant to their interests and cultural identities and, overall, led by terrible instructors. They also reported their academic counselors saying WLS was too difficult or impractical for students like them. Sadly, this finding has been consistently present throughout the history of research on black students in our field, and studies routinely report such negative classroom experiences, racist exclusion, and gatekeeping by teachers and counselors at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels (see an example from every decade of the past century in Rivers, 1933; Nyabongo, 1948; Miller, 1954; Hubbard, 1968; Clowney & Legge, 1979; Brigman & Jacobs, 1981; Davis, 1992; Scanlan & Palmer, 2009; Glynn, 2012; Pollock, 2018). To increase their presence in this subject area, the black students Moore (2005) surveyed recommended greater instructional focus on communicative skills, more rigorous recruitment of African American teachers, promotional activities and workshops on the benefits of WLS, and implementation of university-wide language requirements.

A more recent study with direct implications to Moore (2005) is Pratt’s (2012) investigation on if African American high-school students were less interested in or felt any less motivated to study Spanish language than other groups. Pratt cited Moore’s (2005)

troubling findings of black students' negative experiences in secondary language programs as why she wanted to learn more about this study population, especially since most of the scant research available on African Americans in WLS has focused on college students. She surveyed 631 secondary Spanish language students of different races and ethnicities—among whom 102 identified as African American—on their enrollment level, classroom instruction, attitudes toward the language and its speakers, and on multiple factors related to their motivation to continue studying high-school Spanish after the first year and in college.

Pratt (2012) found that, in the first year of high-school Spanish, black students were enrolled at equal rates, were equally motivated to continue studying Spanish, and reported liking and anticipating having fun in class at comparable rates with other groups. However, with each subsequent year, African American student enrollment decreased in upper-level classes while other groups' enrollment grew. Also, those black students who did continue on to upper levels made fewer reports of liking Spanish and having positive experiences in class while other groups reported liking the advanced levels more. This downward trend of black high-school students liking Spanish class less each year they remained in them, while fewer and fewer opted to continue at all, persisted into the postsecondary level, with only 39% responding they planned to study it in college. Recalling Moore (2005), Pratt's surmised that her black high-school students' loss of liking for the Spanish language and subsequent attrition from higher levels could be caused by negative classroom experiences and "unappealing teaching practices" (p. 129).

The most recent work on black students' attitudes toward WLS include a noteworthy trio of dissertation projects that build upon the forged path of research on African American new language learners while showing a strong future for its continued growth. Watterson (2011), Gatlin (2013), and Pollock (2018) all sought to examine the problem of low enrollment among African Americans in WLS with the goal of contributing to understandings and solutions. Watterson (2011) conducted a case study examining the program and classroom experiences of 20 African American Spanish language students—ten majors and ten introductory level nonmajors—at an HBCU. Pollock (2018) also conducted a case study of ten black students at an HBCU examining their prior and present experiences in WLS, and Gatlin (2013) surveyed 571 black students at four universities (two HBCUs, two PWIs). All three studies found that African American college students believe in the importance and value of multilingualism, believe they can excel in learning a new language, and they report that their positive K-12 experiences with WLS contributed to the choice to continue at the postsecondary level.

Watterson (2011) additionally found, as I did in my case study of the motivations of successful black second-language learners (Anyá, 2011), that black students who stayed to eventually major and minor in WLS already had some type of multilingual or multicultural background, positive K-12 experiences, travel abroad, strong desires to engage with Spanish-language-speaking communities, and professional goals favored or bolstered by multilingualism and international experiences. Watterson (2011), Gatlin (2013), Pollock (2018), and I (in Anyá, 2011) learned from both language majors and nonmajors at both HBCUs and PWIs that black students greatly desire to see the cultural content in world language curriculum make stronger and more meaningful connections with their identities as members of the African Diaspora through greater emphasis on, and more in-depth explorations of, the Afro-descendant cultures and populations among the target language-speaking communities. We also found that

black students who were studying or previously studied world languages at the introductory levels explicitly cited the opportunity to make these Afro-Diasporic connections in WLS as a reason they, and, they believe, other black students, would take a certain language class, continue taking classes beyond the initial level offerings, or pursue a special opportunity like study abroad. This result is important to consider when seeking solutions for the problem of black student underrepresentation in WLS; it shows a concrete strategy that can be implemented to make courses and other program offerings more relevant and appealing to African American students.

Experiences in World Language Study Abroad

Problems of inequity and exclusion of African American students in our educational system are also reflected in their rates of participation in college-level study abroad. Black students are 6% of program participants while they represent 13% of postsecondary enrollees. In comparison, white students, who are 56% of the overall postsecondary student population, comprise 70% of study abroad participants (Institute of International Education, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). Black student underrepresentation in study abroad can be attributed to barriers imposed by institutional gatekeepers, such as faculty and staff, who do not recommend African American students for special or prestigious programs, and trip organizers, who do not actively advertise to blacks or create sojourn opportunities in locations of unique interest and appeal to this population. Additionally, a critically important cost factor prohibits many black students from studying abroad, since they are disproportionately represented among those who need parallel employment and financial aid in college. Furthermore, many African American students are concerned with race-based hostility and fear-intensified levels of the isolation most already feel as the only or one of a few blacks among the majority white, middle-class study abroad participant groups, exacerbated in a world location far from home. They worry about encountering new types of racism abroad for which they may not be able to use the same coping strategies as in the U.S. (Cole, 1991; Murray Brux & Fry, 2009).

This worry was borne out in the experiences of Misheila, the only African American student out of 35 participants of a five-week Spain study abroad program examined in the foundational ethnographic study on race, gender, and language learning by Talburt and Stewart (1999). On the streets of Segovia, white men routinely followed Misheila, leaning close enough to whisper in her ear racist, lewd requests and references to hypersexualized black women. White female classmates also received catcalls and curbside flirtations; however, the come-ons directed at Misheila differed considerably in tone, persistence, and level of aggressiveness. Similar stories of distinctly racist and sexist abuse young black women endured on the streets of both Spain and Italy were told by Willis' (2015), and my own personal experiences as a recent college graduate working in Segovia during the 1998–99 period of Talburt and Stewart's study were identical to Misheila's. However, she was met with skepticism when she told her white Spanish instructor and American classmates that she felt unsafe and hardly went out, and she lamented that no one in the program prepared her to encounter such problems.

Misheila's frustration with being targeted by racist, sexist street harassment caused her to severely limit her outings and contact with Spanish locals. It was likely this had negative repercussions for potential linguistic gains she could have made interacting more with the target language community. This was the case with Albert, the primary participant of Goldoni's (2017) study of a black male Dominican American heritage

Spanish language learner on a study abroad program in Valencia, Spain. Albert had daily experiences with racism in his interactions with locals, which included being stopped twice by police and being the only one in a group of white friends who was asked to show his passport. Albert was also refused service in restaurants and suffered frequent glares and inexplicable hostility from passersby.

So fraught was Albert's experience that, like Misheila, he drastically cut his involvement with Spanish locals. He reported that his disengagement hindered the language-learning gains he expected, because his practice in Spanish was limited. In Talburt and Stewart (1999), Misheila not only curtailed contact with Spanish locals, she also grew distanced and more isolated from her study abroad program instructor and American classmates, who did not know how to manage the discomfort provoked by discussing racism and race-based sexism in class. Misheila's experiences in the study abroad program challenged the assumption that immersion automatically guarantees opportunities for intercultural exchange and language learning. They also caused Talburt and Stewart (1999) and, later, Flores and Rosa (2019), to propose that we make more considerations of race in SLA to examine the needs and experiences of those racially marginalized in our field, as well as the privilege and positioning of dominant white groups.

My ethnographic case study (Anya, 2017) of the Portuguese language-learning experiences of four African American college students on a study abroad program in Brazil answered the call. While previous research on African American students in study abroad examined how they experienced language learning in communities where they felt isolated, minoritized, and marginalized, I focused on how the primary participants Nina, Leti, Didier, and Rose took the same journey in a black Brazilian city where they were surrounded by a majority of people who looked like them and with whom they sought and felt a diasporic connection and ethnoracial affinity. Hence, for these African American students, learning to speak Portuguese in Salvador-Bahia entailed the life- and perspective-changing experience of learning to understand and speak blackness in a new linguacultural context.

Data for Anya (2017) were gathered from the participants' audio-recorded interviews, their personal journals, and academic writings, and video-recorded episodes from classroom interactions. Thematic, descriptive, and critical discourse analyses examined ways the students learned to speak their material, ideological, and symbolic selves in Portuguese and how linguistic action reproduced or resisted power and inequity. The study showed how diasporic identification and affinity fueled by historic, social, and cultural similarities between African Americans and Afro-Brazilians incentivized and contributed to all four study participants' investments in learning Portuguese, and, at the same time, how their understandings of blackness clashed with Brazilian notions of race, nationality, gender roles and performance, sexuality, and social class. The study also illustrated detailed workings of SLA processes through close examination of the black students' attempts to understand and learn new practices in languaging cultural, religious, and sexual fluidity. It showed that Portuguese language-learning for these African Americans in an Afro-Brazilian city entailed constant negotiations of material, ideological, and linguistic belonging in race-identified linguacultural practices that were at the same time very familiar and completely new to their conceptions of blackness.

Like Misheila's story in Talburt and Stewart (1999) and Albert's in Goldoni (2017), Anya's (2017) presentation of Nina, Leti, Didier, and Rose's journeys also investigated how blacks in study abroad faced difficulties in learning a new language and how they

managed racism and inequity in their participation and treatment in classrooms and local communities. A key difference in my study, however, was that the overwhelming, suffocating impact of racial trauma was not a central focus that shaped the participants' immersion experience. This was due to the program's location in a black city, classrooms where the students' identities and experiences were valued, and the inclusion of Afro-descendent populations and cultures in the program's language- and cultural-learning curriculum. Therefore, a fundamental lesson we can learn from the study, among others I will discuss later in the article, is that African American students in WLS develop strong linguistic expertise and make clear, appreciable communicative gains while interacting in both classrooms and target language communities where they feel connected, comfortable, relaxed, and respected.

Young Learners in World Language Study

Moore and English (1998) conducted an ethnographic investigation and action research of language learning in a traditional classroom of ten seventh- and eighth-grade African American boys studying Arabic at an urban public middle school in a working-class neighborhood. The action research component of the study to identify and implement pedagogical strategies that best supported the students' language learning was conducted by the second author of the report, who was also the classroom instructor and an African American man. The school records of most of the ten students in the Arabic class listed problems with absenteeism, suspensions, and marginal performance; however, they did not exhibit that behavior in the Arabic class. Instead, the students were consistently engaged in classroom activities, showing strong desires to participate, move around, interact, touch and feel instructional visual aids and materials, dramatize, and stylize new words and grammatical forms. They also learned and experimented with the new language through composing hip-hop songs and poetry in Arabic, which they used to showcase new vocabulary or recount short narratives.

The students in Moore and English (1998) were speakers of AAL, and this resource in their linguistic repertoire was valuable in new language learning, as it was easier for them to adapt to features in Arabic that were similar to what they already knew. This finding contradicted a common deficit view of black students' language practices that having a background in AAL impedes success in WLS. Instead of seeing the students' linguistic heritage as a hurdle to overcome, the instructor encouraged their flexibility and creativity in experimenting with new forms, for example, through a regular activity where they collaborated in selecting and presenting special cultural topics. The students regarded these opportunities to lead class lessons very seriously, taking great pains to prepare original, informative, and accurate presentations. When others presented and led discussion, they listened attentively, asked questions, and participated in their classmates' lessons. In contrast to prevalent ideas about African Americans' lack of interest in world languages, and to the surprise of other teachers who considered Moore and English's middle-school Arabic students troublesome and unmotivated, the study found the boys to be particularly active, engaged, and strong language learners.

Haj-Broussard (2003) conducted another in-depth study of the classroom language-learning experience of African American students through examination of in-class observations and standardized assessment scores of a fourth-grade French language immersion program in Louisiana that included racially and socioeconomically diverse groups of children. Haj-Broussard analyzed the language and math achievement tests of all fourth-grade students to compare black and white students' scores, and she

conducted observational case studies of the regular and immersion classrooms to examine the African American students' language-learning experiences, their interactions, and perceptions of them by peers and instructors in the regular education and French immersion contexts. She found that black students—girls in particular—gained tremendously from participation in French language immersion in terms of their self-image, their peers' perception of them, their social inclusion, academic engagement, and the many opportunities for extended one-on-one interaction with teachers. Standardized assessments of the majority working-class black student participants in French immersion showed they scored as high as nonimmersion black students in English language tests. The working-class French language immersion black students also scored higher than their nonimmersion black counterparts and just as high as the middle-class white students in math assessments. This may indicate a need to more closely examine small, student-centered language immersion classrooms for their possibilities in showing us how WLS can boost performance in other content areas, and also, how academic achievement gaps between white and black students relate more to instructional access and opportunity than innate differences in ability or potential.

Similar findings to Haj-Broussard (2003) were made in Holobow et al. (1991), a four-year study of a cohort of both middle-class white and working-class black kindergarten and first-grade students in a dual language or two-way immersion (TWI) French/English program, Lightbown's (2007) study of a Spanish/English TWI group of working-class African American and Hispanic children from kindergarten to fourth grade, and Nicoladis et al.'s (1998) study of working-class black and middle-class white children from grades one to four in a Spanish/English TWI program. In the Holobow et al. (1991), Lightbown (2007), and Nicoladis et al. (1998) studies, black language immersion students did just as well or better in English language tests as their black counterparts receiving instruction in English-only regular education classrooms. Like Haj-Broussard (2003), they found that black students did not suffer any loss of abilities in English as a result of completing their daily instructional activities in another language, which contradicts another common myth that intensive WLS "confuses" English-dominant children or hinders their first language development.

What's more, the working class AAL-speaking black students in Holobow et al. (1991) and Nicoladis et al. (1998) scored just as highly as the middle-class white students in French and Spanish language proficiency tests. Those in Lightbown (2007), whose school population did not have a white comparison group, also demonstrated strong abilities in Spanish language reading. As was previously shown in Moore and English (1998), such findings contradict the fallacious belief that being a speaker of AAL impedes black students' learning and success in WLS. Unfortunately, deficit ideas that African American students will not do well in immersion programs because they have "enough difficulty already speaking English" still persist (Palmer, 2010; Scanlan & Palmer, 2009). 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.

The Future for African Americans in World Language Study

A future for African Americans in WLS calls for understanding how best to serve their needs and assure their equitable and meaningful participation in language education

from the very beginning. Research on black students in WLS shows direct links between their success at the postsecondary level and strong, early, positive language-learning experiences long before college. By the time we encounter problems we are trying to solve with underrepresentation of blacks at the college major or minor level, or as educators and linguistic scholars, we have lost critical opportunities to create a solid base that would have made their chances of persistence and success in our programs much greater. We do not know nearly enough about black students' experiences at the elementary and middle/secondary levels, because K-12 studies are the least available among the already scant research. We especially need more studies on language immersion programs, which have been shown to provide strong social, cognitive, and academic benefits across all groups but are also where we see the lowest levels of black student access and participation. Warranting special attention and critical examination in these new studies are factors that contribute to the exclusion of black students from immersion programs in neighborhoods and schools where working class African Americans are the majority or sizeable population but are displaced by middle-class whites who benefit most from prestige tracks within the schools through gentrification, participation lotteries, district policies, instructor and administrator preference (Palmer, 2010; Scanlan & Palmer, 2009).

In addition to conducting more inquiry on African Americans in WLS, the research we have now should be more widely incorporated into professional development for teachers, counselors, and administrators. The trainings should address their roles in gatekeeping that excludes African Americans from beneficial language-learning programs and help them learn about black students' instructional experiences, myths, and deficit mindsets about the students' abilities in language learning, and strategies to promote their equitable participation and success. More public outreach should also be conducted based on what we already know in the research we have. A critical audience to target is black parents, who are often not made aware of benefits and opportunities for their children in WLS. Some may even be skeptical about the programs based on their own negative and discriminatory schooling experiences, a concern that language study may detract from other more necessary content areas, and myths they may have also been told and perhaps internalized about black children's linguistic abilities.

In Anya (2017), the program location and centrality of ethnoracial topics in its core curriculum were a boon to the black students' experience learning Portuguese. However, this is unusual among commonly taught languages, where we typically see no explicit mention of race in the curriculum and complete erasure or stereotyped imagery of blacks in the learning materials with little representation of them as principals in the target language culture. Spanish, for example, is the most commonly studied language among African American students, and they consistently report a lack of explicit links between their ethnoracial backgrounds and classroom materials, topics, and curricula. Black students express a desire to see more relevant and personally significant connections made between their experiences and those of the cultures and people who speak the languages they study. Their desires have not been fulfilled so far, but not because the target language populations do not include black people. A third of Spanish speakers worldwide are Afro-descendants. Equatorial Guinea is a Hispanophone African country, and there are large black populations in Colombia, Cuba, Panama, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. We have simply made choices in many K-12 and postsecondary Spanish language programs not to represent Afro-descendants as principal or even relevant cultural agents of the target language-speaking communities, and certainly, we

can improve (see Abreu, 2016; Dahl, 2000; Kennedy, 1987; Moeller & Ashcraft, 1997; Ruggiero, 2015; Watson, 2013 for ideas in diversifying instruction; and Anya & Randolph, 2019 for diversifying learners and educators).

A promising future for African Americans in study abroad should include better choices not just to attract greater numbers, but also to accommodate and facilitate their learning. This starts with the choice of geographic location to house programs in countries and cities that offer the sort of meaningful experiences and relevance to their ethnoracial identities and background that black students seek (Murray Brux & Fry, 2009). Nero (2018), for example, showed how this could be done with a three-week study abroad program in the Dominican Republic that facilitated greater understanding of racialized identities and linguistically/culturally responsive pedagogy for preservice teachers from New York. A future for African Americans in study abroad also includes the choice to assure that black families are on the homestay roster available for all students, and black instructors and local staff are part of the program. Even in programs not centered within or around majority African or Afro-descendant cultures and populations, the curriculum, materials, and activities that accompany the study abroad experience should still reflect an ethnoracially inclusive orientation, as everyone benefits from this.

Advertising and outreach regarding the availability and affordability of study abroad programs should consider how they can be targeted to reach black students, because, with more black applicants, there is a greater possibility of more than one black student in the cohort, which contributes to decreased feelings of isolation for African American participants (Cole, 1991; Murray Brux & Fry, 2009). There should be plans and policies in study abroad to address incidents and experiences of racism in the host country and among the participants themselves. The topic should be raised as part of regular orientations, providing coping strategies and information on how to seek and offer support. Programs should also orient staff and instructors on facilitating safe, supportive spaces in classrooms for experiences with racism to be discussed.

A future for African Americans in WLS can be informed by more surveys of enrollment, access, participation, attitudes, and other large-scale investigations of general educational topics that give us a broad view of trends among different student and institutional populations. The largest of such studies were conducted more than 20 years ago by Davis and Markham (1991) with 770 black college student participants and Finn's (1998) high-school world language enrollment study examining the transcripts of 24,000 students, 3800 of them black. These larger studies, though in need of expansion and update, exist in education research. However, the SLA work examining language learning processes at the interactional level through in-depth holistic explorations of African American experiences in SLA is severely lacking. More would be helpful both for theory generation and for instructional skill building for practitioners to address black students' complaints of classroom experiences being tiresome, unappealing, and culturally irrelevant. Finally, in line with the "social justice turn" in our field (Ortega, 2019), we need more research that directly addresses racism in SLA, because the problem of African American underrepresentation in our field will not be solved by ignoring its major cause.

Conclusion

The most recent 2016 study from the Modern Language Association on U.S. undergraduate and graduate enrollments in languages other than English showed a decline of

nearly 10% fewer students in our programs (15.9% fewer in community colleges) than in 2013 and a sharp cut of 651 fewer language programs (Looney & Lusin, 2019). Hardest hit by the downturn are introductory-level enrollments where most African American students first make contact with postsecondary WLS before they leave. In light of this current crisis of overall student attrition in our field, why should we willingly lose black students who could be thriving and advancing in WLS if we did more to attract and retain them? Black students see who and what we include and prioritize in the images, stories, and experiences we think are most representative of key aspects of language and cultural learning. They see who is chosen or whose profile is considered ideal for prestige tracks and opportunities in language program offerings, and they see where we choose to locate study abroad. For African Americans, what is highlighted in WLS has been as important as who and what is left out, what is unsaid, and what is left undone, because a clear message has been communicated about how much we (do not) value their meaningful and equitable inclusion. Let us do better.

Notes

1 World languages or languages other than English (LOTEs) are contemporary terms for what have been traditionally called foreign languages. This article refers to a field of study with literature and programs associated with the name foreign language. However, I use the term world language to recognize that our field is moving past the idea that languages spoken in the U.S. for as long as (or even longer) than English are “foreign” in our communities.

2 Blacks in the U.S. are African, Caribbean, Latin American, European, and from other ethnic backgrounds. In this article, I focus on the history and experience of those who ethnically identify as (U.S.) American Afro-descendants, and I use the terms “African American” and “black” interchangeably to refer to this population.

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