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## Discovering Identity with World Language

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### Discovering Identity with World Language

Teaching different foreign languages in schools opens the educational, mental, and universal benefits of language diversity. Indeed, the history of foreign-language instruction illustrates that early educators grasped these benefits. The Center for Applied Linguistics illustrates the evolution of foreign language teachings. According to CAL, between the late sixties and mid-seventies, languages other than English moved into public schools. At first, schools practiced these studies as an opportunity to enhance listening skills, memorization abilities in the classroom, and create diversity within the school system. However, in the nineties, the English- Only movement progressed, which degrades the educational equity and sense of identity. Foreign studies got reintroduced into schools after the English-Only motion failed. Depending on the state, schools began foreign language studies in the fifth grade and continued through high school and college. Spanish was the first international study that teachers taught in schools in the United States. In 2008, schools began to expand the languages to French, Latin, German, and other foreign languages. Now, foreign-language education is used in public and private institutions across the world to motivate students to study distinct cultures and communities. However, recently, schools once again have begun to remove many of these

language courses. The elimination of language diversity from schools hinders the development of students' identity, destroys curiosity, and delinks students from their heritage.

The introduction of foreign languages motivates students to study unfamiliar cultures and societies, which in turn expands the knowledge of self. Teaching different foreign languages in schools introduces and elaborates on the cultural, intellectual, and social benefits of language diversity. Removing foreign language studies from traditional school disables the feeling of unity and connection that students create as they learn more about a different language. Claire Kramesh, the author of “Alien Wisdoms in English and Foreign Language Programs”, illustrates the unique underlying similarities of people interested in seeking out the knowledge of language: “The common denominator among language learners is their interest in all its manifestations: literary and non-literary. As a mode of thought, as a mode of action, and as a symbol of identity” (Kramesh 1245). The significance of language continues to grow as more people dissect the importance of language in the classroom and how it connects to identity development. Kramesh explains that those introduced to foreign-language studies can see the connection between language and identity. The more someone learns about another language, the more they can understand another culture and belief system which opens a new conversation about self (Kramesh 1244). The connection between knowledge and self, explained by Swiniarski as global education in the book *Educating the Global Village*, defines global education is the teachings of unity around the world when faced with diversity. Education of this importance encourages people to see the world in a new light, adapt, and accept the differences within a community. The growing knowledge about global education is the cause for many people of different cultures to feel united over the connection of language (Swiniarski 4). The introduction of foreign languages in schools enables global education within traditional schools and in those who are new to the

language. The idea of global education is meant to create unity and community amongst counties. Nancy Sterniak elaborates on Swiniarski theories by defining the term foreign language in her essay *The American Attitude toward Foreign Language Education from the 1700s to 2006*. According to Sterniak, a foreign language is “a group of instructional programs that describes the structure and use of language that is common or indigenous to individuals of the same community or nation, the same geographical area, or the same cultural beliefs” (Sterniak 12).

When looking at the definition, foreign language studies is a group activity that is meant to bring people together and share a different culture with someone unfamiliar. However, Sterniak continues to explain how multiple organizations are detrimentally using the term foreign; associating the term with the word ‘alien’; a term for unlawful immigrant or degrading a person of ethnicity (Sterniak 13). The negative connotation with the word affects global education in schools in an unfavorable way by placing a negative connection with the study of language. Therefore, over the past 10 years, organizations have been fighting to change the term ‘foreign language’ studies to ‘world language’ studies. “The use of world language emphasizes that language connects us rather than keep us separated, that languages help us understand the world and participate in multicultural communities” (Sterniak 13). Sterniak and Swiniarski demonstrate the importance of unity and community. The removal of language diversity from schools hinders this sense of community amongst students and hinders the discovery of their identity. The decrease in world language studies deprives students of the chance to explore their curiosity. The removal of specific language courses harms the development of students' identities. “Different languages carve up reality in different ways and that, therefore, the language you speak will determine the way you think. If these were true, in fact, [it proves] such a powerful connection between language and cognition” (Edwards 60).

Reality is all based on perspective. When students introduced to language diversity witness exposure to a new perspective of culture, and as a result, they have a wider and brighter reality. Louise Hubbard exemplifies the concept of the connection between language and one's mind: "Study of a foreign language opens one's eyes. More specifically it opens one's mind. It does more. Foreign language study liberates the mind" (Hubbard 301). As the author of the "Foreign Language Study and The Black Student", Hubbard illustrates how the study of culture and language will stimulate the mind and develop one's identity. The introduction of a new language opens a different layer within the mind that understands global education and identity. This development is vital to the impact of language and its positive influence on a student's identity.

Taking away the study of these diverse cultures deprives students of learning about new things and values and inhibits the expansion of one's mind. The cultural knowledge in schools is causing students to miss opportunities that come with foreign language studies when these studies are threatened to be taken away. This is particularly important for those students who cannot afford to travel or limited to what they see in the classroom. Students lose the chance to study abroad and lose the competitive edge in the future professional field. Sonia Nieto illustrates the impact of culture and knowledge. She reveals in her book *Language, Culture, and Teaching*, that in a dominated community it is common for outside languages that are not of that dominate society, to be ignored or dismissed (Nieto 59). Even though it is slowly losing its momentum, language diversity is a vital part of understanding one another and connecting to people across the world and removing the fewer dominate languages from schools will destroy the connection between cultures. The more people lose knowledge about the importance of language, the further away they become from developing a piece of their identity.

Most students who are enrolled in world language classes are using the course to connect with their culture and heritage. For example, a student of German descent who already speaks the language may take a German language class to enhance his/her global education that Swiniarski and Kramesh speak about in their works. Kramesh illustrates that several students take language courses seeking to grow closer to their heritage and enhance their global education: “For an increasing number of students, English is a foreign, a second, an international, or a global language, not the language of a unitary other tongue and culture” (Kramesh 302). World-language studies create a sense of curiosity amongst the students and enable them to discover aspects of their identity as they discover new elements of their heritage.

When interviewing a language studies teacher, I made many discoveries of my own that correlated with Kameshs’ theory between the connection of heritage and identity. Janelle Coleman is an executive director for diversity and engagement program and taught Spanish at multiple colleges, including the University of Tennessee, Maryville College, and Brescia University. While teaching, Ms. Coleman took notice that many of her students first entered her course to meet a requirement, however, as the semester went on, the students began to become more intrigued in the topic and the culture. The more excited the students became in her classroom, the more successful they were in other studies. “Proficiency in the second language has been proven to support students and their ability to learn. I have seen students learn a second language and become confident in other areas of their studies” explains Ms. Coleman. She continues to illustrate how there are multiple ways to learn a world language, just as there are many ways to teach one. When I asked Ms. Coleman, what is something she has learned while teaching students a new language. “The U.S. is one of the few countries that does not have an official language, but it is also one of the few countries where I have seen that learning a second

or third language is not common”. She continued to explain how she felt about the removal of world language studies from schools: “These courses build a student’s confidence and self-esteem, and even provide a career path. The removal of these classes would be a mistake”. Ms. Coleman and many other teachers, philosophers, and businesses will be affected by the loss of language studies. World language studies connect all aspects of life outside of schooling, which John Edward explains as the “ecology” of language. In chapter eleven of *Language and Identity: “The Ecology of Language,”* Edwards defines ecology as the study of one’s surroundings and how lives are connected within the ‘web of life’ (Edwards 230). The overlapping of language and culture are used in world language courses. Students enter these courses to meet a requirement but walk out finding a new sense of self and newfound confidence.

People are beginning to lose interest in world-language studies because it is no longer a requirement, and some students feel that they are not getting the results they want fast enough. This is one reason people are content with the removal of world - language studies. Because taking a world language in some schools is no longer a requirement, students are not responsible for engaging in multicultural language and linguistic diversity. Hubbard explains the results of removing language studies from the graduation requirement: “Course requirements for graduation are being evaluated with the results that many studies of foreign languages have been dropped schools and colleges. Students may choose subjects that will serve them best” (Hubbard 302). By giving the students a choice and no longer requiring the course, the demand for language courses has dropped over the years. However, the removal of world languages in schools is not just about the students. According to an article: “The Numbers Speak: Foreign Language Requirements are a waste of time and Money”, Byan Caplan feels very strongly about the removal of the course from public schools across the United States. Caplan explains how

“surveys [show] one in four Americans can speak a foreign language, but it offers no further details that would allow us to measure the degree of fluency or the effect of foreign language instruction” (Caplan). He continues to show how teaching languages other than the ones dominant in the U.S (Spanish, English) is not economically sound. The main courses being discontinued are French, German, and Latin. Many schools can no longer support the world language programs and the percentage of students that are taking part in the course versus the number of students that are continuing to higher levels is not correlating.

Caplan and others are noticing this discrepancy in schools, mainly in schools that are struggling financially and do not have the funds to support the programs. Without the first interaction of world languages in grade schools, many students will not pursue these languages in their future studies unless it is required; therefore, those students are not becoming bilingual speakers. These courses are on the brink of extinction because students who do not continue foreign language studies do not become fluent in the language as quickly as they would like. Hubbard notes that: “American interest in foreign languages has declined as the benefits of foreign language study is observed by the failure of the classroom to produce fluent speakers if foreign languages” (Hubbard 304). The decline of language learners is constantly spreading. As more students are becoming discouraged with the lack of fluency, they give up on the language altogether. This decline is motivating schools to remove world language programs from traditional public schools.

However, many students that take world language courses are not new to the language. America is a diverse land full of thousands of diverse cultures and values. In *The Skin That We Speak*, a book by Lisa Delpit, the author takes Personal Accounts from men and women who have dealt with controversy and complications when it comes to their native language in

comparison to the traditional speech taught in schools. Each chapter is a new person who talks about their experiences growing up adopting a new language/ culture and how it has affected their future. She begins the stories with one of her own where she speaks about the difficulties of adapting to the new culture of America (Delpit 8). Her account and others are key examples of the importance of foreign language courses. The sense of community and familiarity it creates causes one to become closer to discovering one's identity. These world language courses provide a sense of familiarity with these students and allow them to learn more about their heritage and culture within turn helps develop their identity.

Teaching world languages in schools open the benefits of language diversity by enhancing the students' sense of self and community. German philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein states “The limits of language mean the limits of the world” (Hubbard 301). Hubbard introduces Wittgenstein in his article to fight for his belief in language diversity. Language is the foundation of creation and everything that surrounds it. German, Latin, French, Spanish, Japanese! Every language in the world is a small part of a big picture that is taught in world language courses throughout grade school. Without these classes, students would not have the opportunity to study another culture without having to leave the classroom, making public education less equitable. The continuation of language diversity in schools will enhance the development of students' identity, flourish curiosity, and connect students to their heritage, making them both better students and, ultimately, better citizens.

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