

My personal statement on “*the value of learning languages and developing cultural competence for all learners*” starts with a story that began on a little Dutch island in the Caribbean.

I was born and raised in Aruba, a very ethnically/racially diverse, multilingual and multicultural environment, and spoke four languages in which I was engaged from birth: **Dutch, Papiamentu English & Spanish**. By the end of high school, I had acquired native proficiency in all three modes of communication in the four languages. In college, I studied **French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, and Greek** for several years, while majoring in Speech-Language Pathology & Applied Linguistics. I also worked at the University of Sofia, in Bulgaria, teaching English for one summer. While there, I lived with a host family, immersed myself in the culture, and learned enough **Bulgarian** to meet my basic daily communication needs. A few years later, after graduating, I studied **Tagalog** on my own, and lived with a Filipino family in the Philippines for the summer. Today, I speak eight languages, with varying degrees of proficiency, and work as an Educator of World Languages & Cultures, in an urban school.

As a result of my experiences, my work within and beyond the classroom is always fueled by passion, and by the conviction that indeed *all* learners, of every age, background, ethnicity, ability, gender, orientation, and socio-economic status, have the innate ability to learn languages and to develop cultural competence, at any time throughout their lives, no matter who they are, where they live, or how they are perceived by others.

However, unfortunately, far too often, this is not the conviction in many institutions in dominant and normative society. Often times, language learning privilege is readily available to members of dominant groups in normative society, while marginalized group members are in many ways discouraged and hindered from accessing the same opportunities. This is accomplished through insidious messaging to them, through images that simply “*leave them out of the picture,*” and practices that exclude them, or limit their access and burden their participation.

It is for this reason today, as a Language Educator, I engage tirelessly in the work of facilitating language learning and developing cultural competence, through the lenses of Social Justice and Educational Equity. I do so passionately and without compromise, in and beyond my classroom, in my community, and wherever I go, simply by being present in spaces and places, as a successful language learner and *multilingual* Black man, always with the hope to counteract the persistent messaging and narratives that particularly African American learners are sent in insidious ways. I leverage my website, social media platforms and community talks, raising the awareness of *truly* including *all* learners in the rewarding/valuable opportunities to learn languages and develop cultural competence, as *all* learners innately, ethically, rightfully, justly and equitably deserve! Language learning empowers and enables greater freedoms and joys throughout life, and develops empathy for others. **The value in learning languages and developing cultural competence is therefore translated into *all* learners becoming better thinkers and communicators, more cognitively flexible, more adept problem solvers – to ultimately becoming more fully, healthy and empathetic, globally-ready citizens!**