Bridging the Gap between Teacher Efficacy and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

It Starts with Us

by

Elle M. Anthony

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Dedication

I want to honor my mother, Nicole Lorent, a hardworking and devoted woman, whose unwavering dedication to her family has been a constant source of strength and love. You are always present, whether celebrating birthdays, attending school performances, cheering at sporting events, or supporting life's many milestones. Your commitment is remarkable. You will travel across the world without hesitation to be there for me, ta grande chérie, your son-in-law, and your grandchildren, ta petite chérie, Julia, et ton petit loup, Liam. Your selflessness, resilience, and unconditional love have not only shaped our family, but also provided the foundation of support that has sustained me through every challenge. You continue to model what it means to show up with intention and heart, regardless of distance or circumstance. Je t'aime, Maman.

I want to also express my heartfelt gratitude to my husband, Vinson Anthony. Together, we navigate the complexities of raising our family and striving for a better future, and your commitment to our shared values and dreams has been a constant source of inspiration. I am deeply grateful for your patience, kindness, and the many laughs you bring into my life every day. This work would not have been possible without you by my side.

With deep gratitude and love, I want to also acknowledge my father, Jacques Maerten. His endless intellectual curiosity, vast knowledge, and passion for discovery ignited in me a lifelong drive to learn, grow, and never settle. His example has shaped not only my academic path but my entire outlook on life—as a journey

of ongoing growth, reflection, and exploration. This book is a tribute to his lasting impact on who I am and who I strive to become. May he continue to watch over us.

I dedicate this book to my amazing children, Julia and Liam Anthony. You are my heartbeats and the reason I do everything I do. I feel so blessed to be your mom, and I will always love you and be with you. Your strength, your love, and the way you face life with such honesty and heart remind me every day of the kind of world I hope to help create—a world where you feel respected, understood, and free to be exactly who you are. Watching you grow, learn, and take on challenges fills me with pride and pushes me to do better and be better. This book is as much for you as it is inspired by you. I cannot wait to see you both take on the world with your light, your passions, and all that makes you such beautifully unique human beings. Je vous aime.

Preface

This book began with two children—my own. Julia and Liam, with their endless curiosity, unique perspectives, and unwavering sense of justice, taught me some of the most profound lessons I've ever learned—not from a textbook or professional development workshop, but from simply observing them move through the world. They showed me what it truly means to see a child. Not just to notice their presence in a room or check their name off an attendance list, but to recognize their full humanity: their culture, their language, their dreams, fears, questions, and contradictions.

From the very beginning, I watched them approach life with wide eyes and open hearts, expecting the same in return. And yet, time and again, I witnessed moments—small and large—where their identities were misunderstood, minimized, or ignored altogether. I saw how school systems, even with the best intentions, weren't always built to reflect the richness of who they were or the communities they belonged to. These weren't just my children's experiences; they echoed the stories of countless other students—students whose brilliance, creativity, and resilience too often go unseen.

As an educator, these observations left an imprint I couldn't ignore. I began to ask myself a question that has grown louder and more urgent over the years: What would it look like if every child felt truly seen? Not just acknowledged in a superficial way, but genuinely valued for who they are, where they come from, and all that they bring into the classroom.

Culturally responsive pedagogy has offered me a powerful answer—one rooted in empathy, equity, and radical imagination. It is not a passing trend or a simple checklist of strategies. It is a mindset. A lens through which we reexamine not just our teaching practices, but our beliefs, our systems, and our relationships with students and families. It asks us to pause, to reflect, and to be brave enough to do things differently. At its heart, culturally responsive pedagogy is about love—a deep, unwavering love for our students and a profound belief in the transformative power of education.

This work is deeply personal. It is grounded in the voices of the children I've taught, the collaboration of the colleagues who have challenged and supported me, and the unwavering inspiration I continue to draw from Julia and Liam. It is for them. It is for every student who has ever sat quietly at the back of a classroom, wondering if their story mattered, if their questions were worth asking, or if their way of learning would ever be recognized and celebrated.

We can do better. In fact, we must. Because no child should ever feel invisible. Every child deserves to walk into a classroom and know, without a doubt, that they belong.

Introduction

This book is a carefully adapted version of my doctoral research, reimagined to be accessible and meaningful for educators across all subject areas. While the original study focused on world language education, this edition expands its scope to include practical strategies and examples that resonate across disciplines. My goal is to equip teachers with tools and insights to foster classrooms where all students feel a genuine sense of connection, capability, and belonging.

By blending personal stories with classroom experiences and research—including surveys, interviews, and data visualizations—I aim to demonstrate the impact Culturally Responsive Pedagogy can have on students. By combining evidence with narrative, I hope to engage readers both intellectually and emotionally.

To help educators move from theory to practice, this book offers clear explanations of key concepts and flexible strategies that can be adapted for different grade levels and content areas. Whether you teach science, math, language, or the arts, these ideas are designed to create learning environments where every student feels seen and supported.

At its core, this work is about empowerment—affirming what many educators already know: that when students feel they belong, their engagement and confidence grow. Belonging isn't optional; it's the foundation of meaningful and lasting learning.

Just as vital is our mindset. When we, educators, feel supported, reflective, and equipped with purposeful tools, we become not only instructors but builders of inclusive spaces and champions for each learner. This book invites you to take the next step—not through perfection, but with intention and a belief in the transformative power of small, thoughtful changes.

In these pages, I hope you find inspiration, encouragement, and real strategies to guide your journey. Because what we do each day in our classrooms—how we teach, how we connect, and how we respond—deeply shapes students' outcomes and self-belief. Every child deserves the chance to thrive. And every learner deserves a classroom where they are not only supported and challenged, but truly seen and valued for who they are and all they can become.

Chapter 1
Seeing Through Their Eyes: A Journey of Race, Resilience, and Reform

I had never really thought about my race before. I always saw myself as the "norm," just blending in without ever considering the implications of my skin color. That all changed one day when my 4-year-old daughter said to me: “They don’t want to play with me,” her voice filled with confusion and hurt. I asked her why, and she simply replied, "Because I have brown skin." This shook me to my core.

The memory is engraved in my mind: I was driving east along Oakland Park Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale when it happened. The sights and sounds of that moment, the rhythm of the passing streets, and the weight of the experience left an indelible mark. The significance of that instant, tied to the motion of the journey and the cityscape, has stayed with me ever since, a vivid snapshot in the timeline of my life. As soon as those words left my daughter’s mouth, tears started rolling down my cheeks. The weight of what she said hit me like a ton of bricks. My husband and I stayed silent for what felt like a lifetime, the only sound the hum of the car and my quiet sobbing. For thirty seconds, we said nothing. What could we say? How do you explain to your child that the world sometimes isn’t kind because of something as fundamental as the color of their skin? As we navigated raising biracial children, it became clear that we could no longer avoid discussions about race. Our daughter didn’t have the option to not see color; it was a

reality she experienced every day, whether we acknowledged it or not. It was a pivotal moment for us as parents, realizing that the world might not see our children the way we did—through the lens of love, pride, and equal worth that we hold. I understood then that the journey to help others see our children with the same eyes we saw them with would be a long and challenging one. It was no longer just about protecting their innocence, but about equipping them with the tools to navigate a world that wasn't always kind to people who looked like them. As my children grow older and continue their schooling at a predominantly white institution, I find myself grappling with an ongoing internal struggle. I often ask myself whether we are making the best choice for them. Is this environment truly conducive to their growth? Are they receiving the support they need to thrive? While they seem happy—enjoying friendships and achieving academic success, as all children do—I can't shake the feeling that something may be missing. There are challenges, yes, but they are not unique to my children; every child faces obstacles in school. Still, the more I observed over the years, the more I began to realize that the educational system was not designed to meet the needs of children like mine.

As an educator myself, it was even harder to admit. I spent so much of my career believing that education, as it was structured, could overcome most challenges. I was trained to view the system through a lens that prioritized academic achievement above all else. But now, as a parent, I had a front-row seat to the gaps in that very system. It was one thing to teach students, to guide them through their learning, but it was entirely different to witness my own children—who I knew to be bright, talented, and full of potential—struggling to navigate a system that didn't fully

understand or support their needs. Admitting that the educational system wasn't meeting their needs felt like a personal failure. I had always believed in its ability to be a great equalizer, but now I saw that it often fell short—especially for children who didn't fit the mold. It was difficult to reconcile my professional training with the harsh reality I was facing as a parent. How could I, an educator, continue to believe in a system that wasn't working for my children? How could I champion a system that seemed to be leaving them behind in subtle but impactful ways? But in the midst of these struggles, I also realized that as much as it was hard to admit, it was also a call to action. I couldn't keep looking the other way, pretending that the system worked for everyone. I had to use my position as an educator to advocate for change—not just for my children but for every student who was navigating a system that wasn't fully inclusive. The journey of being both an educator and a parent was challenging, but it also gave me a deeper understanding of the need for reform, for the creation of an education system that truly sees and values every child for who they are, with all of their unique experiences, backgrounds, and needs. I vividly remember those quiet moments at home, watching my children talk about their day, knowing they were encountering subtle biases and facing a lack of understanding that I could not shield them from. It broke my heart in ways I could never quite explain. My children were incredibly resilient, but it became increasingly clear to me that their experiences—navigating a predominantly white world—were not reflected in their lessons, in the books they read, or in the people who taught them. The conversations they needed to have about identity, culture, and race were often missing, leaving gaps in their understanding of themselves and the world around them. I started to see the cracks in the system—the subtle ways the school didn't quite understand

or represent their lived experience. When my daughter asked why a classmate didn't want to play with her because of her brown skin, it was as if the world had paused. In that moment, I realized that, as much as I wanted to shield them from the harsh realities of racism and bias, they didn't have the luxury of ignorance. They were going to have to face these challenges, whether I was ready or not. And I wasn't just their mother; I was also their advocate, their protector, and their guide through a world that wasn't always going to embrace them in the way I did. This growing realization pushed me to think about what changes needed to happen—not just for my children, but for all children who navigate systems that aren't designed with their needs or identities in mind. It wasn't just about providing academic support; it was about creating an environment where their experiences and perspectives were valued and celebrated. It was about teaching them not only to succeed in a system that wasn't made for them but to challenge it, to demand better, and to raise their voices in spaces where they often felt silenced. Through all of this, I found strength in my children's resilience. They reminded me every day that, despite the gaps in their education, they had the power to shape their own path. But I also knew that something had to change—not just for them, but for the countless other children who face similar challenges. It became my mission to advocate for that change, to make sure that every child, no matter their race, culture, language, economic status, or ability, could walk into school knowing they are seen, heard, and supported for who they truly are.

This experience served as the catalyst for my research and ongoing work, driven by a deep desire to ensure that educators develop a strong sense of self-awareness. By understanding their own identities, biases, and perspectives, teachers can better recognize

and respond to the unique needs of diverse learners, including children like mine, who may not always see themselves reflected in traditional educational systems. My goal has been to create a framework that helps educators foster inclusive and supportive learning environments where all students feel seen, valued, and empowered to thrive, regardless of their backgrounds or lived experiences.

Chapter 2
Is School Made for Me?

> *Une éducation, qui ne consulte jamais les aptitudes et les besoins de chacun, ne produit que des idiots.* George Sand (Bodin, 2004)
>
> Translation: "Teaching without taking into account the abilities and needs of each student will only produce idiots." George Sand, (1848), French author

Though it may seem like a bold claim, George Sand was undeniably a visionary figure when it comes to progressive ideas in education. Long before such approaches were widely accepted, she advocated for the kind of human-centered, empathetic perspective that continues to influence educational thought today. Her belief in recognizing the individual—valuing each student not as a vessel to be filled, but as a unique, capable learner—resonates deeply with current understandings of inclusive, equitable education. Centering our students' abilities, identities, and needs is not simply an idealistic pursuit—it is essential. When we prioritize the whole child, we affirm their dignity and create space for real learning to occur. This kind of student-centered approach helps cultivate not just academic achievement, but also curiosity, resilience, and a deeper sense of self. It allows learners to see their place in the world and prepares them to engage with it critically and compassionately.

In today's globalized and interconnected world, educating students to become well-rounded, empathetic citizens is more urgent than ever. Recognizing their diverse strengths and

challenges, and responding with intentional, culturally responsive teaching practices, isn't a luxury—it's a necessity. Education must evolve to reflect the richness of our students' lives and the complexity of the world they will one day lead. Decades of developmental and psychological research have made it clear: there is no age that is "too young" to begin forming an understanding—however limited or evolving—of race. From the earliest months of life, children are absorbing cues from the world around them. In fact, by just three months old, infants can visually categorize people by race, demonstrating early perceptual awareness of racial differences (Kelly et al., 2005). This capacity, while not yet linked to bias or judgment, sets the stage for how children begin to make sense of the social world. By age three, this awareness can begin to take a more concerning shape. Children as young as three have been found to express explicit forms of racial bias (Aboud, 2008), often reflecting the attitudes they observe in their families, media, and broader culture. These early expressions of bias are not innate but learned—absorbed through daily interactions and the implicit messages they receive about whose identities are valued, centered, or ignored. By the time children turn five, the impact of racism is already taking root in deeply harmful ways. Research shows that Black, Indigenous, and other children of color not only understand the concept of race but also become aware of the negative stereotypes that society attaches to their communities (Hirschfeld, 2008). These stereotypes don't just affect a child's self-esteem—they shape how they see their potential, their place in the classroom, and whether they feel like they truly belong. My own experience with my son brought these findings to life in a very personal way. I remember when the Dean of Students called me to share that a classmate had told my young son he didn't want to touch him because he was brown—that he

just didn't like touching brown people. It was hard to hear, especially knowing how young my son was. When I asked him about it, he shrugged it off, saying the boy was mean to everyone. But I could see it stayed with him, quietly unsettling. Over the years, many similar moments like this have come and gone—small acts of exclusion and bias that slowly chip away at a child's sense of belonging, even when they try to make sense of it or dismiss it. Talking with other parents and educators made it clear this wasn't just my children's experiences; it was a reality many students face. These experiences have deepened my understanding, both as a mother and an educator, of how early and often children of color encounter bias—and how vital it is for schools to act with intention. Waiting to respond only after something happens isn't enough. Schools need to build cultures grounded in belonging, empathy, and accountability from the start. By about age eight, research tells us that a shift happens, particularly among white children. While blatant expressions of racial bias tend to decrease because they're socially frowned upon, more subtle and hidden forms of bias often grow stronger (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Prejudice doesn't disappear—it just becomes less obvious, sometimes more damaging because it's harder to recognize. This makes it all the more important to have early, thoughtful conversations about race, equity, and justice—before these attitudes become deeply rooted and continue to influence beliefs and behaviors.

These findings highlight a crucial truth: children are not "colorblind." They are keen observers of difference, and without guidance, they will form interpretations—sometimes inaccurate or harmful—on their own. As educators, caregivers, and community members, we have a responsibility to offer them the tools to

understand race in a way that is grounded in truth, empathy, and justice. The earlier we begin this work, the better equipped our children will be to build a more inclusive and equitable future. How can educators be brave and step outside their comfort zones and initiate honest conversations about race—conversations that genuinely include all students and address their diverse needs? This question is critical in today's classrooms, yet it remains one of the most challenging for teachers to navigate. Educators often encounter significant obstacles when discussing difficult topics such as race, ethnicity, and systemic inequities (Deckert, 1996; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Evans & Saxe, 2007). These challenges stem from a variety of sources: fear of saying the wrong thing, concerns about upsetting students or parents, lack of adequate training, and uncertainty about how to facilitate these discussions productively. Traditionally, many educators have been advised to avoid controversial or potentially divisive topics in the classroom, especially those related to race, in the interest of maintaining harmony or minimizing conflict. This cautionary approach was intended to protect students and staff, but often resulted in silence around the very issues that most deeply affect students' lives and identities (Deckert, 1996; Engle & Ochoa, 1988). However, over time, educational research and curriculum development experts have increasingly emphasized the importance of confronting these topics directly and thoughtfully. Current scholars suggest that avoiding difficult conversations about race only perpetuates misunderstanding and exclusion (Randolph & Johnson, 2019; Wassell, Wesely, & Glynn, 2019).

The question then becomes: *how can we, educators, foster a classroom environment where students feel safe, respected, and empowered to share their experiences and perspectives?* Creating such a learning

community requires intentional efforts to build trust, affirm diverse identities, and establish norms that value open dialogue and empathy. Educators must actively cultivate a sense of belonging for all students by demonstrating cultural responsiveness and by explicitly recognizing and addressing systemic inequities that may impact students' engagement and achievement (Howard, 2016). It is also crucial to acknowledge that research on this topic has sometimes produced conflicting findings. Some studies highlight the risks and challenges associated with discussing race in the classroom, including the potential for discomfort or conflict (Deckert, 1996; Evans & Saxe, 2007). Others argue that avoiding these conversations is detrimental and that when approached skillfully, discussions about race can foster critical thinking, social awareness, and solidarity among students (Randolph & Johnson, 2019; Howard, 2016). The evolving consensus suggests that educators must receive adequate professional development and institutional support to navigate these complexities successfully. Ultimately, being brave as an educator means committing to ongoing self-reflection, learning, and dialogue—even when it feels uncomfortable or uncertain. It involves embracing vulnerability and the willingness to make mistakes while prioritizing the creation of inclusive, equitable spaces where every student can thrive. As research continues to demonstrate, the benefits of addressing race openly far outweigh the challenges, shaping not only students' academic success but their development as compassionate, socially conscious citizens (Wassell, Wesely, & Glynn, 2019).

Many curricula across various subjects continue to fall short in fully representing the rich tapestry of global diversity, leaving

students inadequately prepared for the multicultural and interconnected nature of today's work environments (Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2019; Davis, 2020; Kafele, 2013). For far too long, education systems have largely presented knowledge through a narrow and dominant cultural lens, resulting in the marginalization of many histories and worldviews. This approach has often perpetuated outdated or incomplete narratives that fail to reflect the richness, complexity, and contributions of diverse communities around the globe (Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2019; Anya & Randolph, 2019). This dominance is especially pronounced in world language education, where curricula have long privileged European norms, histories, and linguistic standards. In French instruction, for example, the experiences and contributions of over 140 million French speakers in sub-Saharan Africa are often marginalized or entirely excluded (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, 2022). Francophone African nations such as Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of Congo possess rich linguistic, literary, and cultural traditions that challenge Eurocentric assumptions about the French language and its global relevance. Similarly, Spanish curricula frequently erase or downplay the lived realities of Afro-Latinos, whose cultural presence spans the Caribbean and the Americas—including significant populations in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Honduras, and beyond. The 2015 Mexican census marked a pivotal moment by allowing individuals to self-identify as Black for the first time, revealing that over 1.4 million people acknowledged their African heritage through language, cultural practices, history, and community ties (López & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2016). More recently, the 2020 Mexican census showed that number rise to 2.5 million, reflecting growing recognition of African roots within Latin America (INEGI, 2020). These

demographic realities underscore the urgent need to reframe language education and embrace the full diversity of the Francophone and Hispanophone worlds. Scholars like García and Wei (2021) emphasize the value of translanguaging pedagogies that validate students' dynamic linguistic repertoires, especially among multilingual Black and Brown youth. Likewise, Paris and Alim's (2017) concept of *culturally sustaining pedagogy* calls on educators to move beyond superficial representations and toward instruction that affirms and sustains the cultural and linguistic identities of historically marginalized groups. In this context, world language education must evolve—not only to reflect demographic shifts but to fulfill its moral and pedagogical responsibility to all learners. Educational frameworks beyond Euro-American paradigms and centering African and Afro-Latin American voices and perspectives is not just an academic imperative, but an ethical one.

Despite these realities, research consistently shows troubling disparities in educational outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students within language programs. Retention rates for these students in foreign language courses are significantly lower than those for their White peers, with Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) language classes predominantly composed of White students (Musu-Gillete et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Glynn & Wassell, 2018). Moreover, Black students in K–12 education often attend schools or programs with limited foreign language offerings and, as a result, accumulate fewer high school credits in these subjects. This gap continues into higher education, where Black students represent only about four percent of those earning bachelor's degrees in foreign languages (Musu-Gillete et

al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This disparity in access and representation contributes directly to what educational theorist Lisa Delpit (1988) famously termed the "culture of power," a systemic environment where the curriculum and institutional practices reflect and reinforce dominant cultural norms while sidelining the voices and identities of marginalized groups. Within language education, this manifests as a one-sided curriculum that often fails to affirm BIPOC students' identities, leading to feelings of invisibility and disconnection from the material being taught (Muñiz, 2019; Randolph & Johnson, 2017). When students do not see themselves reflected in the content or context of their learning, it can hinder engagement, motivation, and ultimately their academic success. Addressing these inequities requires a deliberate and sustained effort to diversify curriculum content, pedagogy, and representation within language education and beyond. By doing so, educators can foster more inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued and empowered to engage fully with their education, thereby preparing them to thrive in a diverse, global society.

Numerous studies have consistently highlighted significant disparities in access to world language courses across both public and private K–12 schools, as well as postsecondary education institutions (Glynn & Wassell, 2018; Poza, 2013; Randolph & Johnson, 2017). Despite increasing recognition of the benefits of multilingualism in an interconnected world, language education remains unevenly distributed, often reflecting broader systemic inequities related to race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. Between 2004 and 2008, public K–12 schools in the United States experienced a modest increase in world language enrollment; however, even at its peak, only about 18% of students

were enrolled in language courses (ACTFL, 2011). This figure pales in comparison to many other countries around the globe, where acquiring a second or third language is a standard and often mandatory part of the educational experience. In numerous European and Asian countries, multilingual proficiency is cultivated from an early age, with language learning deeply embedded in the curriculum and cultural expectations. While comprehensive, nationwide data on world language enrollment in private schools is scarce, existing research suggests that independent schools exhibit similar patterns of limited access and participation (Baggett, 2016; Schoener & McKenzie, 2016). This indicates that even in settings with potentially greater resources and autonomy, barriers persist that prevent broader and more equitable access to language education. Factors such as curriculum priorities, faculty availability, and institutional emphasis on language programs may all play a role in shaping these enrollment trends. The consequences of these disparities extend beyond academic achievement—they affect students' cultural competence, global readiness, and future opportunities in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. Without equitable access to robust world language programs, many students are deprived of the cognitive, social, and economic benefits that come with multilingualism, limiting their ability to participate fully in global conversations and careers. Recognizing and addressing these gaps is critical. Efforts to expand world language access must consider not only increasing enrollment numbers but also ensuring that language education is culturally responsive, inclusive, and reflective of the diverse linguistic heritages of students themselves. This requires intentional policy, investment, and community engagement to build language programs that serve all students effectively, preparing them to thrive in a multilingual and

multicultural society. Bilingualism offers a wide array of benefits that extend beyond simply communicating in multiple languages. Research consistently highlights that bilingual individuals tend to develop enhanced cognitive skills, such as improved executive functioning, better problem-solving abilities, and increased mental flexibility (Rourke et al., 2016). Moreover, bilingualism fosters international awareness and cultural empathy, equipping learners with a broader perspective of the world and preparing them to engage more effectively in diverse, globalized environments. These advantages underscore the value of promoting multilingual education as a fundamental part of preparing students for the 21st century. Despite these clear benefits, many private and public schools across the United States still lack a formal language requirement for high school graduation (Rourke et al., 2016). This absence of a graduation mandate has contributed to a gradual decline in college enrollment in language courses over recent years, signaling a worrying trend that diminishes opportunities for students to develop bilingual competencies during critical stages of their academic journeys (Goldberg et al., 2015). Without structural incentives or requirements, students often prioritize other subjects, and language learning can be sidelined, limiting their exposure and proficiency. In response to this challenge, several initiatives have emerged to promote bilingualism and world language learning. One such program, the Seal of Biliteracy, recognizes and celebrates students who achieve proficiency in two or more languages by the time they graduate from high school. The Seal has gained traction in numerous states and districts, offering an encouraging sign that language education is beginning to receive more attention (Rourke et al., 2016). However, despite these promising developments, world language education remains relatively low on most state and district policy agendas,

often lacking the funding, prioritization, and systemic support needed for widespread implementation and sustainability.

At the postsecondary level, enrollment patterns reveal some encouraging trends. Higher-level language courses at colleges and universities have seen an increase in student participation relative to entry-level classes, suggesting that those students who do begin language study are persisting and advancing in their learning (Goldberg et al., 2015). Yet, these gains are tempered by persistent disparities in access and opportunity, particularly among BIPOC students. Structural and systemic barriers related to admissions, socioeconomic status, and institutional support continue to limit equitable access to advanced language learning pathways for many students from historically marginalized groups (Baggett, 2016).

Overall, the research clearly indicates that language education is more than just an academic requirement—it offers significant cognitive, social, and developmental benefits that contribute to student success across disciplines. Addressing the current gaps in policy, access, and cultural responsiveness is essential to ensure that all students can reap these benefits. Only by elevating the role of bilingualism and multilingual education within our educational systems can we truly prepare learners to navigate and contribute meaningfully to an increasingly interconnected world. Access to world language courses remains deeply inequitable for students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and those attending under-resourced schools, compared to their White peers (Baggett, 2016; Ford, 2011; Glynn & Wassell, 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2014). This disparity is not simply a matter of availability but reflects broader systemic issues

within educational institutions. One critical factor is the persistent undervaluing of students' home languages and cultural backgrounds within schools, which often leads to a sense of exclusion and invisibility among marginalized learners. Language programs, especially those in more advanced tracks such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB), tend to be structured in ways that favor students from more privileged backgrounds, reinforcing elitist dynamics that exclude many students of color and those from economically disadvantaged communities (Glynn & Wassell, 2018; Muñiz, 2019; Randolph & Johnson, 2017). Furthermore, language curricula frequently present a narrow, one-sided view of language and culture that centers a so-called "standard" or prestige variety of the language, while marginalizing local dialects, regional accents, and the rich linguistic diversity found within communities (Ramirez, 2018). Textbooks and materials often only superficially acknowledge this diversity, thereby perpetuating monolithic narratives and failing to reflect the lived experiences of many learners. This limited representation not only diminishes the cultural identities of students but also sends a message about which forms of language and culture are deemed "correct" or "valuable," further alienating BIPOC students. To counter these entrenched inequities, a social justice approach to world language education is essential (Glynn & Wassell, 2018). This means intentionally designing classroom strategies and institutional policies that actively expand access to rigorous language courses such as AP and IB for all students, regardless of their background (Glynn, 2012; Poza, 2013; Schoener & McKenzie, 2016). For world language educators committed to critical pedagogy, a vital first step is the thorough examination and critique of current textbooks and instructional materials to identify and dismantle biases

embedded within them (Allen & Rossatto, 2009). This reflective practice enables teachers to select or supplement content that more accurately and respectfully represents diverse linguistic and cultural realities. Moreover, BIPOC students—who have long faced systemic educational marginalization—often experience fears of stigmatization and stereotype threat in academic settings, which can severely impact their confidence and academic performance (Welton & Martinez, 2014). These social and psychological barriers necessitate supportive classroom environments where students feel affirmed and empowered to engage fully in their language learning journey. Ultimately, addressing these intersecting issues requires a comprehensive commitment to equity, representation, and inclusivity within world language education so that all students can thrive and see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

In sum, this chapter shows that although U.S. private and public schools are more diverse now than at any previous point in history, a significant number of students—especially those from marginalized and underrepresented communities—still face substantial barriers to accessing college-preparatory coursework. Despite demographic shifts that have increased diversity within schools, opportunities for placement in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses remain limited or altogether unavailable for many students (Ford, 2013a; Ford, 2013b; Glynn & Wassell, 2018; Schoener & McKenzie, 2016). This inequity is driven by a range of factors, including institutional biases, tracking practices, resource disparities between schools, and sometimes a lack of proactive outreach or support for students who might benefit from more rigorous academic challenges. Consequently, the promise of rigorous, college-level coursework is

often unevenly distributed, perpetuating educational gaps and limiting the potential of students who might otherwise excel given equitable access and encouragement. This persistent imbalance calls for intentional efforts by educators, administrators, and policymakers to dismantle structural barriers and ensure that all students have meaningful opportunities to engage in high-level academic programs that prepare them for postsecondary success.

As we reflect on this chapter's question, it becomes clear that for too many students, the answer has been uncertain—or even a quiet no. When the structure, content, and culture of school fail to reflect who students are or what they bring with them, it sends a message about who belongs and who doesn't. But schools are not static—they're shaped every day by the people inside them. As educators, we have the power to reimagine what school feels like, looks like, and means. We can choose to build classrooms where every student feels like they *do* belong—where the answer to "Is school made for me?" becomes a confident, undeniable yes.

Chapter 3
Why is Fostering Belonging in the Classroom Important?

School climate and culture—the collective mood, values, attitudes, and overall environment of a school community (Kafele, 2013)—play a crucial role in shaping students' academic success, social-emotional well-being, and personal development. This environment influences a wide range of student experiences, from how bullying and conflict are addressed to the nature of day-to-day classroom interactions. A school's climate sets the tone for whether students feel safe, respected, and valued, which in turn impacts their ability to engage fully in learning and take intellectual risks. When the culture is positive and inclusive, it actively fosters a sense of belonging for all students, particularly those from diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Such an environment encourages mutual respect, empathy, and open dialogue, enabling students to share their identities and experiences without fear of judgment or exclusion. This kind of supportive atmosphere is essential for creating spaces where students not only learn content but also develop critical thinking skills about language, identity, and culture. It empowers them to explore and discuss their own and others' language experiences, confront stereotypes, and challenge biases within and beyond the classroom (Kafele, 2013; Randolph & Johnson, 2017). Moreover, a positive school culture promotes ongoing reflection among educators and students alike, emphasizing growth, understanding, and equity. It helps dismantle barriers that