

international
electronic journal of
**elementary
education**

Special Issue

Translanguaging as a Pedagogy for Refugee Children
in Elementary Classrooms



INTERNATIONAL ELECTRONIC JOURNAL OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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ISSN: 1307-9298

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Editorial

Kamil Özerk^a

Received : 7 March 2026
Revised : 7 March 2026
Accepted : 7 March 2026
DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2026.427

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Dear IEJEE Readers,

As Editor-in-Chief of the International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education (IEJEE), I am pleased to present this special issue on translanguaging. Translanguaging is a relatively recent and influential movement in the fields of second and foreign language education, bilingual education, and English-medium instruction worldwide. Given the breadth and complexity of this area, it is challenging to address all dimensions of translanguaging within a single issue.

In this special issue, researchers explore diverse approaches to translanguaging pedagogy in migrant, bilingual, and refugee education across a range of educational contexts and countries. Together, these contributions offer valuable perspectives on theory, practice, and policy related to translanguaging in contemporary education.

IEJEE has been published as an international electronic journal since 2008 and, over the past eighteen years, has successfully produced several special issues on timely and relevant topics. Unfortunately, this special issue encountered unforeseen challenges that delayed its publication.

In April 2024, I began working with Dr. Khánh Lê (Queens College, CUNY) and Dr. Zhongfeng Tian (Rutgers University–Newark), who kindly agreed to serve as guest editors for this issue. Our collaboration proceeded smoothly for some time; however, in fall 2025, difficulties arose that ultimately prevented them from continuing in this role. After several extensions of deadlines, we were informed that they could no longer serve as special issue editors, and all submitted manuscripts were returned to the journal.

The IEJEE editorial board and staff decided to continue the process rather than discontinue the issue. With informed consent from the authors, we proceeded to publish this special issue with eight articles. We sincerely thank Dr. Lê and Dr. Tian for their contributions during the earlier stages of the project, as well as the authors for their patience and commitment.

We hope that this special issue will make a meaningful contribution to the field of translanguaging and to educational research more broadly.

Sincerely,

Dr. Kamil Özerk

Editor-in-Chief, IEJEE



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ISSN: 1307-9298

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Educators' Perspectives on Translanguaging and Trauma in Refugee Education: Insights from Multiple Contexts in Greece

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Received : 20 March 2025
 Revised : 27 September 2025
 Accepted : 07 March 2026
 DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2026.428

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Abstract

Since 2016, Greece has functioned as both a transit and host country for refugees from Asia and Africa, generating a wide range of educational responses across formal, semi-formal, and informal contexts. Within these settings, translanguaging has emerged as a central pedagogical and psychosocial practice that mediates learning, inclusion, and identity reconstruction. This study investigates how educators working in diverse educational contexts describe the institutional and classroom conditions shaping refugee children's learning, how they perceive and address the impact of trauma and displacement on students' participation, and how they understand and employ translanguaging as a tool for communication and empowerment. Drawing on three interviews with teachers engaged in refugee education in Greece, the analysis reveals that translanguaging operates both as a strategy for comprehension and as a relational practice that fosters safety, belonging, and agency. The findings further indicate that teachers' epistemological stances and institutional constraints influence the extent to which translanguaging can be integrated into classroom practice. By situating educators' narratives within frameworks of trauma-informed and multilingual pedagogy, the study highlights translanguaging as a humanizing and agentive response to the educational and emotional realities of refugee children in Greece.

Keywords:

Translanguaging; Refugee Education; Trauma-Informed Pedagogy; Teacher Agency; Multilingualism; Greece

Introduction

Refugee and migrant children in Greece

Although Greece is officially monolingual, with Greek as its national language, it is, in practice, a multilingual country shaped by immigration and broader social dynamics (Aravossitas et al., 2020; Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., 2019; Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., 2018). Over the past decade, Greece has served as a major entry point into Europe for refugees and migrants—particularly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, and Palestine—whose displacement is driven by war,



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 ISSN: 1307-9298

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persecution, hunger, and systemic violence (Greek Council for Refugees, 2025; Stathopoulou et al., 2025; Gouvias et al., 2025).

Since 2015, more than one million refugees and migrants have arrived in Greece, with children constituting a substantial proportion of these arrivals (Gogonas & Gatsi, 2021). According to UNHCR and UNICEF reports, in 2024 alone, more than 41,000 children entered Southern European states, including Greece, with national statistics showing over 6,400 child arrivals in Greece—over four times the figure for the same period in 2023 (UNICEF, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). Of particular concern are the more than 4,000 unaccompanied and separated minors, who remain at heightened risk of abuse and exploitation (Gouvias et al., 2025; Skourtou et al., 2021).

While access to safety and basic living conditions is an immediate priority, education plays a vital role in creating stability in refugee children's lives and in enabling them to regain a sense of childhood, beyond their status as statistics (Gouvias et al., 2025; Skourtou et al., 2021). Research in the Greek context highlights both the potential and the challenges of providing education under such conditions, with particular attention to the importance of inclusive pedagogies (Cummins, 2021, 2000) and trauma-informed practices (Lê, 2023; Koliandri & Datsogianni, 2025).

Since 2016, a range of initiatives aimed at establishing safe and inclusive educational environments for refugee children have been implemented in Greece. These include formal structures such as the Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFRE) and integration classes within public schools coordinated by the Ministry of Education, often co-funded by the European Union, as well as informal initiatives organized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Teachers are central to these initiatives as they mediate between institutional policies and the lived realities of refugee students, between the mainstream and the communities (Skourtou, 2014). Recognizing their pivotal role, this paper examines three interviews with teachers engaged in the formal and informal education of refugee children within diverse literacy contexts.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of situating refugee education within broader frameworks of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), trauma-informed pedagogy (Lê, 2023), and inclusive learning environments (Cummins, 2021, 2000). Translanguaging has been shown to foster participation and identity affirmation (Cummins & Early, 2011; García & Wei, 2014), while research on trauma-informed practices highlights their potential to build resilience and school belonging among refugee children (Lê, 2023; Koliandri & Datsogianni, 2025). Studies in Greece reveal the constraints and opportunities of current practices,

stressing the centrality of teachers in shaping equitable educational responses (Stathopoulou et al., 2025; Martínez-Medina & Chania, 2024; Samsari, Palaiologou, & Nikolaou, 2024). Research has demonstrated that contextual factors, including learning objectives and students' linguistic backgrounds, influence the scope and nature of translanguaging practices (Tian, 2022a, 2022b). Together, these insights provide the theoretical and empirical foundation for examining how translanguaging operates in refugee education in Greece.

What this research is about and where do we stand in it

Having worked for years in language education with minoritized students and communities in Greece (e.g., Skourtou, 2008, 2014), we regard our involvement in the language education of refugee children as a pressing necessity. Our university students, enrolled in education departments, who will become teachers, are expected to develop the capacity to teach in super-diverse educational environments (e.g., mainstream day classes, support classes, and informal education settings). They must be prepared to support children in accessing school literacy and comprehending new input (Cummins, 2001), as well as to respect and build upon the prior knowledge that children bring to school, thereby facilitating connections between existing and new learning (see Hornberger, 2003, for the continua of biliteracy).

Refugee children and unaccompanied minors represent the most recent to an educational landscape that is already linguistically and culturally diverse. Migrants, repatriated individuals from the Greek diaspora, minoritized local communities, and culturally mixed families have all contributed to shaping this multifaceted and fluid cultural, social, and educational environment. Responding to this reality, Greek scholars have conducted quantitative and qualitative research to describe and analyse diverse aspects of multilingual and refugee education in Greece, and to suggest and apply educational implementations (Gogonas & Gatsi, 2021; Chatzidaki & Tsokalidou, 2020; Tsokalidou & Skourtou, 2020). Issues such as bilingualism, second language learning, translanguaging, literacy and teaching practices, giving voice to children and minors, and understanding teachers' epistemological stances have been — and continue to be — central to this process. In the case of refugee children, the accumulated scholarship on the above issues provided the foundation for expanded and alternative approaches. We consider translanguaging a novel approach within refugee education in Greece, applied either as an extension of existing pedagogical frameworks or as an alternative to them. It should be noted that, in addition to the work of individual researchers and research teams

in Greece who have focused on refugee language education, there has also been a broad institutional response. This is reflected in the inclusion of relevant content within undergraduate and graduate curricula and programs. For example, the Master's Program Language Learning for Refugees and Migrants (LRM) at the Hellenic Open University focuses extensively on bilingualism, translanguaging, second language teaching and learning, and teachers' epistemological stances (see, e.g., Kitsiou, 2019).

Our main aim is to explore how educators perceive the languaging practices of their refugee students across different educational chronotopes (Blommaert, 2015; Blommaert & De Fina, 2017) and whether they incorporate translanguaging into their communication and teaching routines. We understand translanguaging, following García and Wei (2014), as the liberating, barrier-crossing linguistic practice through which children and adolescents strive to make sense of themselves, to make themselves understood, and to develop a sense of agency. At the same time, we view translanguaging in relation to translation practices (Baynham & Lee, 2019; Creese et al., 2018), as well as to students' awareness of the named languages that play a crucial role in their survival and safety. In this sense, we do not draw a rigid distinction between translation and translanguaging (García et al., 2019). For the students in our research, translation does not function as a means of separating languages; rather, it ensures that they can be properly understood—particularly by the authorities who make decisions about the students' futures.

We hypothesize that, even within a monolingually oriented mainstream education system such as that of Greece, teachers retain both the space and the agency to recognize and validate translanguaging practices in their classrooms. We base this hypothesis on the concept of the nested pedagogies (Cummins, 2021, 2019; Skourtou, et al., 2006) that allows us to see educational settings not as oppositional concepts but as nested into the other with the possibility of extension of their limits. Specifically, nested pedagogies refer to a model in which different pedagogical orientations are layered within one another rather than treated as separate or competing approaches (Cummins, 2021; Skourtou, et al. 2006). In this framework, transmission, social constructivist, and transformative pedagogies are viewed as interconnected levels of teaching and learning practice (Cummins, 2021; Skourtou, et al. 2006). Transmission-oriented pedagogy forms the inner layer and focuses on the direct teaching of curriculum content and skills. This approach emphasizes structured guidance, clear objectives, and explicit instruction, which remain important for effective learning in many contexts. Social constructivist pedagogy occupies the middle layer; it builds on transmission approaches by incorporating

collaborative knowledge construction, experiential learning, and the development of higher-order thinking through interaction between teachers and students (Cummins, 2001). Transformative pedagogy forms the outer layer and extends social constructivist principles toward the development of critical literacy. Its purpose is not only to support students construct knowledge, but also to enable them to analyse social discourses and to consider actions that can influence social realities (Cummins, 2001). The concept of nesting highlights that traditional methods are not rejected but integrated within broader, more critical and socially responsive approaches. Structured instruction can coexist with collaborative inquiry, and social constructivist practices can create the conditions for transformative learning. In this way, nested pedagogies provide a flexible and inclusive framework that supports multiple dimensions of learning rather than privileging a single pedagogical orientation (Cummins, 2021; Skourtou, et al. 2006).

In this sense, even a conservative educational system can be opened or expanded toward a more progressive model, which, in turn, may evolve into a transformative one. The pedagogical orientation of an educational system potentially extends its educational limits, transforming both students' and teachers' potentials. In this sense, the different chronotopes (Blommaert & De Fina, 2017) in which the interviews took place create a continuum. The notion of chronotope allows us to gain a clearer idea of the actual social constraints and the fluidity in the different contexts in which students and educators find themselves. Informal education may constitute an overall context, but each educational facility constitutes a unique and fluid chronotope. Students often move from an informal chronotope to a more formal one (e.g., to a reception class). Though distinct in their features, the chronotopes function as a continuum in students' lives. Similar for the teachers: in-service teachers may have taught both in reception classes and in informal educational centers. Their epistemological stances are therefore continually shaped by their educational experiences across diverse chronotopes (Kitsiou & Karantzola, 2022). In summary, our theoretical framework builds pedagogically on the notion of nested pedagogies (Skourtou et al., 2006) and situates the language education of refugee children in Greece within an inclusive paradigm that views bilingualism and translanguaging as complementary and mutually reinforcing dimensions of learning (Skourtou, 2024).

As authors—privileged, mainstream, white academics—our long-term engagement with migrant students, students from minoritized local communities, and refugee children and adults compels us to continuously reflect on our own positionalities within this context (Golash-Boza, 2016). Operating from within the mainstream, while conducting research

in minoritized communities and designing materials and tasks for teaching Greek as a foreign or second language, may inadvertently lead one to act through a raciolinguistic lens—that is, to adopt a neocolonial stance as a “white listening subject” (Flores & Rosa, 2015) without conscious awareness. Ethical considerations, critical awareness of social and racial power relations, and the positionalities of both researchers and participating teachers must therefore be made explicit. Seltzer and de los Rios (2018, p. 49) refer to the concept of “teachers’ raciolinguistic literacies,” which can enable educators to better understand their students’ languaging practices, recognize their own epistemological stances, and design classroom learning experiences in more humanizing and equitable ways.

Building on this theoretical and ethical ground, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do educators working in different educational settings in Greece (formal, semi-formal, and informal) describe the classroom and institutional conditions in which refugee children learn?
2. How do educators perceive and respond to the effects of trauma, displacement, and conflict on refugee children’s participation and learning?
3. How do educators understand and implement translanguaging within their teaching practices, and in what ways do they view it as contributing to inclusion, communication, and identity formation?

Language support for refugee students in Greece

As we have already mentioned, in Greece, language support for refugee children is provided through both formal and informal educational frameworks (Chatzidaki and Tsokalidou, 2020). As regards formal education, there are policies that define how refugee children should be educated. According to Article 21 of Law 4251/2014 (Government Gazette A’ 80), underage third-country nationals residing in Greece are subject to compulsory education under the same conditions as Greek nationals. This provision applies to children eligible for international protection, minors originating from conflict-affected regions, third-country nationals with irregular residence status, as well as individuals who have submitted applications for international protection. Notably, access to formal education is granted even in cases where documentation is incomplete.

Furthermore, to provide education for children whose parents are third-country nationals, a specific educational structure was established: the Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFREs). These facilities operate as part of the formal education system, functioning within school units during the

afternoon for four teaching hours. However, their status and pedagogical orientation have been subject to criticism. Although RFREs are located within mainstream schools, they are organized according to a segregation model, as they remain disconnected from mainstream classes and fail to promote inclusive educational policies (Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019).

The subjects taught within the Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFREs) include Greek Language, English, Mathematics, Physical Education, Culture and Activities, Information and Communication Technology, and Aesthetic Education (Music, Visual Arts, and Drama Education). In the case of preschool education, RFREs operate within accommodation centres as extensions of nearby kindergartens during morning hours. These structures are intended to provide refugee students with basic learning tools and to facilitate their smooth integration into the mainstream educational system. In recent years, however, an increasing number of children have bypassed RFREs and have been directly enrolled in mainstream schools. At first glance, this development appears to reflect a shift toward integration rather than segregation, suggesting that formal education is indeed the appropriate setting for refugee children to learn alongside their mainstream peers. As will be shown below, however, the degree of integration or segregation often depends on the teacher, and forms of separation may still emerge within the context of the mainstream classroom.

In areas where Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFREs) do not exist, children with a refugee background are enrolled in the age-appropriate grade in primary education or, in many cases, are placed in a lower grade while parallelly attending a Reception Class. Depending on the student’s level of proficiency in the Greek language, as determined through diagnostic testing, students are placed either in a Reception Class within Educational Priority Zone 1 (EPZ 1) or Zone 2 (EPZ 2). Although RFREs do not incorporate trauma-informed practices (see, e.g., Boukhari, 2025), public schools are staffed with school psychologists who can provide relevant support. In contrast, informal educational programs may or may not integrate trauma-informed approaches, depending on the design and orientation of each specific program.

The informal education for refugee children refers to educational activities that occur outside the formal school system. These programs are designed to be flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the specific needs of displaced learners (UNESCO, 2012). The informal education typically encompasses a broad range of learning activities, including literacy and numeracy instruction, life skills education, psychosocial support, language acquisition, and vocational or technical

training (UNHCR, 2011). Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Greece play a vital role in addressing the educational needs of refugee and migrant children by offering language instruction within these informal educational frameworks.

The primary objectives are to support children's integration into formal education where feasible, promote psychosocial well-being, and enhance future livelihood prospects (INEE, 2024). The informal education may function as a complement to formal schooling or serve as an alternative when access to formal education is restricted due to legal, social, linguistic, or infrastructural barriers. However, informal education has been critiqued for often perceiving refugee children as a homogeneous group, consequently applying teaching methodologies that fail to address the diverse needs of these students (Kitsiou et al., 2021; Gogonas & Gatsi 2021).

Translanguaging in the Greek context

As can be expected, formal education settings are more rigidly structured compared to informal ones, which allow for greater flexibility. Nevertheless, even within formal settings, educators often create spaces to implement inclusive practices together with their students (see above, nested pedagogies).

Bilingualism and translanguaging approaches may be viewed either in an integrative and complementary way (Cummins, 2019, 2021) or in an antagonistic way (Flores & García, 2013, 2022), with the latter framing translanguaging as a replacement for bilingualism. Translanguaging is frequently framed as a shift of focus from named languages, which are considered to have been socially constructed by a colonial logic (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020), towards the dynamic, barriers transcending and therefore liberating languaging practices of speakers. In multilingual educational environments, an exclusive focus on the target language tends to exclude—or rather marginalize—the students' linguistic repertoires in their entirety. In this sense, opting for focusing on language is increasingly questioned, particularly in the case of refugee children who need to apply all resources available to them to develop essential communicative resources for survival and resilience (García & Wei, 2014).

Aspeaker-focused perspective—"doing languaging"—creates room for the active and synthetic use of the learner's full repertoire. It breaks down rigid boundaries between named languages and strengthens students' agency. Documented examples from classrooms with refugee children demonstrate how translanguaging can be pedagogically implemented to support learning (Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2018). In everyday life—within families, communities, play, and informal learning contexts—languaging and translanguaging

naturally constitute core features of communication. In refugee settings in particular, translanguaging operates as a vital tool for survival, resilience, and identity affirmation (Kitsiou & Karantzola, 2022).

Educational settings, however, are not fully authentic communicative environments; rather, they simulate communication with the primary purpose of teaching a target language. Traditionally, education reflects broader societal structures, yet it often struggles to keep pace with rapid social change. Consequently, teachers frequently face a pedagogical dilemma: whether to prioritize exclusive use of the target language or to embrace translanguaging practices. Recent evidence from Greek classrooms indicates that translanguaging often emerges spontaneously and that teachers sometimes employ it as a scaffolding strategy to facilitate students' transition from their first languages to Greek (Stathopoulou et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the literature highlights significant intersections between translanguaging and trauma-informed pedagogy (Boukhari, 2025). Enabling children to mobilize their full linguistic repertoires can help mitigate feelings of exclusion and foster resilience under conditions of displacement. A recent review from Greece and Cyprus emphasizes both the guiding principles and the implementation gaps of trauma-informed education, offering practical as well as policy-oriented recommendations (Koliandri & Datsogianni, 2025). These insights underscore that translanguaging functions not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a powerful psychosocial resource within refugee education.

Methodology

To address the research questions outlined above, participants were selected through convenience and purposive sampling, and data were gathered via semi-structured interviews. Such interviews enable in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives while allowing flexibility to probe emerging issues (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted online in Greek, audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim and then translated into English.

Data analysis followed Krippendorff's (2018) approach, integrating content and textual interpretation to generate valid inferences from qualitative data. The material was inductively coded to identify recurring themes related to educators' experiences with refugee students across three educational contexts—formal, semi-formal, and informal.

Ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation were maintained throughout. Identifying details were removed, and all data were securely stored. While the small sample

limits generalizability, the study prioritizes depth and contextual understanding, offering insight into how educators in Greece navigate multilingual and trauma-related dimensions of refugee education.

Results

Following the methodological procedures described above, this section presents the analysis of three semi-structured interviews with educators involved in the education of refugee children across different settings in Greece. The participants were: (1) a teacher who also served as director of a public primary school attended by refugee children likely residing in Greece temporarily; (2) a teacher working in a public institution exclusively for children with refugee backgrounds; and (3) a teacher-researcher affiliated with a non-governmental organization providing education for unaccompanied refugee minors. All three participants were women educators. These interviews were selected because each represents a distinct educational chronotope—formal, semi-formal, and informal—offering complementary perspectives on the complexities of refugee education. The data were analyzed thematically according to three core categories: (a) classroom and institutional context; (b) trauma and conflict; and (c) educators' perspectives on translanguaging as a pedagogical tool.

The first theme explores the classroom and institutional context in which each educator operated, focusing on the structural conditions, participant roles, and broader educational environments that shaped teaching and learning practices.

Classroom and Institutional Context

The classroom and institutional settings described by the three interviewees reflect distinct yet interconnected educational chronotopes within Greece's refugee education landscape. Each context illustrates how institutional structures, teacher roles, and local conditions shape both the learning experiences of refugee students and the pedagogical agency of educators.

Interview 1: A teacher /director in a public primary school with refugee children who were most likely living in Greece temporarily

"The school had many children from Palestine, Syria, and Iran. The NGO provided interpreters to communicate the educators with parents. Most of the children had attended school before, except the youngest ones."

The public primary school was located on an island in Greece, in an urban location. This island received a substantial number of refugees through sea routes, but most of the refugees on the island were there on a temporary basis, as the island did not have a formal

reception centre. This public school had 6 classes (grade 1 to grade 6) and approximately 95 students who lived in the school district. In each school year there were approximately 5 refugee children who remained at the school from 6 months to 1 year and then were moved to other parts of Greece or abroad, depending on the refugee status of their parents and on other circumstances. There were refugee children from Palestine, Syria, and Iran. Enrolment was facilitated through a non-governmental organization (NGO), which provided interpreters to support communication with families. In this public school, students were generally placed one year below their chronological age on the assumption that this would facilitate language learning. Most children had previous schooling experience except for the youngest newcomers in the first grade.

Interview 2: A teacher in a public institution, only for children who have a refugee background

"The majority of the children were Arabic speakers, but they spoke many other languages...."

The second interviewee worked as a substitute teacher in a Reception Facility for Refugee Education (RFRE) located in northern Greece. The RFRE operated within a public primary school building but began functioning relatively late in the academic year. The class included 22 refugee students whose educational levels ranged from early primary to late secondary grades. All the students resided in a nearby refugee camp under police and military supervision.

Even after her teaching contract ended in June, the educator continued volunteering during the summer months, providing continuity and emotional support for the children. To avoid potential opposition from local parents, educational authorities sought to limit interaction between refugee and Greek students—a practice that the teacher described but did not fully contextualize. Consequently, RFRE classes were scheduled in the afternoons, after the mainstream school day had ended.

Initially, the teacher was employed solely to teach Greek, but additional subject teachers—responsible for mathematics, English, and physical education—were appointed much later. Meanwhile, university students from nearby education departments volunteered to organize music and theatre activities, enriching the children's learning experience. Despite its institutional limitations, the RFRE thus functioned as a semi-formal educational space that combined structured instruction with creative, community-based initiatives.

Interview 3: A teacher who was also conducting research in a non-governmental organization for

unaccompanied refugee children

"I worked in two NGO shelters with unaccompanied refugee children in Athens... Most children were Arabic speakers, while others spoke many different languages".

"The interpreter within the facility held significant authority in mediating communication and managing multilingualism".

"Institutional constraints categorized the children as Farsi, Urdu, or other language groups – placing linguistic labels"

The third interviewee worked as a volunteer teacher and researcher in two NGO-run shelters for unaccompanied refugee minors in Athens over a period of six to eight months. Her work took place within informal educational settings designed to offer psychosocial support, safety, and access to learning for children outside the formal school system. The students were mainly from Palestine, Kuwait, Egypt, and Syria, with Arabic being the most commonly spoken language, alongside a variety of other linguistic repertoires.

A professional interpreter was permanently present in each shelter and played a pivotal role in mediating communication, managing linguistic diversity, and influencing how translanguaging occurred within the space. The interpreter's authority often extended beyond linguistic mediation, shaping interpersonal dynamics and the degree of participation in educational activities.

The educator emphasized the institutional challenges of working within an environment where children were categorized according to named languages such as Farsi or Urdu. These categorizations, while administratively convenient, often oversimplified the children's complex linguistic identities and experiences. The boundaries between languages, roles, and responsibilities were thus both institutional and relational, highlighting how linguistic and social hierarchies intersect within humanitarian education settings.

Taken together, these three contexts—formal, semi-formal, and informal—reveal how institutional structures and local conditions shape the educational experiences of refugee children and the pedagogical choices available to teachers. Across settings, educators navigated the tension between prescribed curricula and the realities of multilingual, transient student populations. Their practices often extended beyond institutional mandates, drawing on personal commitment and improvisation to meet learners' linguistic and emotional needs. These accounts also highlight how educational environments, even when framed as neutral spaces of instruction, are deeply embedded in broader social, political, and

humanitarian dynamics that influence both teaching and learning.

Trauma and Conflict

The following excerpts illustrate how trauma and conflict are perceived, referenced, or indirectly expressed within educational contexts involving refugee children. Each interview offers a distinct perspective on how educators recognize—and sometimes overlook—the psychological and emotional effects of displacement in their students. From subtle symbolic gestures to explicit reflections on classroom challenges, these accounts shed light on the complex interplay between learning, memory, and emotional survival.

Interview 1: A teacher/director in a public primary school with refugee children who were most likely living in Greece temporarily

"Apart from the younger children, who tried to adapt to the school environment and were more manageable, the older children were initially very negative. Some of them told us that they were not at all interested in learning Greek, since they were planning to go to Germany. Instead, they wanted to learn English, because they believed that it would help them in their new homeland."

The teachers found it very difficult to manage children with refugee experiences. In fact, many of them said that they had not been prepared to deal with such situations and had not received adequate training."

The excerpt above reflects the complex dynamics of language learning, adaptation, and teacher preparedness within refugee education. The older refugee students clearly prioritized their learning goals in accordance with their intention to leave Greece, viewing the acquisition of languages such as English as more beneficial for their anticipated relocation. Their perspectives were not merely expressions of resistance but rather realistic reflections of their personal aspirations and migration trajectories. This passage underscores the diverse attitudes toward language learning as well as the challenges faced by educators who reported limited preparation and insufficient institutional support in managing culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

The interviewee's account offers valuable insight into the pedagogical challenges of teaching refugee students, while also revealing certain limitations in perspective. Notably, the teacher did not refer to specific instances of trauma—perhaps due to a lack of awareness of events occurring in other classrooms, or because she had not encountered such incidents before. This absence of reference may also point to the limited visibility of students' traumatic experiences within everyday classroom life, where emotional

distress often remains concealed or unrecognized. Such omissions highlight the importance of teacher education that not only addresses linguistic and cultural adaptation but also equips educators with the sensitivity and skills to identify and respond to trauma among refugee learners.

Interview 2: A teacher in a public institution, only for children who have a refugee background

"I also saw mathematics as a language. Based on age they made groups. The younger children did calculations within the top five, the older ones [did] more difficult [ones]. Suddenly one child insisted on going to the blackboard to write something.

He wrote in Kurdish something like the number 68. He started to make movements pretending that he was in a boat and finally wanted to inform the teacher that there were 68 people in the boat carrying them. I asked him about it afterwards and the boy confirmed it".

This account offers a poignant example of how trauma may emerge indirectly through symbolic expression and classroom activity. What began as a mathematics exercise unexpectedly became an act of remembrance and testimony. The child's decision to write the number "68" in Kurdish and his subsequent miming of being in a boat transformed a seemingly neutral academic task into a powerful recollection of collective suffering. The number itself became a signifier of a lived experience—a crowded boat, perilous conditions, and the enduring memory of survival.

The teacher's reflection reveals how moments of trauma can surface in educational contexts that are not explicitly designed to engage with emotional or psychological experiences. This incident demonstrates how learning activities can unintentionally trigger memories of distress while also offering opportunities for expression and meaning-making. The child's use of mathematics as a narrative medium underscores the complexity of trauma, which often resists verbal articulation yet finds expression through embodied and symbolic forms.

This episode highlights the importance of trauma-informed approaches within refugee education—approaches that enable teachers to recognize and respond to non-verbal manifestations of trauma with empathy, care, and pedagogical sensitivity. It also calls attention to the need for interdisciplinary teacher preparation that bridges cognitive, linguistic, and emotional dimensions of learning. In this context, mathematics was not only a subject but also a medium through which memory, identity, and emotional truth converged.

Interview 3: A teacher who was also conducting research in a non-governmental organization for unaccompanied refugee children

"Language use was connected to children's feelings of safety and identity."

This observation captures the deep interconnection between language, emotion, and selfhood within the learning experiences of unaccompanied refugee minors. The educator explained that children's willingness to use Greek—or to engage in communication more broadly—depended on their sense of safety and trust within the learning environment. Many initially resisted speaking Greek, not out of linguistic limitation but as a form of self-protection, shaped by earlier encounters with authority during their arrival and registration processes. Silence, in this sense, became a defensive strategy—a means of maintaining agency in settings where personal control was often restricted.

The teacher also emphasized that the use of language was closely tied to the children's negotiation of power and belonging. Translanguaging emerged spontaneously when feelings of safety were established, often facilitated by the presence of interpreters or the educator's own efforts to connect linguistically with the students. Language thus served both as a bridge for communication and as a shield against vulnerability, reflecting the children's complex emotional landscapes and their strategies for navigating uncertainty.

"We tried to get him to participate, but he insisted on staying in bed. When we finally got him to come to the lesson, he drew a bed."

This incident refers to a student who withdrew completely from classroom activities following the rejection of his family reunification application. The drawing of a bed functioned as a silent, symbolic expression of exhaustion, grief, and longing for safety—a powerful non-verbal manifestation of trauma. The teacher's response was compassionate, yet it also revealed the limits of pedagogical preparedness in addressing the psychological and emotional dimensions of displacement.

The account highlights the urgent need for trauma-informed pedagogies that recognize emotional expression and silence as integral components of learning. For unaccompanied refugee children, language learning extends beyond the acquisition of linguistic competence; it is embedded in processes of identity negotiation, trust-building, and recovery. In this sense, translanguaging is not merely a communicative strategy but a means of restoring agency and dignity in conditions of instability and loss.

Many children left the facilities abruptly and under life-threatening circumstances—some hiding beneath trucks in desperate attempts to reach other countries, such as Italy. Their lives were marked by constant risk, trauma, and displacement, making education a fragile and transient “safe haven,” a brief interval of safety and normalcy amid persistent danger and uncertainty. The teacher described feelings of deep concern and helplessness as she witnessed these departures, recognizing that her role extended far beyond academic instruction. In such contexts, teaching became an act of care and moral responsibility, shaped by the tension between the fleeting stability of the classroom and the ongoing precarity of the children's lives.

The Educator's Views on Translanguaging as a Teaching Tool

The following section presents educators' reflections on translanguaging as a pedagogical practice within refugee education. Their accounts reveal multiple interpretations of how translanguaging is understood, enacted, and valued across different educational settings. These narratives highlight both the challenges and affordances of implementing multilingual approaches in environments marked by displacement, linguistic diversity, and emotional complexity. At the same time, they expose the spectrum of educators' orientations toward students' home languages—from restrictive to transformative—reflecting broader tensions within Greek educational policy, institutional frameworks, and prevailing language ideologies.

Interview 1: A teacher/director in a public primary school with refugee children who were most likely living in Greece temporarily

“Some teachers allowed children to speak their own languages, but others forbade it even outside the classroom. Most did not try to use the children's languages in teaching. Only the reception teacher, with the principal's support, engaged meaningfully with students' languages.”

The interviewee, who is also the director of the school, noted differences in attitudes towards students' home languages among the teaching staff. Some teachers permitted the use of home languages both inside and outside the classroom, whereas others strictly prohibited their use. Most educators did not actively explore or incorporate children's home languages into teaching practices. However, the reception class teacher and the school principal were exceptions, as they acknowledged and utilized the multilingual repertoires of the students. This indicates that even within the mainstream school, despite its restrictions, there are educators and administrators who attempt to move beyond their comfort zones, often in contexts where other members of the school staff lack understanding of the pedagogical potential of

children's languages.

“Translanguaging was practically absent in the classroom, but children spoke multiple languages freely during breaks, which helped them get along. Teachers often missed opportunities to support this pedagogically.”

The interviewee claims that translanguaging was not widely recognized or implemented by most teachers. There was limited integration of students' diverse linguistic resources in instructional settings, and translanguaging was largely absent from pedagogical practices. However, in informal contexts, such as playground interactions, children naturally engaged in multilingual communication, freely shifting between languages in ways that fostered social integration and peer relationships. This spontaneous use of multiple languages stood in stark contrast to the restrictive language policies upheld by many teachers within the same school.

“Some teachers knew about bilingualism but did not connect language with identity or empowerment at school. Children used language naturally in play, showing natural plurilingual identities.”

Although some teachers had been exposed to concepts of bilingualism and second language learning through their university studies and training, a significant gap remained in their understanding of the benefits of translanguaging and the role of identity investment. Most educators did not explicitly connect language practices to processes of identity construction or empowerment within the school context. This conceptual gap limited their recognition of students' multilingual identities and of the pedagogical potential of translanguaging to foster belonging and agency. Nevertheless, in informal social interactions—such as play during recess—children communicated fluidly across languages, prioritizing understanding and connection over adherence to formal linguistic norms.

Interview 2: A teacher in a public institution, only for children who have a refugee background

“Translanguaging was my survival tool in the classroom.”

*“In the Reception Classes the learning of Greek was more systematic.”
“School starts long before first grade and continues after school, to fit right into the context. There is a belief that school is only about knowledge and learning. If we ensure that children are also happy at school, then they will make progress.”*

The teacher had heard of the term translanguaging in a training workshop she had attended, but claimed that up to that point she had no needed to use it, as most of her students with migrant or refugee backgrounds already knew Greek. When she began teaching in the RFRE, she realized that she could not

teach without translanguaging, as she had no other means of communication with students who did not know Greek, and she did not speak their languages. She described translanguaging as “a survival technique in the classroom,” enabling both her and the students to communicate effectively and co-construct meaning across languages.

Because of translanguaging, she was able to facilitate communication and build a community of learning. Examples included bilingual songs adapted by students, student-led Arabic lessons during the summer, and collaborative discussions in which children analysed how to translate specific Greek words (such as “kaseri” cheese) into both Arabic and Kurdish. Puppet theatre, conducted by university volunteers, was another effective medium for translanguaging: children performed bilingual dialogues between puppets, moving freely between their home language and Greek. The teacher emphasized that translanguaging was not a formal method she applied “by the book,” but rather an instinctive, flexible approach guided by her students’ needs and the multilingual reality of the classroom.

“Many children with an immigrant or refugee background get lost in Greek classrooms”

The teacher viewed bilingualism and translanguaging as essential elements in shaping student identity and inclusion. She stressed that students with refugee or migrant backgrounds often become “invisible” (Gkaintartzi et al., 2025) in regular classrooms and risk being lost in the system. Allowing students to use their own languages, she argued, meant recognizing their identities and affirming their cultural backgrounds. She highlighted the importance of making students feel happy, safe, and emotionally connected within the school environment—believing that emotional well-being was a prerequisite for learning and progress. She also noted that the flexibility of the RFRE setting, which did not impose a rigid curriculum, allowed for deeper relational work and more responsive teaching. In summary, she advocated for an educational model that embraces multilingualism, supports students’ linguistic and emotional needs, and fosters inclusive identities.

Interview 3: A teacher who was also conducting research in a non-governmental organization for unaccompanied refugee children

“Translanguaging occurred spontaneously when children felt safe and would use Google Translate or switch languages”

The third interviewee - who was also a researcher - was very familiar with the pedagogical benefits of translanguaging. She stated that translanguaging took place in various forms: informally, through tools such as Google Translate; strategically, to

withhold or obscure meaning; and personally, as a right tied to self-expression and identity. One child with prior school experience exemplified effective translanguaging—he proudly spoke Arabic, English, and Greek and acted as an informal mediator among peers. His playful switching between languages was both communicative and performative. However, for many children, the learning of Greek occurred in fragmented ways, often detached from meaningful contexts. The activities, such as museum visits and theatre outings, functioned more as a space for “normalization” rather than deep learning.

“They preferred to speak their own language through the interpreter rather than in Greek, as it was more than communication — it was protection and resistance.”
“Language use was connected to children’s feelings of safety and identity.”

The presence of the interpreter ensured that children were not obliged to speak Greek and could assert their linguistic rights. Children often insisted, “Without an interpreter, I will say nothing.” This stance was respected and normalized within the learning space. The interpreter’s role was decisive: depending on her relationship with the educator, she could either facilitate children’s expression or abruptly end conversations. Once trust was established, the children began referring to the educator affectionately as “teacher nur” (light), signalling relational closeness. At that point, translanguaging practices emerged more clearly. The educator herself began learning Arabic, which further strengthened communication and engagement. Identity negotiation (Cummins, 2001) became a visible process as children questioned one another’s linguistic and national affiliations.

“Experiences, languages [should be] child-centred, not school-centred ... moving from the language to the speaker. Everyone speaks to each other and language is at the centre. We cannot ignore it”

“Language and identity negotiations were constant among the children”

The interviewee emphasized that bilingualism and translanguaging are deeply intertwined with identity formation, power, and emotional well-being. Language was not just a tool for communication but a mode of self-representation, resistance, and negotiation. Rather than focusing on schooling, the educational focus was on the child—on their emotions, histories, and future hopes. Language awareness played a crucial role, particularly for children with prior educational experience, who leveraged their multilingualism to assert agency and identity. The educator described a broader pedagogical shift: from treating language as an object of instruction to recognizing it as a living, dynamic expression of the child’s experience. She concluded that, in working with refugee children, she could not ignore trauma (Lê, 2023), insecurity, or the constant possibility of sudden

displacement. Every pedagogical act was, in her view, conditioned by the complexities of asylum processes, emotional crises, and institutional instability. Ultimately, she viewed translanguaging and multilingualism not merely as assets but as necessities for supporting refugee children's identities in contexts of dislocation and uncertainty.

Insights that emerge in the Three Interviews

Across the three interviews, a series of interrelated insights emerge concerning how educators understand and navigate the linguistic, emotional, and pedagogical dimensions of refugee education in Greece. Although each setting differed in structure and purpose, several common patterns can be identified.

First, teachers' awareness of multilingualism and translanguaging varied considerably, reflecting both institutional constraints and individual pedagogical dispositions. In the mainstream school, translanguaging was largely absent from classroom practice, constrained by monolingual policies and limited conceptual understanding among teachers. In contrast, in the RFRE and NGO contexts, translanguaging emerged as an adaptive and survival-driven practice, allowing communication and participation where shared linguistic codes were unavailable. These differences suggest that institutional flexibility and teacher autonomy strongly influence whether translanguaging is perceived as a pedagogical resource or as a deviation from established norms.

Second, the relationship between language and emotional safety surfaced as a key theme across all cases. Teachers observed that students' willingness to use Greek—or to engage in any form of learning—was closely tied to feelings of trust and belonging. In the NGO context in particular, children's linguistic choices were intertwined with protection, identity, and resistance. This reinforces the argument that language practices cannot be separated from the affective and social dimensions of refugee students' lives.

Third, the interviews point to persistent gaps in teacher preparation and institutional support. Even well-intentioned educators expressed uncertainty about how to respond to trauma or how to integrate students' home languages meaningfully into instruction. The lack of systematic training in both trauma-informed and multilingual pedagogies leaves teachers to rely on instinct and improvisation, often producing uneven outcomes.

Finally, translanguaging emerges as both a pedagogical and psychosocial practice. It enables communication and learning while simultaneously

affirming identity, agency, and emotional resilience. When teachers acknowledged students' linguistic repertoires, they created conditions for inclusion and empowerment. Conversely, when these repertoires were ignored or suppressed, exclusion and disengagement often followed.

Taken together, these findings highlight the need for a more integrated framework of refugee education in Greece—one that combines trauma-informed approaches with multilingual pedagogies, recognizes teachers' agency, and promotes institutional structures that value linguistic diversity as a foundation for both learning and well-being.

Lastly, there are certain central points that emerge:

(a) *Chronotopes / Context.* The different chronotopes presented here—from formal to semi-formal to informal—by definition allow for varied uses of language(s) and languaging. However, even in strictly formal contexts, translanguaging appears to be at least tolerated, while in semi-formal contexts educators have the space to develop inclusive initiatives. We therefore consider these educational contexts not as rigidly separated but as expandable points along a continuum. In light of Blommaert's (2018) work, we view context and chronotope not as oppositional but as complementary interpretive tools. The general educational context, the RFRE context, and the NGO shelter contexts represent broader, relatively stable frameworks that accommodate diverse, specific, and fluid chronotopes. As our third interviewee observed, the interventions and decisions made within these chronotopes were conditional.

(b) *Translation / The Interpreter.* The students' demand for the presence of an interpreter—highlighted in the third interview but also evident in the second—along with their resistance to using Greek, functioned primarily as components of agency-building. In relation to language and languaging, this insistence shows that while engaging in translanguaging, students remain aware of the distinct named languages in their environment and of the power relations between them. Furthermore, they express preferences regarding how their language use should be mediated. Since translation has been discussed in relation to both named languages and translanguaging (García et al., 2019; Baynham & Lee, 2019), we suggest that in the context of refugee education—where certain languages are perceived as vital for survival—the gap between named languages and translanguaging should be reconsidered. Rather than viewing them as opposing poles, they should be understood as complementary practices. The key point here is that socially constructed named languages play a central role for individuals who are compelled to learn one for reasons of survival.

(c) Trauma. There were numerous references to trauma within the context of refugee education (see Interview 3). Trauma (Boukhari, 2025; Lê, 2023) is presented as both a personal and institutional experience. Traumatic experiences are lived and relived within host institutions that can either open spaces of resilience or, conversely, push individuals to their limits—as exemplified by the case of the boy who became depressed after receiving a negative response to his application for relocation. This may be further explored in relation to similar experiences among other displaced groups (see, for example, Lê, 2023, for the notion of transtrauma).

Conclusions and Implications

In summary, the three interviews illuminate how translanguaging operates simultaneously as a linguistic, emotional, and ethical practice within refugee education. Across the chronotopic continuum—from formal classrooms to NGO-run shelters—teachers negotiated their own agency within institutional constraints while responding to students' immediate communicative and affective needs. Translanguaging emerged not only as a pedagogical resource but also as a relational practice, mediating belonging, safety, and identity formation. These insights set the stage for the concluding discussion, which situates the findings within broader debates on teacher agency, trauma-informed practice, and the development of nested pedagogies (Cummins, 2019, 2021) that link policy, practice, and theory in inclusive refugee education.

We acknowledge that the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution regarding their generalizability. The three interviews conducted cannot be assumed to capture the full complexity of refugee education, nor can they be considered representative across different chronotopes and contexts. Nevertheless, they provided valuable insights into the educational routines of teachers working in diverse refugee education settings, ranging from formal to semi-formal to informal environments.

Our engagement in this research encouraged critical reflection on both theoretical and practical dimensions of refugee education, exposing enduring gaps within translanguaging theory—particularly the tension between “languages” and “linguaging.” At the same time, it deepened our understanding of the complementarity between context and chronotope, the potential for teacher empowerment, and the significance of safe—albeit fluid—spaces for identity negotiation and agency building.

This study highlights how translanguaging manifests across different educational settings in Greece, specifically in contexts involving refugee children. Although each educator engaged with translanguaging differently—shaped by their role,

institutional framework, specific chronotope, and familiarity with the theory—all shared a common goal: to support multilingual students in navigating complex linguistic, emotional, and institutional terrains. The findings underscore that translanguaging is not only a pedagogical strategy but also a response to students' lived realities, acting as a vehicle for inclusion, communication, and identity formation.

Official educational policy in Greece is defined through laws and ministerial circulars, including those that regulate education within Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFREs). However, teachers often go beyond these frameworks, implementing their own strategies based on the needs and lived experiences of the children they teach. These teacher-led practices frequently reflect child-centred approaches that adapt to the linguistic and emotional realities of refugee students.

Moreover, Greek educators rarely encounter translanguaging theory directly, as it is neither integrated into the national curriculum nor included in professional development programs. This absence in official educational policy helps explain why many teachers rely on intuition rather than theoretical grounding. As demonstrated in this study, while some educators make instinctive efforts to incorporate multilingual practices, they often do so without structured training or institutional support.

These findings suggest the need to re-examine the gap between official policy and classroom practice. Rather than viewing teachers' intuitive strategies as informal or marginal, they should be recognized and supported as legitimate and context-responsive pedagogical practices. If educational environments are to become truly inclusive, policies must evolve to equip educators with the theoretical tools and institutional backing necessary to engage meaningfully with translanguaging. Such a shift would affirm multilingualism not as a challenge to overcome but as a rich resource for learning, identity formation, and resilience.

In line with Cummins's (2019, 2021) call for integrative and nested pedagogies that bridge bilingual and translanguaging approaches, and with García and Wei's (2014) conception of translanguaging as a liberating and agentic practice, our findings reaffirm the need for pedagogies that recognize the full linguistic repertoires of refugee learners. Ultimately, translanguaging in refugee education should be understood not only as a bridge between languages but as an ethical and humanizing response to displacement—one that fosters learning, belonging, and resilience.

Future research should explore how teacher education programs can integrate trauma-informed

and translanguaging-based approaches, enabling educators to respond more effectively to the linguistic and emotional needs of refugee and migrant students across diverse educational contexts.

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Translanguaging as Resilience: Trauma-Informed and Culturally Sustaining Education for Venezuelan Indigenous Refugee Students in Brazil's Public Schools

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Received : 28 March 2025
Revised : 23 August 2025
Accepted : 7 March 2026
DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2026.429

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines how Café Sem Troco, a rural public school near Brasília in Brazil's Central West region, supported Warao Indigenous refugee students from Venezuela through translanguaging and trauma-informed, culturally sustaining pedagogy. Data were collected in 2024 and 2025 through five in-depth interviews with teachers, the school leader, and a Warao community leader; analysis of participant-generated photographs and short videos; and extensive participant follow-up. Guided by a critical, qualitative, and community-based research approach, we used thematic analysis to interpret interviews and visual artifacts. Findings identify three areas: educator responses to forced displacement; the schooling effects of poverty, food insecurity, and nutritional trauma; and acculturation pressures shaping students' self-esteem. Educators built a multilingual, relational classroom where Warao, Spanish, Portuguese, and Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) coexisted. Translanguaging functioned as an emotional, cultural, and instructional foundation, as well as a social justice-based practice that affirmed students' and families' identities, reduced anxiety, and strengthened belonging. Daily practices such as community food gathering, oral storytelling, and collective care resisted assimilation and honored Warao epistemologies and funds of knowledge. This study advances scholarship on Indigenous education and educational responses to forced migration, trauma, and hunger. It provides recommendations for policies, practices, and processes in public education, and outlines directions for future research.

Keywords:

Translanguaging; Indigenous Education; Refugee Education;
Trauma Informed Pedagogy; Culturally Sustaining Practice;
Brazil; Libras; Hunger; Trauma; Community-Based Research



www.iejee.com
ISSN: 1307-9298

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Introduction

Venezuela's political and socioeconomic crises have triggered one of Latin America's largest forced migrations (IOM, 2020). Economic collapse, hunger, violence, and the breakdown of public services have displaced over 7.9 million people as of November 2024 (R4V, 2024). In response, countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, and Uruguay have adopted policies offering legal pathways and humanitarian aid to Venezuelan migrants and refugees.

While scholarship on Venezuelan migration is extensive, much of it has focused on economic displacement, migration policy, and labor integration (Shamsuddin et al., 2021). A smaller but growing body of research addresses family dynamics and displacement, yet the experiences of Indigenous refugees remain severely underrepresented (Pitkänen, 2023; Yamada, 2019; da Frota Simões et al., 2018). Venezuelan refugees are often conceptualized as individual economic actors, with fewer studies examining how displacement reshapes families, communities, and educational pathways (Weitzman & Huss, 2024; Correa-Salazar et al., 2025; Summers et al., 2022). Research on Venezuelan Indigenous refugee children is still limited (Aloázar & Balarin, 2020; Yamada et al., 2019), particularly regarding schooling and the intersections of multilingualism, cultural identity, trauma (Bustamante et al., 2018), and inclusion (Kley & García, 2019; Langfeldt, 2020). Few studies address how Venezuelan Indigenous children navigate education systems shaped by racialized, monolingual ideologies and systemic exclusion.

Although some scholarship examines refugee access to education more broadly (Silva & Pinto, 2024; Loyola, 2024; Watson, 2019), deeper engagement is still needed to understand the linguistic, cultural, and socioemotional inclusion of Indigenous communities such as the Warao.

This study addresses that gap by centering translanguaging as both the analytical and pedagogical lens. The Warao, Venezuelan Indigenous refugees in Brazil, often arrive having endured multiple forms of trauma - hunger, forced displacement, family separation, and loss of ancestral lands. These experiences shape how students engage with language, learning, and school life. In this context, translanguaging is not simply a linguistic practice but a trauma-informed, culturally sustaining approach that fosters belonging, resilience, and identity affirmation. As a social justice pedagogy, translanguaging disrupts monolingual, colonial language norms (Wei, 2022; García & Kley, 2016), validating students' linguistic repertoires and drawing on their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Despite its growing recognition in education, translanguaging remains underexamined in work with Indigenous refugee students in Latin America, particularly in Brazil. Its potential to address trauma while promoting linguistic and cultural sustainability is especially relevant for contexts like Café Sem Troco, a rural public school near Brasília (capital of Brazil) known for its innovative multilingual practices. This case study explores how educators and school leaders at Café Sem Troco respond to Warao students' lived realities by integrating translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), trauma-informed pedagogies (Carello & Butler, 2014; Lê, 2024), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Alim & Paris, 2017). Guided by this context, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do educators at Café Sem Troco respond to the traumas of forced displacement and related stressors experienced by Warao refugee students and their families through trauma-informed and culturally sustaining practices?

RQ2. How do educators at Café Sem Troco integrate translanguaging to support Warao students' linguistic identities, emotional well being, and sense of belonging in school?

By centering translanguaging as a central pedagogical practice and situating it within the lived realities of Warao students, this study contributes to scholarship at the intersection of multilingual education, Indigenous refugee rights, and trauma informed practices.

Literature Review

Venezuelan Migration in Brazil and the Educational Crisis

Venezuela's political and socioeconomic crises have led to one of Latin America's largest forced migrations, displacing over 7.9 million people as of November 2024 (R4V, 2024). Brazil hosts approximately 626,900 Venezuelan migrants, including a significant number of children and adolescents facing educational vulnerabilities (Shamsuddin et al., 2021). Enrollment delays often stem from documentation issues, language barriers, and overcrowded classrooms, with only 45% of Venezuelan refugee children aged 6 -14 enrolled in school (Shamsuddin et al., 2021; Chaves-González et al., 2021; dos Santos & Mota, 2023). These challenges are compounded for Indigenous populations, where a lack of multilingual educators and culturally relevant curricula exacerbates exclusion (de Oliveira Carvalho, 2024; Loyola, 2024; Silva & Pinto, 2024).

Indigenous Venezuelan Refugees in Brazil: A Distinct and Overlooked Population

While Venezuelan migration research often focuses on economic and policy aspects (Shamsuddin et al.,

2021; da Frota Simões et al., 2018), the experiences of Indigenous refugees, such as the Warao, remain underrepresented (Pitkänen, 2023; Yamada et al., 2019; Alcázar & Balarin, 2020). As of 2024, Brazil registers 12,593 Indigenous Venezuelan refugees, primarily Warao, with over 5,643 children and adolescents (ACNUR, 2024). Systemic barriers, including limited school enrollment (e.g., 80% of Warao children in Maranhão unenrolled; DTM, 2020) and inadequate protections for unaccompanied minors, heighten risks of exploitation and psychological harm (Ramírez-Martínez et al., 2023; Roldão et al., 2021). Despite policies like Resolution No. 1 (2020) promoting intercultural education, implementation gaps persist, particularly in validating Indigenous languages and identities (Loyola, 2024; de Oliveira et al., 2024).

Intersectionality and Indigenous Refugees' Invisibility

Indigenous Venezuelan migrants face intersectional invisibility in Brazil, recognized neither fully as refugees nor as Indigenous Peoples, leading to exclusion from services like education and healthcare (Mezzanotti & Kvalvaag, 2022; Chaves-González et al., 2021). This dual marginalization, rooted in cross-border mobility and structural failures, erases their identities and limits access to rights (IOM, 2020; Silva & Pinto, 2024). In schools, this manifests as monolingual ideologies and deficit-oriented practices that neglect Indigenous epistemologies, perpetuating invisibility (Oliveira et al., 2024).

Structural Violence & Institutionalized Trauma in Forced Migration

Forced migration inflicts layered structural violence (Johan Galtung, 1969) and institutionalized trauma (Cohodes et al., 2021) on Venezuelan Indigenous refugees, including displacement, family separation, loss of ancestral lands, food insecurity, and cultural dislocation (Correa-Salazar et al., 2025; Weitzman & Huss, 2024; Bustamante et al., 2018). These experiences can manifest as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and cognitive challenges, impairing focus, memory, and engagement (Van der Kolk, 2014; Abelson et al., 2023; Teixeira et al., 2013; Muldoon et al., 2021). For Warao communities, life is closely connected to the Orinoco River, one of South America's largest waterways, and to the Buriti Palm, both of which stand as enduring symbols of their heritage (Wilbert, 1993; Sørhaug, 2017). Displacement severs these spiritual and generational ties, exacerbating cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004).

Nutritional trauma from chronic hunger and malnutrition further compounds these effects, altering brain development and academic outcomes (Georgieff, 2023; Pizzol et al., 2021; Bhat et al., 1973; Weinreb et al., 2002; Jepkemboi, 2018; Gorman, 1995). Food insecurity during migration links to language acquisition difficulties and emotional regulation

issues (Kaplan et al., 2016; Milán & Martens, 2023; Tuaza Castro, 2020; Gingell et al., 2022). Acculturation stressors, including culture shock and discrimination, erode self-esteem and create barriers to adaptation (Oberg, 1960; Berry, 2005; Oppedal et al., 2020). Educators supporting these students often experience emotional labor and compassion fatigue, highlighting the need for trauma-informed responses (Hochschild, 1983; Oberg et al., 2023).

Translanguaging, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), and Global Practices

Research in diverse contexts highlights how translanguaging supports refugee and migrant learners. In Roraima, Brazil, educators have used Portuguese–Spanish translanguaging in literacy courses for Venezuelan students so they can keep up Spanish literacy and learn Portuguese (de Oliveira Carvalho, 2024). Globally, Moroccan Arabic–Spanish translanguaging communities in Spanish primary schools have facilitated cross-cultural solidarity (Sanz, 2020), and in New York, translanguaging in dual language programs sustains Dominican and Mexican students' heritage languages as well as academic content knowledge (García & Kleyn, 2016). In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, Capstick and Ateek (2024) showed that Arabic–Kurdish–English translanguaging spaces offered both academic scaffolding and psychosocial safety for refugee students. These global examples illustrate how, as enacted through a critical stance, translanguaging is simultaneously a tool of access, cultural affirmation, and socioemotional support.

Research has also shown how schools that adopt culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) resist assimilationist pressures. While culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) emphasizes academic success through cultural connections, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010) adapts curricula to students' lives, CSP goes further: it seeks to sustain and develop community languages and knowledges for the long term (Paris & Alim, 2017). In Brazilian schools serving Venezuelan migrants, Portuguese has often been positioned as obligatory adaptation, at times undermining heritage languages (Oliveira et al., 2024).

Building on these Brazilian and global experiences, we frame our study within translanguaging theory, integrating CSP, and trauma-informed practice to address the specific educational realities of Warao refugee students.

Theoretical Framework

This study centers translanguaging as a critical and decolonial practice that mobilizes full linguistic repertoires to resist monolingual norms and affirm

students' identity (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015; Wei, 2022; Flores & Rosa, 2015). In integrating CSP (Paris & Alim, 2017), it sustains Indigenous epistemologies and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), moving beyond additive bilingualism (Lambert, 1975) to challenge raciolinguistic ideologies.

Trauma-informed practices (Carello & Butler, 2014; Lê, 2024) are woven into this framework, recognizing how displacement affects learning and how translanguaging can provide emotional safety and reduce cognitive load (Ateek, 2022; Midgette & González, 2023). We do not approach translanguaging as switching between independent languages but as the fluid and spontaneous mobilization of one's full linguistic repertoire, rooted in history, identity, and power dynamics (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015). For Warao students navigating displacement and exclusion, translanguaging represents not only a means of communication but also a pathway to belonging, resilience, and survival.

Translanguaging is also understood here as encompassing CSP. Rather than treating CSP as separate, we see it as fully integrated within translanguaging, guiding pedagogy toward the preservation and development of community languages and epistemologies. This perspective aligns with a decolonial and anti-assimilationist orientation, resisting the pressures that position dominant languages as the only path to participation (Paris & Alim, 2017).

We draw on critical and decolonial stances of translanguaging which emphasize how language use is tied to racialization, power, and colonial histories. This perspective guided our research design by shaping three key commitments: conducting interviews in Portuguese, Spanish, and Portunhol; co-authoring with a local teacher to resist extractive practices; and structuring our analysis to attend to the ways language practices intersect with power, identity, and healing.

Trauma-informed practice is likewise intimately tied to translanguaging. While displacement and loss can hinder learning, welcoming students' languages and cultural capital helps restore safety, agency, and trust (Van der Kolk, 2014; Ateek, 2022; Midgette & González, 2023). We therefore define translanguaging in this study as:

- A culturally sustaining practice that develops Warao, Spanish, Portuguese, and Libras.
- A trauma-informed practice that provides safety, reduces cognitive load, and affirms lived experience.
- A decolonial stance that interrupts raciolinguistic ideologies, resists assimilation, and centers Indigenous epistemologies.

Through this composite lens, translanguaging is positioned not simply as an instructional strategy but as a justice-oriented practice of healing, resilience, and sovereignty for Indigenous refugee students in Brazil and beyond affirming their languages, identities, and epistemologies in the midst of forced displacement.

Methodology

This critical qualitative case study examines how Café Sem Troco supports Warao Venezuelan Indigenous refugee students and their families. Case study methodology is suited to complex "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 1984; Butler et al., 2021), making it ideal for exploring translanguaging, trauma-informed pedagogy, and culturally sustaining education. Drawing on institutional strategies, multilingual pedagogical models, and inclusive leadership approaches, this study highlights how schools can build inclusive, equity-focused environments for Indigenous refugee students. This case contributes to broader conversations on refugee education, multilingualism, and educational justice.

Study Context

This case study is situated within a larger qualitative research project that spanned April 2024 to March 2025. Within this broader timeframe, data collection at Café Sem Troco occurred between August 2024 and February 2025, following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Data sources included virtual interviews, follow-up conversations, and participant-generated photographs. In addition, during interviews participants shared photographs taken over previous years, providing longitudinal insights that enriched the analysis.

Participants

The research team initiated recruitment through exploratory searches on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Instagram), local Brazilian newspapers, and non-governmental organizations to identify public schools engaged in refugee education. Drawing on researcher positionality and connections to her hometown, Michelle identified Café Sem Troco, an elementary public school recognized for supporting Venezuelan Indigenous refugee students, particularly from the Warao community.

An initial online interview with Janerrandra, the school's literacy teacher, highlighted her central role in integrating Warao students through translanguaging and serving as a community connector. Through snowball sampling, she introduced the research team to additional educators and the school leader closely involved with Warao students and their families. Preliminary findings revealed strong commitments to translanguaging and trauma-informed, culturally

sustaining pedagogy, leading to the purposeful selection of Café Sem Troco for in-depth analysis.

Ultimately, five participants were recruited, all directly engaged in language teaching, leadership, or student welfare. Interviews were conducted virtually, primarily in Portuguese, with one interview conducted in Portunhol with Eduardo, a Warao cacique (Indigenous leader). Participants provided verbal informed consent and chose to use their real names as a way to honor their work with Warao students.

Data Sources and Collection

This study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted virtually during the 2024–2025 data collection period. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and were conducted in Portuguese and Portunhol. The interview protocol included open-ended questions exploring educators' use of translanguaging practices, challenges in teaching multilingual Indigenous refugee children, community engagement, and culturally sustaining pedagogies. For example, participants were asked: "How do you draw on translanguaging practices to support Warao students in daily classroom practices?"

In addition, participants volunteered to share photographs and videos documenting translanguaging activities, multilingual practices, and community events. A total of 40 photographs and 3 short videos were shared by participants and the research team via email and WhatsApp. These visual materials were analyzed thematically alongside interview transcripts using photo elicitation and artifact analysis. Visual data functioned as prompts for deeper reflection, enabling the research team to contextualize experiences, highlight cultural traditions, and capture the everyday realities of Warao students and their educators.

Community-Based Research Approach

As the research evolved, a community-based research (CBR) model was adopted to prioritize equity, reciprocity, and inclusivity. CBR incorporates members of a community into the planning, implementation,

or review of the research (Jason et al., 2004). Rather than position Janerrandra as only a participant, the research team invited her to co-author this study, an intentional approach grounded in ethics that uphold teamwork, shared voice, and democratic knowledge-making (Castleden et al., 2010; Fursova, 2023).

This decision emerged organically during a conversation in which Janerrandra expressed frustration that journalists and researchers often collected data at the school but rarely returned to share findings or include the community in outcomes. Her reflection highlighted a pattern of extractive research that overlooks the agency and expertise of local educators. As social justice-oriented scholars grounded in decolonial and critical perspectives, we reflected on our positionalities as Brazilian researchers and the responsibilities we carry when working with historically underrepresented communities (Villenas, 1996). Co-authorship was therefore not only an ethical act of reciprocity but also a methodological intervention aimed at disrupting Western epistemological hierarchies.

Collaborating with community members is increasingly recognized as a way to challenge Western-centric paradigms and foster equitable research relationships, especially with communities in the Global South (Su et al., 2018; Castleden et al., 2010). Involving Janerrandra in co-constructing the research honored her lived experiences, pedagogical knowledge, and scholarly insight, thereby enhancing the study's rigor, relevance, and authenticity. This partnership reflects a broader commitment to ethical, transnational collaboration between Latin America and the U.S. that recognizes educators as active knowledge producers, not passive subjects of inquiry.

Data Analysis

All virtual interviews were transcribed verbatim in Portuguese and Portunhol to preserve participants' linguistic authenticity. Initial analysis was conducted in Portuguese, with English translation occurring during final manuscript preparation to retain cultural and linguistic meaning. We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify, code, and organize

Table 2.
Research Participants and their roles at Café Sem Troco

Research Participant	Role	Responsibilities
Janerrandra	Literacy Teacher	Delivers Portuguese and Spanish instruction, develops inclusive curricula for Warao students.
Sheyla	School leader	Oversees school administration and coordinates refugee education initiatives.
Eduardo	Cacique (in Portuguese means Indigenous Community Leader)	Acts as a volunteer interpreter and cultural mediator between Warao students, families and the school
Irenice	Brazilian Sign Language Teacher (Libras)	Supports multilingual learning and addresses special education needs.
Ercilane	Teacher Assistant	Assists in language instruction and classroom activities alongside the Spanish teacher.

patterns aligned with our research questions. Coding was both inductive and deductive, informed by the data and our framework of translanguaging, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed practices.

As part of this analytic process, the research team met weekly via virtual platforms for close reading, coding, and reflexive dialogue. Drawing on Brazil's *roda de conversa* (circle conversations) methodological tradition (Moura & Lima, 2014; Oliveira & Gama, 2024), these sessions created a dialogic, egalitarian space despite geographic distance: Michelle and Karina were in the U.S., Cátia in southern Brazil, and Janerrandra in central-west Brazil. The *roda de conversa* approach emphasized collective reflection and co-interpretation, enabling the team to situate findings within broader social, cultural, and ethical contexts. These meetings were both analytical and transformative, fostering reflexivity on positionality, systemic injustice, and the ethics of knowledge production.

Follow-up conversations with research participants were also conducted via WhatsApp, where they clarified responses, shared insights, and sent additional photographs documenting classroom practices, multilingual materials, and community engagement. These visual and institutional artifacts were analyzed alongside interview transcripts to triangulate findings. These practices reflect our ongoing commitment to transparency, respect, and honoring the voices and lived experiences of educators supporting Warao refugee communities.

Setting the Scene: Café Sem Troco's Multilingual Model for Refugee Inclusion

Located near Brasília in Brazil's Central-West region, Café Sem Troco Public Elementary School was founded in 1992 as an *escola do campo* (rural school), serving families involved in subsistence and small-scale agriculture (Governo do Distrito Federal, 2022; Melo, 2011). Despite economic hardship and limited infrastructure, the school emerged as a key site for the educational and linguistic integration of Warao Indigenous refugee students, demonstrating how rural schools can bridge forced migration, language learning, and educational equity.

Amid the continuing impacts of COVID-19, which deepened social and economic vulnerabilities for migrant families, Warao families began arriving in 2022, many of whom had no prior formal schooling. In response to Brazilian law mandating school access for all children under 17, Sheyla (the school leader) worked alongside *caciques* (Warao community leaders) to enroll students and ensure access to Portuguese instruction. This process exposed systemic gaps, as Brasília's education system lacked formal procedures for enrolling refugee children. Nonetheless, the

school's administrators navigated these challenges, setting a regional precedent for inclusive, rights-based educational practices for Indigenous refugee students.

Cultural Continuity and Multigrade Inclusion

In collaboration with Warao families, the school adopted a multigrade (Recla & Potane, 2024), multiage (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2019) classroom model rooted in communal learning. At the request of Warao *caciques*, parents, and indigenous elders, all Warao students were grouped together, regardless of age or language proficiency, to uphold Indigenous values of shared knowledge, cultural continuity, and protection through unity. Older students supported younger peers, reflecting Warao traditions of intergenerational care and resilience. This trauma-informed model respected Indigenous epistemologies while helping students cope with displacement and trauma.

Translanguaging in Action: Building a Multilingual Classroom

With the arrival of 30 Warao students aged 4 to 17, the school fostered a multilingual, interdependent classroom despite limited funding and infrastructure. To accommodate the new students, the school converted its auditorium into a Warao-designated classroom, allowing them to remain together while integrating into the Brazilian education system. To address linguistic diversity, the school hired Janerrandra, a Spanish-speaking teacher whose resourcefulness proved essential. She grouped students by language proficiency: Spanish-fluent, Warao-only speakers, and those with emerging Portuguese, and taught primarily in Portuguese while using Spanish and Portunhol as a bridge.

The lack of additional staff fluent in Warao or Spanish posed challenges. In response, Eduardo, a Warao community leader, volunteered as a cultural and linguistic mediator, providing interpretation and ensuring that Warao-only speakers were not excluded. Rather than enforce monolingual instruction, the school embraced a translanguaging approach. Instruction followed the *Português como Língua de Acolhimento* (PLAc) model, with Spanish and Portunhol serving as bridges, and Eduardo providing Warao interpretation as needed. This dynamic, multilingual environment valued student identities and linguistic repertoires, centering Warao epistemologies (García & Lin., 2017).

Expanding Access and Inclusion: Integrating Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) as a Fourth Language

In 2023, the school expanded its multilingual model to address accessibility needs when a 16-year-old Warao student with a hearing disability, and

no prior exposure to Sign language, was enrolled. Although the school was not formally designated for special education, persistent advocacy from the school leader led the local Secretary of Education to assign a Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) instructor. Because Venezuelan Sign Language (VSL) was unavailable, the student began learning Libras, a language structurally different from VSL, while also adapting to a new country. Recognizing the importance of inclusion, the school extended Libras instruction to all Warao and Brazilian students. This approach fostered peer communication, classroom interaction, and a collective sense of belonging. Co-developed by educators and the school leader, the initiative reflected interdisciplinary collaboration where language, culture, accessibility, and educational justice converged (Skliar, 2003).

Figure 1:

Warao student practicing basic Libras gestures during a classroom activity

Figure 2.

Multilingual signage at Café Sem Troco featuring student's greetings in Portuguese, Spanish, Warao, and Libras



School-University Community Partnership

To strengthen linguistic inclusion and cultural integration, Café Sem Troco partnered with the University of Brasília's Department of Linguistics (UnB). The collaboration aimed to co-develop a multilingual education framework that responded to the urgent needs of students and educators. UnB offered free professional development on Warao history, oral traditions, linguistic practices, and inclusive pedagogies grounded in Indigenous epistemologies. These efforts supported culturally sustaining instruction (Paris & Alim, 2017).

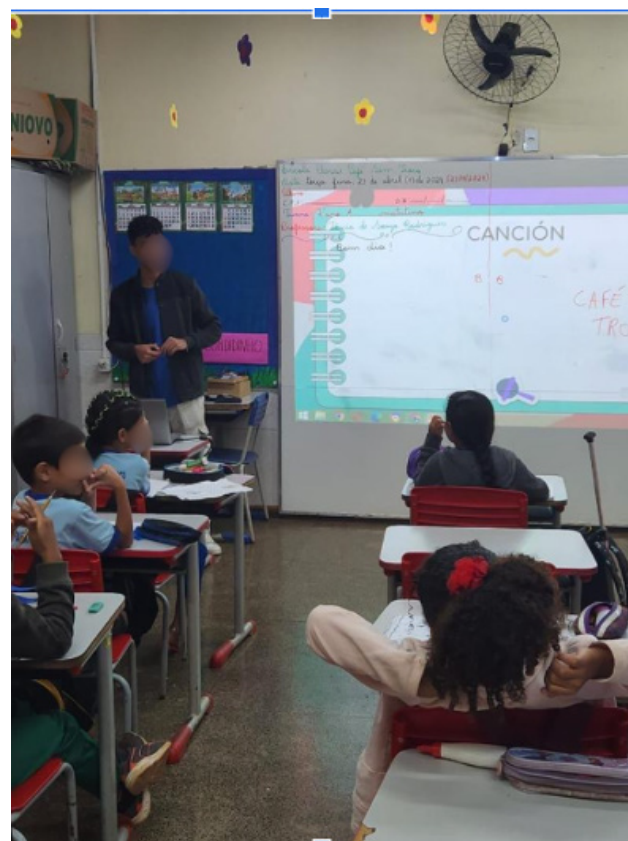
Teachers themselves acknowledged that they had not been prepared to work with multilingual Indigenous or refugee students whose first language was not Portuguese, as their teacher preparation

programs had not included this focus. Even though they were required to follow a mandated curriculum set by local education authorities, they created space for translanguaging practices to address the linguistic needs of Warao students. The school - university partnership helped fill this gap by equipping educators with strategies to sustain multilingualism in the classroom. Building on this foundation, the partnership promoted translanguaging as a core strategy. Rather than impose "Portuguese-only" policies, teachers were encouraged to support the use of Warao, Spanish, and emerging Portuguese across the curriculum. This culturally and trauma-informed approach fostered a respectful transition to Portuguese literacy while honoring students' linguistic and cultural identities.

Importantly, UnB student volunteers also began offering Spanish classes to Brazilian students at the school, enabling them to communicate with Warao peers and further advancing multilingual education as a holistic, community-based approach.

Figure 3.

Spanish volunteer teacher leading a multilingual activity with Warao and Brazilian students.



Attending to Students' Needs: Translanguaging, Health, and Hygiene

During the resettlement process, Sheyla and Janerrandra identified urgent health concerns linked to the extreme poverty and years of forced migration

faced by Warao children and families. Understanding that linguistic and educational inclusion required holistic attention to well-being, the school partnered with public health providers to implement targeted interventions. Translanguaging served as a bridge for communication among students, families, teachers, and healthcare workers.

Figure 4.
Students participating in hygiene education through translanguaging practices



By addressing Warao families’ health needs, the school fostered trust and reduced barriers to participation. Translanguaging was embedded in daily routines to navigate cultural and linguistic borders and to build relational inclusion through Portuguese, Warao, Spanish, Portunhol, and Libras.

A Culture of Care and Parental Engagement

Café Sem Troco cultivated a multilingual, community-centered space where a cultura de carinho (culture of care) was central to the schooling experience (Valenzuela, 1999). By addressing physical and cultural needs through a translanguaging-based framework, the school advanced a model of justice grounded in respect and relationality. Health, identity, and language were treated as interconnected aspects of learning.

A key pillar of this holistic model is the strong relationship between the school and Warao families.

The school functions as a welcoming space where Warao families feel respected and engaged in their children’s multilingual education. Eduardo shared that the school provides space for Warao association meetings with government and nonprofit representatives. These gatherings give families a platform to voice priorities and influence decisions. Through multilingual communication and responsive practices, Café Sem Troco supported parents and elders to sustain leadership and exercise collective agency in educational decision-making.

Figure 5.
Warao parents and community members participating in a cultural school-based gathering at Café Sem Troco.



Table 2.
Translanguaging & Inclusion Strategies at Café Sem Troco

Domain	Strategy	Purpose
Enrollment	Partnered with Warao Indigenous leaders to register students	Ensure legal access, build community trust, and uphold Indigenous refugee rights
Classroom Structure	Implemented multigrade, multiage grouping of Warao students	Preserve Indigenous traditions, support multilingual trauma-informed inclusion, and foster cultural continuity
Peer Support and Mentorship	Older Warao students mentored younger peers; Warao leader actively engaged in classroom	Foster intergenerational knowledge-sharing, inclusion
Language Inclusion	Portuguese, Spanish, Portunhol, Warao, and Libras used together in the same classroom	Facilitate multilingual communication, affirm identities, and honor families’ epistemologies and full linguistic repertoires
Cultural Sensitivity	Included Warao leadership in educational decision-making	Respect Indigenous elders and leaders, values, and community-defined priorities
Community Partnership	Collaboration with the University of Brasília’s Department of Linguistics	Expand multilingual practices, provide teacher PD, offer Spanish classes for Brazilian peers, and support sustainability

Table 1 outlines the innovative strategies Café Sem Troco adopted to integrate translanguaging and inclusion into school practices, illustrating how the school bridged linguistic, cultural, and structural barriers.

Findings

Guided by our research questions and theoretical frameworks, interviews with educators and the school leader at Café Sem Troco highlight three interrelated domains of trauma and school responses among Warao Indigenous refugee students and their families. Across all domains, educators draw on translanguaging, culturally sustaining practices, and trauma-informed pedagogy as foundational strategies to affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities, promote well-being, and foster belonging (García & Kleyn, 2016; Wei, 2022; Paris & Alim, 2017; Toulouse, 2016). The three domains identified are: (1) Traumas of forced migration and educator response; (2) Extreme poverty, food insecurity, and nutritional trauma; (3) Culture shock, acculturation, and impacts on self-esteem

Together, these findings address RQ1 by specifying the traumas affecting Warao students and the ways educators at Café Sem Troco respond through trauma-informed and culturally sustaining pedagogies. They also address RQ2 by illustrating how translanguaging and culturally sustaining practices bolster linguistic identity, emotional well-being, and belonging. In the sections that follow, each domain is discussed in detail as it emerges in practice at Café Sem Troco.

Finding 1. Traumas of Forced Migration and Educator Responses

Warao students arriving at Café Sem Troco experienced layered traumas from forced displacement, family separation, loss of ancestral land, cultural disruption, and discrimination. These challenges affected trust, emotional well-being, and readiness to learn. Educators responded with trauma informed and culturally sustaining approaches. These included flexible enrollment, multilingual classrooms, land based learning, and heritage based art. Together, these practices addressed immediate needs while also supporting long term resilience.

Displacement, Homelessness, and Cultural Capital. Many families endured prolonged instability when they first arrived, often sleeping in bus stations, temporary shelters, or on the streets. During this time, children were not enrolled in school. After families settled near Café Sem Troco, school leaders and community members advocated for their right to education, in line with Brazil's policy that all students under 17 must attend school. The school responded by creating flexible enrollment procedures and coordinating with

municipal agencies to secure social services, which made consistent attendance possible.

During this transition, teachers observed visible distress. Some children were engaged in child labor, selling artesanato (traditional Warao handmade crafts) on the streets as a survival strategy to buy food. In their home communities, food is traditionally obtained from the land rather than purchased with money. Forced displacement and prolonged hunger required families to adapt to a capitalist system. They drew on their cultural strengths and ancestral knowledge to survive.

Selling artesanato illustrates what Yosso (2005) describes as community cultural wealth. Families relied on their assets, skills, and traditions not only to resist structural exclusion but also to meet their most basic need of eating. Importantly, it was through classroom assignments that Warao children began to share these survival experiences. Without these assignments, teachers would not have fully understood the children's realities or known how to respond. In turn, educators built on this resilience by integrating oral storytelling, art, and handcrafting, which are practices central to Warao culture. These activities became ways to process trauma, narrate memory, and affirm identity, while also challenging Western norms of communication and learning. Ercilane, a teacher assistant, shared:

Teve um dia que a professora de Libras entrou em prantos, porque eles estavam escrevendo sobre a vida deles, né! E a gente ia fazer as correções. Nossa (pausa para respirar)! Foi muita tristeza porque foram muitas as dificuldades que eles passaram. Fome... a questão de pedir e trabalhar na rua. Teve um mesmo que escreveu no texto dele que as pessoas xingavam eles de vagabundos e eles me perguntavam o que significa vagabundo.

[One day, the Libras teacher broke into tears because they were writing about their lives, you know! And we were going to make corrections. Wow (pause to breathe)! It was so heartbreaking because they had been through so many difficulties. Hunger... The issue of begging and working on the streets. One of them even wrote in their text that people called them 'vagabundo (bum, worthless)' and they asked me what 'vagabundo' means.]

These moments show how trauma surfaced in classroom activities. They also reveal the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) that educators carried while teaching children affected by forced displacement, poverty, and discrimination.

Family Separation & the Loss of Maternal Support. Trauma extended into family life. Many lost close relatives, including mothers, during migration. Irenice shared: "Alguns tinham cinco irmãos, mas só ficaram eles. Os demais foram ficando pelo caminho." [Some had five siblings, but only they remained. The others were left behind along the way.] Janerrandra noted that maternal loss intensified distress because Warao

women are often both caregivers but also income earners to help the community survive (Fraternity Humanitarian Mission, 2020). Such losses are linked to PTSD, anxiety, depression, and learning difficulties (Abelson et al., 2023). As Janerrandra described: "Muitos alunos são muito quietos no início, não confiam facilmente. Dá para ver que passaram por muita coisa." [Many students are very quiet at first; they do not trust easily. You can tell they have been through a lot.] This hesitation reflects trauma, fear, impacts of discrimination, and displacement (Teixeira et al., 2013), which hinder integration into school life.

Creating Space as an Act of Care and Belonging. Responding to limited space and to Warao leaders' request to keep students together, school leader Sheyla transformed the school's only auditorium into a multilingual classroom. Students of varying ages, language proficiency, and abilities learned together in Warao, Portuguese, Spanish, Portunhol, and Libras, honoring *confiança* and an Indigenous worldview of communal caregiving. As Ercilane explained "A comunidade Warao não queria que separasse os alunos [...] Eles são muito unidos. Eles fazem tudo juntos." [The Indigenous community did not want the students to be separated. They are very united. They do everything together.] The school embedded culturally sustaining practices and rejected assimilationist approaches.

Janerrandra emphasized: "A escola se preparou para atender a comunidade Warao [...] A nossa intenção não é 'matar' a cultura deles." [The school prepared itself to serve the Warao community. Our intention is not to 'kill' their culture.] By combining flexible policies, physical adaptations, and multilingual pedagogy, Café Sem Troco became a protective anchor where students rebuilt trust, identity, and belonging, and where multilingualism was treated as an asset.

Loss of Ancestral Land and Cultural Heritage. For the Warao, displacement is not only the loss of territory. It also severs ancestral continuity, spiritual identity, and generational traditions. Their name, derived from Wa (canoe) and Arao (people) (Wilbert, 1996; Sørhaug, 2016), reflects a deep connection to the river. The Orinoco Delta is both homeland and lifeline. The Buriti Palm provides food, shelter, and craft materials, and it symbolizes heritage, resistance, and resilience. Environmental degradation, political, and territorial violence have devastated these lands, forcing many families to flee.

Educators responded by integrating artistic projects that honored students' ties to the Orinoco Delta and the Buriti Palm. Students painted canoes with the Venezuelan flag (Figures 7 - 8), symbolizing heritage, mobility, and belonging. These projects affirmed oral and artistic traditions and fostered pride, healing, and cultural continuity.

Figure 7 and 8 .

Warao students engaging in art to reconnect with land, memory, and identity



Disruption of Daily Practices and Cultural Continuity. Forced migration also disrupted routines tied to health and identity. Many students lost access to traditional foods and replaced them with cheap processed snacks such as soda and fried foods, which affected nutrition and cultural connection. In response, Café Sem Troco introduced multilingual health education, including a dental care activity (Figure 4). These small practices helped reestablish routines, care, and community trust.

Another important initiative was establishing a horta (school garden) as part of the curriculum. The horta revived agricultural traditions disrupted by displacement and offered students a communal space to reconnect with land and ancestry. At the same time, it created a translanguaging environment where students used language, cultural knowledge, and land-based practices to learn and interact (Figures 9 - 10). As García and Wei (2015) explain, translanguaging encompasses oral traditions, gestures, and lived experiences, not only shifts between traditional Western languages. Within the horta, students cultivated food while also cultivating linguistic agency and cultural identity through memory, movement, and connection to their ancestral lands.

Figure 9 and 10.

Students and educators in the school's fresh garden, proudly harvesting vegetables and fruits.



Honoring Heritage through Art and Commemorations. Figure 11 shows students using translanguaging and photography to highlight Warao women, traditional foods, handcrafted goods, and the Buriti Palm. For April 19, Brazil's Day of Indigenous Peoples, students created pieces displayed in school hallways. Beyond pride, the artwork conveyed memory and belonging through storytelling, Portuguese, Spanish, and photography. These activities reflect a trauma informed and culturally affirming environment in which commemorations, cultural recognition, serve as acts of care.

Figure 11.

Students use translanguaging and photography to highlight the significance of Warao women, traditional foods, handcrafted goods, and the Buriti Palm in their culture.



Finding 2: Impacts of Extreme Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Nutritional Trauma. Nutritional trauma emerged as a central theme in this study because of its profound impact on Warao students. Educators described both immediate and lasting effects of food insecurity, experienced in Venezuela, during migration, and after resettlement, on students' learning, well-being, and classroom engagement. Janerrandra reflected:

"No início, eles iam para a escola para comer e não para aprender. Hoje não, a gente passou aquela segurança para eles que aqui na escola eles vão comer." [At first, they came to school to eat, not to learn. Today that has changed. We have assured them that they will always have food here.]

Her words show how hunger influences cognitive development, emotional regulation, and focus. For many children, school was the only place where meals were guaranteed, and it became a safe space where they knew they could find food. Café Sem Troco demonstrates that reliable and dignified access to food is not supplemental but foundational for students' well-being and academic engagement.

These observations align with scholarship linking migration and food insecurity. Studies of Venezuelan refugees in Ecuador report similar patterns (Milán &

Martens, 2023), and Tuaza Castro (2020) emphasizes Indigenous migrants' heightened vulnerability during crises such as COVID-19. Research also documents community agency, including children's participation in informal economies, such as selling handcrafts, to secure food. School leader Sheyla explained about the connection of food insecurity and learning development

Toda criança que tem um nível alimentar ruim e que vive na miséria... Toda criança desnutrida, ela se torna uma criança especial, porque o nível cognitivo de aprendizado se torna inferior... No caso dos nossos Venezuelanos, é como eles passaram pela extrema desnutrição, muitos deles viram pessoas da família deles sendo mortos por essa desnutrição.

[Every child who suffers from poor nutrition and lives in extreme poverty... Every malnourished child becomes a child with special needs because their cognitive learning process becomes lower... In the case of our Venezuelan students, many experienced extreme malnutrition, and some even witnessed family members die from starvation.]

Her use of "special needs" is not a judgment about students. It names the way extreme and prolonged malnutrition, driven by poverty, displacement, systemic discrimination, and neglect, can affect cognition and learning in ways that require additional support. This interpretation is consistent with research linking food insecurity to health and academic outcomes (Cohen et al., 2021; Wang & Fawzi, 2020; Weinreb et al., 2002; Jepkemboi, 2018; Gorman, 1995), hunger and displacement to challenges in language acquisition (Kaplan et al., 2016), and early malnutrition to changes in brain development (Georgieff, 2023; Pizzol et al., 2021; Bhat et al., 1973).

At Café Sem Troco, daily meals of rice, beans, protein, and snacks offered reliable access to food and a sense of safety. The school became a place of dignity and stability, where nourishment was inseparable from education. This finding highlights the limits of one-size-fits-all approaches in Western education. Responding to students who have endured poverty and hunger requires pedagogical flexibility, empathy, and teacher preparation grounded in an understanding of students' histories. This was possible through different pedagogical approaches that integrated care, culturally sustaining practices, and translanguaging.

Finding 3: Culture Shock, Acculturation, and the Impacts on Students Self-Steem

Educators highlighted the cultural shock described by Oberg (1960) that Indigenous refugee students experience in Brazilian public schools. Even everyday routines, such as food habits, can cause distress and affect mental health and self-esteem. This aligns with research on cultural discrimination, macro- and microaggressions (Williams et al., 2021), and acculturation pressures (Berry, 2005). Oppedal

et al. (2020) emphasize that developing cultural competence, including verbal and nonverbal communication and interpersonal skills, is essential for adaptation.

At Café Sem Troco, educators observed that while Brazilian and Western cultures typically use utensils such as spoons, forks, and knives, Warao families traditionally eat with their hands using a *cumbuquinha*, a small wooden bowl. Rather than impose mainstream norms, the school adopted a culturally sustaining approach (Paris & Alim, 2017) that treated foodways as integral to identity and belonging. As Gingell et al. (2022) remind us, food anchors home and cultural identity. At Café Sem Troco, mealtimes became spaces for dialogue and mutual learning, where students could honor Warao traditions while also learning to navigate Brazilian contexts.

Teachers recognized Indigenous foodways as sources of assets and cultural knowledge rather than problems to be corrected. They collaborated with students to affirm their community's traditions while also opening spaces for intercultural learning. In this context, Eduardo emphasized in Portunhol

Preservar a cultura. Nosotros siempre preservamos y lo ponemos en práctica. Sempre relembrando os nossos antepassados... Isso não podemos perder. Y nosotros, que estamos aquí no Brasil, também temos que dar apoio a los nossos hermanos brasileiros. Aprender a cultura brasileira também é conhecer, e também para que eles conheçam a nossa cultura Warao. Nosotros con nuestra cultura, mas também com a cultura brasileira.

[Preserve the culture. We always preserve it and put it into practice. Always remembering our ancestors. This we cannot lose. And we, who are here in Brazil, also have to support our Brazilian brothers. Learning Brazilian culture is also about understanding, and also for them to know our Warao culture. We with our culture, but also with Brazilian culture. This would be very important.]

Eduardo's words illustrate the importance of cultural preservation while also valuing intercultural dialogue. In practice, this meant that educators did not enforce utensils as the only proper way to eat. Instead, they created opportunities to discuss diverse food customs, validating Indigenous practices, challenging Western norms, and affirming the equal value of all traditions. At the same time, teachers introduced practical skills such as using utensils, not to replace Warao habits but to build cultural flexibility and agency. Students could then choose when to adapt in restaurants or other public settings while preserving their cultural identity.

Figure 12 and 13.

Warao students engaged in culinary learning



Figures 12 and 13 show Warao students engaged in culinary learning. These activities created a space for cultural exchange, where students learned Brazilian cuisine while sharing Warao food traditions. Rather than one-sided assimilation, this approach encouraged mutual learning and built confidence and self-care. As Altoé and de Azevedo (2018) remind us, identities are hybrid and shaped through daily negotiations between cultural heritage and the realities of displacement. Reflecting on trauma, self-worth, and cultural shock, Janerrandra emphasized the challenges of intercultural transition

Essa interculturalidade também é um trauma, porque eles têm que deixar o eu deles e tudo o que eles aprenderam até o momento. A comida que eles comem na terra deles, eles vão lá e pegam. E aqui não! Aqui eles têm que ter dinheiro para comprar a comida. E isso acaba impactando a autoestima deles. Eles ficam com vergonha e, quando você tem autoestima baixa, isso interfere no aprendizado, na sala de aula. Interfere também na aprendizagem, na linguagem. Eles criam um certo bloqueio para falar porque ficam com vergonha, porque eles vão se diminuindo.

[This intercultural transition is also a trauma because they have to leave behind their sense of self and everything they have learned up to this point. In their homeland, they can gather food directly from nature, but here, they need money to buy it. This deeply impacts their self-esteem. They feel ashamed, and when self-esteem is low, it interferes with learning in the classroom. It affects their ability to communicate, their language development, and their willingness to participate. They create a psychological barrier, withdrawing because they feel smaller and less valued.]

Her words highlight how acculturation can generate shame and loss of autonomy. In their homeland, food was gathered directly from nature, but in their new home, it must be purchased, adding both financial and emotional strain. The result can be low self-esteem, withdrawal, and silence in the classroom.

This transition reveals how students lose not only cultural knowledge and traditional ways of living but also autonomy around food. Recognizing trauma

is not enough. Culturally sustaining practices are needed to restore dignity, agency, and voice. As Gingell et al. (2022) observe, food is closely tied to culture and identity, and for refugees, cultural foods are central to settlement during periods of stress and dislocation. Persistent comparison to dominant norms can produce internalized shame and reduced self-efficacy, creating barriers to expression and learning.

Transformative Educational Practices: Healing, Partnership, and Cultural Respect. The partnership between Café Sem Troco and the University of Brasília (UnB) expanded multilingual instruction, fostered trust, and challenged traditional models of refugee education. In a rural and underfunded context, this collaboration helped fill critical gaps while honoring students' cultural and linguistic rights. Ateek (2022) reminds us that refugee students experience trauma not only through displacement but also when schools require learning in languages and systems that marginalize their histories. Similarly, Capstick and Ateek (2024) argue that inclusive schools validate identity rather than pursue assimilation. At Café Sem Troco, this validation grew through partnership. University students and faculty joined as collaborators, not distant experts, and helped build a multilingual ecology where Spanish, Warao, Portuguese, Portunhol, and Brazilian Sign Language coexisted. These efforts were rooted in sustained relationships with students and families. Janerrandra reflected

A escola se preparou para atender a comunidade Warao. A gente trabalha com o pessoal da UnB na parte da linguística e eles fazem isso realmente de forma gratuita. Eles não ganham nada e fazem um estágio na escola. Eles vão para a escola ensinar Espanhol para todos os alunos, para que os estudantes possam se integrar e consigam conversar. Desde o início, falamos com eles (Warao students and parents) em espanhol.

[The school prepared itself to serve the Warao community. We work with the folks from UnB in the linguistics department, and they really do this free of charge. They do not get paid and they do an internship at the school. They teach Spanish to all students so that the students can integrate and be able to communicate. From the beginning, we spoke with them, the Warao students and parents, in Spanish.]

An essential dimension of this finding is the recognition that partnerships between schools and universities are not peripheral but central. Such collaborations support schools in preserving students' full linguistic and cultural repertoires and transform language instruction into a multilingual and multicultural bridge for empathy, mutual learning, and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Discussion

This study addressed two key questions: (1) How do educators at Café Sem Troco respond to the

traumas of forced displacement and related stressors experienced by Warao refugee students and their families through trauma-informed and culturally sustaining practices? (2) How do educators at Café Sem Troco integrate translanguaging to support Warao students' linguistic identities, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging in school? Findings show that these pedagogies shaped everyday teaching and school programs while also revealing systemic barriers that limit their long-term implementation.

To answer the first question, trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices were enacted through a holistic, justice-driven vision led by a principal committed to inclusion, accessibility, and equity. A trauma-informed approach was evident in the school's response to food insecurity, which directly shaped attendance, student engagement, and well-being. Teachers observed that many Warao students initially came to school primarily in search of meals. In response, the school ensured consistent food access and incorporated nourishment and agricultural practices into the curriculum through initiatives such as the community garden. These efforts addressed basic needs (Pizzol et al., 2023) while affirming ancestral knowledge, positioning food as both a foundation for learning and a culturally sustaining practice (Georgieff, 2023; Pizzol et al., 2021).

Culturally sustaining pedagogies were also prioritized. Lesson planning drew on Warao cultural activities, storytelling, painting, artesanato, and intercultural dialogue, which helped students express themselves and restore cultural pride. These practices directly countered the cultural trauma of students who expressed shame regarding their language, food, or clothing, and they repositioned Indigenous funds of knowledge as cultural capital (Paris & Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005).

This approach was further strengthened through a partnership with the local public university, which expanded multilingual instruction, teacher training, and opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. These initiatives, however, unfolded within a broader context of limited infrastructure and structural barriers that affected refugee education more generally. Families often faced interruptions in enrollment and restricted access to essential services, while educators worked with limited resources and professional preparation in areas such as trauma-informed care, refugee rights, and Indigenous knowledge systems (Duden & Martins-Boges, 2022; Azevedo & Dantas, 2017). These conditions contributed to what Oberg et al. (2023) describe as compassion fatigue, as educators and the school leader extended themselves beyond capacity to ensure student well-being while navigating the constraints of under-resourced educational structures. Despite these challenges, the dedication of the school

community enabled the implementation of a model that was emotionally responsive, culturally affirming, and linguistically inclusive.

While the first question highlighted how educators responded to trauma and systemic barriers, the second question reveals how translanguaging became central to affirming identity and fostering belonging. Findings indicate that translanguaging was essential to validation, engagement, cultural preservation, and identity-building. Teachers created an environment where students drew freely on their full linguistic repertoires, including Warao, Spanish, Portuguese, Portunhol (Santos, 2017), and Brazilian Sign Language. This use of language enabled students to access materials, participate more independently, and engage across colonial linguistic boundaries. As Flores (2014) emphasizes, translanguaging is not only a pedagogical strategy but also a political act and a form of resistance to the imposition of a mandated monolingual curriculum.

Teachers encouraged students to use the languages in which they felt most comfortable, knowing that this flexibility reduced anxiety and improved self-esteem and well-being, particularly for recently displaced students. Translanguaging was used in storytelling, gardening, painting, cultural practices, and group projects that connected students' home knowledge with academic learning. Research supports this interpretation, acknowledging translanguaging as both a cognitive scaffold and a trauma-responsive practice for refugee and Indigenous students (Capstick & Ateek, 2024). Importantly, translanguaging was treated as a valid practice in its own right rather than a temporary bridge toward Portuguese monolingualism. Through translanguaging, students sustained and cherished their linguistic origins while actively participating in the intellectual and social life of the school.

These were not separate interventions but intertwined practices centered on care, justice, and cultural inclusion. Translanguaging functioned as both pedagogy and healing practice, enabling student participation while affirming linguistic and cultural belonging. Culturally responsive practices recentred Indigenous epistemologies, disrupted deficit thinking, and strengthened school-family relationships. These advances were made possible through visionary leadership and community collaborations, yet they were consistently challenged by systemic inequities and underinvestment.

Importantly, Café Sem Troco also ensured that Warao families and community members were active participants in school life. Educators invited parents into decision making, respected cultural traditions, and created opportunities for families to feel a sense of belonging within the school. These

practices reinforced trust between the school and the community and positioned the school as a shared space of care, cultural respect, and resilience.

As the number of Indigenous refugee students continues to grow across Latin America and worldwide, this case study offers timely lessons about how schools can adopt inclusive, justice-oriented pedagogy. It also highlights the critical need for sustained investment in teacher professional development, multilingual mental health services, and institutional partnerships that respect and uplift Indigenous and refugee funds of knowledge. Without such support, even the most dedicated educators will continue to face restrictions in meeting the complex needs of forcibly displaced learners and their families.

Implications

This case study demonstrates that even in under-resourced, rural areas, schools like Café Sem Troco can implement transformative practices to support Indigenous refugee students and their families. However, their initiatives cannot exist in isolation.

First, there is an urgent need for trauma-informed and culturally sustaining training across public schools so that educators understand how forced displacement, discrimination, and cultural loss affect students' learning and well-being. Teachers require preparation not only to recognize trauma but also to reflect critically on how their curriculum, actions, assumptions, or disciplinary measures may inadvertently harm refugee and Indigenous students.

Second, this study highlights the importance of integrating translanguaging practices into teacher education programs, enabling future educators to view students' diverse linguistic repertoires as assets rather than deficits. Third, advocacy from school leaders and educational systems is essential for adapting curricula and pedagogy to incorporate non-Western, community-based knowledge.

As migration continues to rise across Latin America, universities need to provide specialized coursework in refugee, migration, and multilingual education for teachers and school leaders. Sustained institutional investment is critical to ensure the continuity of this support. Finally, this case study highlights the value of school-university partnerships as catalysts for innovation, professional development, and equity-centered education. Equally important, schools can strengthen trust and belonging by engaging families as integral partners. Parent and caregiver participation in decision making, cultural activities, and school events affirms collective belonging and fosters community resilience.

Conclusion

This study examined how educators at Café Sem Troco implemented translanguaging, trauma-informed, and culturally sustaining pedagogies to support the linguistic, emotional, and cultural identities of Warao students and their families. Translanguaging emerged as both pedagogy and healing, affirming heritage while enabling students to navigate displacement. Classrooms became inclusive spaces where language and culture were validated through storytelling, food, and Indigenous epistemologies.

Teachers developed these approaches collaboratively, drawing on care, reflection, and support from the local public university. In the absence of systemic guidance, they created innovative practices rooted in community knowledge. These efforts reshaped peer dynamics, as Brazilian students increasingly participated in intercultural routines that fostered empathy and mutual respect.

At the same time, structural barriers such as inconsistent enrollment systems, under-resourced schools, and limited trauma-specific training threatened sustainability. Educators consistently extended their responsibilities, highlighting the urgency of broader institutional and policy support.

A key limitation of this study is the absence of direct input from Warao students and families. Future research should adopt participatory approaches that center refugee voices, explore long-term outcomes of inclusive pedagogies, and examine their application in urban schools. Further attention is also needed to the experiences of Indigenous refugee students with visible and invisible disabilities, which remain critically underexplored.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that inclusive, justice-oriented education for Indigenous refugees is achievable even in underfunded rural areas. Scaling and sustaining such practices requires investment in trauma-informed teacher preparation, multilingual mental health services, and curricula grounded in Indigenous epistemologies. Strengthening school–university–community partnerships and regional coordination can close persistent gaps and create support systems for volunteer workers, whose efforts were critical yet difficult to sustain in the absence of broader institutional resources. Lastly, refugee education needs to evolve from providing access to fostering belonging, where cultural and linguistic identities are preserved rather than censored and erased.

Acknowledgments

The research team would like to express their gratitude to the educators and school leader, cacique Eduardo,

of Café Sem Troco, as well as the Warao families who supported this study. We are also deeply thankful to Dr. Braustein for her support throughout the research process.

Disclosure

Portions of the manuscript benefited from digital writing assistance used for editing support, clarity and organization; all analysis and interpretation reflect the researcher's original work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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Community Translanguaging Through Amistades: Holistic Support for Latina Mothers and Their Children's Kindergarten Readiness

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Received : 4 April 2025
 Revised : 17 October 2025
 Accepted : 7 March 2026
 DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2026.430

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Abstract

This collaborative (auto)ethnographic study documents the use of community translanguaging within a support group called Amistades (pseudonym) created through a community-based partnership between mamás Latinas and a local non-profit organization. The purpose of Amistades was to offer parental and childhood socioemotional and educational support for early childhood and kindergarten readiness in a predominantly white and English-speaking city in the U.S. Amistades was exclusively designed for mamás Latinas and their young children (0-5 years old), creating unique safe spaces where mothers could share and appreciate their *mujerismo*, *Latinidad*, migration experience, translanguaging (English-Spanish), and pedagogies of the home to support their children's identity, multiculturalism, bilingualism, and protection after migrating. Co-facilitating the support group for two years, we—two mamás Latinas—documented our experience with living and interacting in a new community, mainly including community translanguaging and supporting each other in constant *pláticas*, monthly support groups with other mothers, playdates with our children, and the use of social media. Then, we followed a grounded theory approach to reflect on and interpret the data. Finally, we reflected on how community translanguaging helped Amistades: (1) become our only *red de apoyo* and *sentido de comunidad* with other familias Latinas; (2) allow mothers to share their experience, leadership, and diverse resources supporting other families to navigate and thrive as peers; (3) create spaces where young children could meet and interact with their monolingual Spanish-speaking and bilingual friends through free play; and (4) provide mothers with emotional support, knowledge, and resources to enroll their children in kindergarten and navigate elementary schools for the first time. This study has implications for research-practice partnerships by informing how elementary schools and other local organizations and researchers can address critical gaps in supporting familias Latinas, protecting and promoting their multiple identities and languages, *amistades*, and *liderazgo* to navigate elementary schools in the U.S. through community translanguaging.

Keywords:

Community Translanguaging; Grassroot Work; Early Childhood; Kindergarten Readiness; Socioemotional Support; Latina Mothers



www.iejee.com
 ISSN: 1307-9298

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Introduction

Parenting can be difficult on its own but imagine the complications parents face after migrating (Ali, 2008). The intersection of two of the most significant changes in one's life, migration and motherhood, represents a whole new world for mothers and their families. Mothers may have many questions when raising and nurturing children in a new place (Perreira et al., 2006). For instance, how do we nurture our children who are babies or toddlers in a new place? Who is going to help us take care of our children while we find out where to live or work? How can we help them get ready for school? Who are they going to be friends with, and how are they going to interact with them? How do we protect them and their identities from bullying and ensure they are proud of their identities and home countries? After all, drawing on our own personal experiences, children and their well-being are often one of the main reasons families migrate in the first place. Luckily for us, the two mother-authors of this article, after migrating to the U.S., found a non-profit organization that supports parents of young children by offering guidance and resources on pregnancy, the neonatal period, early childhood, and kindergarten readiness. We started participating there with some English and Spanish words here and there, so our familias could benefit from their services after the abrupt changes we had when moving to the U.S. At that time, our children were 4 months old, 18 months old, and 3.5 years old.

Then, one of us started volunteering at this organization and created a monthly support group for families Latinas and led only by familias Latinas. For this study, we used the pseudonym "Amistades" for the support group. Here, we started seeing each other, Author 1 and Author 2, more and more often, until we developed a friendship and decided to co-facilitate this support group with other families. We appreciated the local organization's willingness and excitement to serve more familias Latinas, translate their documents into Spanish, organize events for familias Latinas, ensure bilingual support, and host our monthly support group. This local organization also provided all the resources we needed at no cost: a beautiful and safe space to meet, materials for activities, snacks, bilingual children's books, and diapers and wipes to take home, among others. This support group, Amistades, helped us connect with and develop friendships with other Latina mothers while supporting each other in raising our children and preparing them for school. Basically, Amistades helped us move from the total isolation we felt when we recently arrived in the city to constant interaction with more than 40 Latina mothers and their children.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how Amistades laid on community translanguaging—the

community linguistic repertoires created through relationships (Kim & Song, 2019; Kim et al., 2021)—provide holistic support for Latina mothers and their children's kindergarten readiness. Essentially, with this study, we wanted to answer the questions: (1) What does linguistic and socioemotional support look like in informal, non-institutional, and grassroots mothering communities, particularly through community translanguaging? (2) How can community translanguaging help families and young children with their well-being, kindergarten readiness, and enrollment in schools after migrating? After a systematic analysis of our experiences as participants and co-leaders in Amistades for two years, we developed a collaborative autoethnography that helped us conclude on: (1) community translanguaging among and led by bi/multilingual communities happens more often than we imagine at grassroots spaces outside formal structures; (2) community translanguaging not only helps develop community linguistic repertoires but significantly impacts the well-being of migrant, bi/multilingual, and bi/multicultural communities; and (3) community translanguaging helps increase the recreation, mental health support, equity, friendships, and neighborhood supports for migrant communities.

Literature Review

When migrating to the U.S., families experience various migration-related traumas and grief (Kartal et al., 2019; Sangalang et al., 2019; Ventriglio & Bhugra, 2015), such as the separation from family and friends who remain in the country of origin, the different migration journeys and risks, drastic changes in routine and increased uncertainty, cultural and language shock in the new destination, and anti-immigration discourses and policies, among others (Adair, 2014; Catalano, 2017; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Ward & Batalova, 2023). At the same time, migrant parents and caregivers need to overcome these challenges and keep developing their skills and tools to support their children's development, education, and overall well-being. It is well known that a child's close circle of relationships helps protect them socioemotionally during and after abrupt changes, and these protections can help reduce negative impacts related to migration (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015; Ramírez, 2022), especially for young children. Research with Latin American migrant families have documented how adult caregivers protect their children after migrating by (1) keeping warm and responsive parent-child relationships (Ramírez, 2022); (2) promoting peer interaction with other emergent bilingual children, contributing to their language development (Washington-Nortey et al., 2022); (3) promoting socioemotional competencies and social, cultural and navigational capital (Vesely et al., 2013; Washington-Nortey et al., 2022; Yosso, 2005); and (4) having a strong determination that their children will have a different future with more and

better opportunities than the ones they had (Smith, 2019), among many others.

Context of Reception when Raising Children

When we talk about young children, we recognize that their development is directly related to the relationship they have with their closest caregivers, who are primarily mothers in Latin American culture (Ramírez, 2022; Vesely et al., 2013, 2021). Ramírez (2022) noted that the comprehensive development of young children (0-5 years) depends on the time mothers dedicate to them, the quality and quantity of that time, and the resources and strategies they use during parenting to support their development. Therefore, mothers become essential and key players in the protection, adaptation, and development of their children (Carlson & Harwood, 2003; Ramírez, 2022; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 1998), especially after migrating. Additionally, the literature shows that neighborhoods, understood here as both physical spaces and local communities, and their resources are essential for children's and families' development. Neighborhoods help increase (1) access to a variety of low-cost or free resources, (2) the amount and quality of time that parents spend with their children, (3) social and cultural connections and trust, (4) resilience and adaptability, (5) community engagement through play, and (6) children's socioemotional competencies (McCoy et al., 2022; Melzi et al., 2022; Ramírez, 2022). The literature underscores the significant impact of having welcoming and inclusive neighborhoods that can support migrant families, while they adapt to their new lives, especially when families with young children face multiple challenges.

There is vast literature about the challenges that migrant families face when arriving in a new destination that has systemic and structural forces that impose significant obstacles to survive and obtain essential resources and services (Adair, 2014; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). The intersection of racism, sexism, and classism with anti-immigrant discourses and policies shapes families' lives and experiences in the U.S., creating barriers to access support for the development of children (Catalano, 2017; Lee, 2018; Ramírez, 2022). As a result, families, especially those from Latin America, have reduced access to public and recreational resources, spaces, and services that are essential for children's development, such as safe housing and utilities, education, health care, parks, recreational activities, and social services (McCoy et al., 2022; Melzi et al., 2022). Additionally, families from Latin America tend to lack access to home language(s), bilingual, or culturally responsive resources that support their children as emergent bilinguals due to dominant English monolingual approaches (Ramírez, 2022). In the new destination, migrant parents and caregivers are also often ignored

and not considered the main strategists for their children's development (Ramírez, 2022), even though parents and the broader family environment "are unequivocally the most significant drivers of children's well-being and healthy development" (Cabrera et al. 2021, p. 158; see also National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016).

Unfortunately, caregivers from Latin America, "as a group, experience comparatively high rates of family stress, including poverty, racism and discrimination, and, for many, challenges related to acculturating and rearing children in a different country" (Cabrera et al., 2021, p. 159), and their children may be perceived as "dangerous waters flooding the country" (Catalano, 2017; Hlass, 2020; Ramírez, 2022). Lastly, with many 2025 executive orders targeting immigrants and the practices and organizations that support them (National Archives, 2025), anti-immigrant laws, political discourses, and deterrence practices have drastically impacted the lives of migrant communities and how they are perceived and treated in the U.S. (Altman et al., 2025; Reichlin-Melnick, 2025). The 2025 sociopolitical context, sadly, has resulted in thousands of immigration raids, apprehensions, disappearances, and deportations of immigrants (ICE, n.d.). (Im)Migrant communities across the U.S. are suffering the effects of "record-breaking immigration enforcement" (ICE, 2025, para. 1) financially, physically, socioemotionally, and, of course, academically, culturally, and linguistically.

Support that Can Help Close Gaps

As mentioned earlier, neighborhoods and communities play a significant role in closing gaps of support for migrant families, especially when talking about specific needs that come while mothering after migrating, raising children in different cultures and languages, providing socioemotional and recreational support, reducing isolation for parents and children, and connecting families to more resources in the community (McCoy et al., 2022; Melzi et al., 2022). In the U.S., individuals and community-based groups and organizations, especially those who share the identities and values of the migrant families, play a significant role in mediating between the language and culture of the home country and the receiving country. These individuals are usually called cultural or language brokers (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Stephens, 2024). Cultural and language brokers "are motivated by solidarity and reciprocity, [and facilitate] trust with community members" (Campbell-Montalvo & Castañeda, 2019, p. 735), promote inclusive engagement, connect families to resources, promote understanding, help reduce conflict, and provide linguistically and culturally appropriate support (Colvin & Swartz, 2015). Weise (2015) reflected on what he called "constructive marginality," where cultural

and language brokers use their marginalized position in a strategic way, moving and working between groups, translating across cultures and languages, and mediating between conflicts, aiming to facilitate change and build understanding. Additionally, a significant body of literature has explored language brokering through bi/multilingual children and adolescents who help their families and communities (Cline et al., 2011; Dorner & Kim, 2024; Orellana et al., 2001, 2003).

On the other side, many organizations (including schools) rely on this brokering support but at the same time reinforce hierarchies of who is “controlling” the brokering, maintaining organization-centric approaches that fail to transform institutional policies and practices and systemic inequities to better serve families (Cooper et al., 1999). Ishimaru and colleagues (2016) criticized these models, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between “conditional access” (p. 856)—which reinforces existing power asymmetries between the broker and the families they serve while conditioning the support—and more “equitable approaches” that promote shared leadership and design with and from migrant families for institutional and sustainable transformation. Additionally, the authors reflected on how brokers tend to be seen and treated as people with higher status than the families they are serving, reinforcing unequal power and access for migrant families. Then, Stephens (2024) positioned how brokers can risk also reflecting their own social positions and broader societal ideologies, including deficit-based views of migrant families and racialized communities. On the contrary, effective and equitable collaborations and brokering with migrant families require a shift toward designs and actions that prioritize systemic change. These actions purposefully create more spaces for migrant families to take leadership roles and recognize their knowledge and experience, investing in relationship and capacity building (Ishimaru et al., 2016). Effective and equitable collaborations and brokering help disrupt the notion that migrant parents are the ones in need, but position them as experts, skilled, and knowledgeable to provide support and develop strategies as well.

Most of the research has explored how institutions and more-established migrants serve as brokers. There is limited attention to the horizontal and reciprocal ways in which migrant families help others organically—as cultural and language brokers for themselves, their families, and for other families—when raising their young children and engaging with schools for the first time. As a result, this collaborative autoethnography helps reduce the gap in research by exploring the use of community translanguaging and friendships for organic and reciprocal brokering and support for and with migrant families. In the next section, we

describe the lenses used to analyze and position this community support.

Conceptual Framework

Translanguaging—a political, flexible, fluent, constant, organic, and simultaneous use of more than one language by bi/multilingual communities—has emerged as a powerful communicative, resistant, and cultural practice, particularly when enacted within communities (Flores, 2019; García & Li, 2013; Li & García, 2022). Many researchers have documented how the approach of translanguaging allows individuals to use their full linguistic repertoire in all learned languages to communicate as a speaker or by listening to messages and meanings and developing relationships (Flores, 2019; García & Leiva, 2014; García & Li, 2013; García & Lin, 2016; Li & García, 2022). Translanguaging allows, then, the creativity and praxis of liberation in communication for bi/multilingual communities to express their identity, sense of belonging, and multilingual, border-crossing experiences (Anzaldúa, 1987; Arredondo et al., 2004; García & Li, 2013). Recent research in sociolinguistics has increasingly supported a shift away from viewing languages as fixed, structured, and unconnected systems between them, recognizing language practices as part of a flexible, constant, and creative repertoire and social act (Charity Hudley & Flores, 2022; Flores, 2019; Li & García, 2022). This social act is dependent on context, social and power dynamics, and culture (García & Sylvan, 2011). Translanguaging articulates the concept of “language as doing” (Pennycook, 2017), emphasizing the transformative power of language to express and construct multifaceted identities in the moment, and positioning the power on the speaker (García & Li, 2013). It challenges raciolinguism—the racialized perceptions of the bi/multilingual that discriminate against their language and race.

García and Li (2013) have for years argued that even though structured organizations, such as schools, mainly do not allow this type of fluent and transformational use of languages, bilingual communities do it all the time. The authors argue that a bi/multilingual person does not and cannot have and use separate languages as if they were different individuals, but has and uses them together, coherently and in response to their needs, decision-making, and communication. Pacheco and Smith (2015) supported this idea by proposing that translanguaging helps create spaces for bi/multilingual communities to reflect, negotiate, and integrate their multiple identities, cultural values, and lived experiences, resulting in identity formation, social participation, and socioemotional support (Wei, 2011). Lastly, Baker and Wright (2021) supported what Flores (2019), Kim and colleagues (2021), and Lang (2019) discussed about how translanguaging is a tool for the reinforcement of bi/multilingualism, identity, and the

creation of safer spaces for immigrant communities. For these authors, when English-dominant structures and systems do not allow translanguaging, they do not allow linguistic creativity and reduce communicative competence in children and adults; ideologies that exacerbate when accompanied by discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization. Therefore, translanguaging can be explored outside of its impacts on language development and the formal structures of schools. As the purpose of this study is to examine how translanguaging within communities provides holistic support to families, in the following sections, we connect and expand on the impact of translanguaging on socioemotional and mental health, how it has been used in therapy for healing, and why it is relevant to consider translanguaging in community for the well-being of families.

Translanguaging for Socioemotional Support and Mental Health

To understand more about the role of bi/multilingualism and translanguaging in socioemotional support and healing, it is important to mention what research says about how memory, language, and traumatic experiences work in humans. Research has documented that memory organization varies across languages for bilingual individuals. Autobiographical memories are often more vivid when recalled in the language of the experience, suggesting that both the home and second languages can serve as reference languages depending on the linguistic context of the event (Kapasi & Melliush, 2015; Kheirzadeh & Hajiabed, 2016). Language acquisition during childhood coincides with emotional regulation development, influencing early experiences and subsequent emotional responses (Oliva, 2019; Singh, 2012). General literature that focuses on language, socioemotional support, and healing within bi/multilingual communities concludes that support (or therapy) conducted in the person's home language may offer more effective outcomes for trauma-related symptoms compared to support in the other learned language, attributing stronger emotional responses and better engagement (Kapasi & Melliush, 2015; Oliva, 2019).

Research suggests that socioemotional support conducted in a bi/multilingual person's home language may be more meaningful and effective, indicating that narratives and expressions related to emotions, cognitive processes, and trauma tend to be richer and more authentic in the home language (Bailey et al., 2020; Szoke et al., 2020). Scholars suggest that providing socioemotional and mental health support in the home language is associated with lower dropout rates and better treatment outcomes, enhancing emotional engagement and therapeutic efficacy (Jansson & Dylman, 2021; Kapasi & Melliush,

2015; Lay et al., 2024; Oliva, 2019; Tannenbaum & Har, 2020). Studies suggest that language plays a significant role in emotional expression, with additional languages often being less emotive when describing events that occurred in the home language (Bailey et al., 2020; Baker & Wright, 2021; Kheirzadeh & Hajiabed, 2016). As a result, other scholars explain that the language used to process traumatic events can modulate the strength of the connection between trauma and emotional reaction, with the language attached to the negative experience often being more strongly associated with distress, encouraging the use of the additional languages to talk about trauma (Kheirzadeh & Hajiabed, 2016; Ortigosa-Beltrán et al., 2023; Singh, 2012). However, other scholars suggest contemplating that the use of the additional languages might also function as a form of avoidance in expressing trauma, potentially allowing them to narrate the events without being overwhelmed by negative emotions (Kheirzadeh & Hajiabed, 2016; Ladegaard, 2018; Oliva, 2019). Despite variations in results and methodological differences, there is a consensus in the literature about how emotion words are represented differently in the home language and additional languages (Jansson & Dylman, 2021). The vividness of information and emotionality of experiences may be influenced when using the learned languages (Bailey et al., 2020; Ortigosa-Beltrán et al., 2023).

The Role of Translanguaging in Therapy

Recent literature in mental health and socioemotional support in bi/multilingual communities suggests that therapists working with patients who speak multiple languages should be adaptable, allowing them to express their experiences through a dynamic use of language(s) to support the healing process (Kapasi & Melliush, 2015; Serrani, 2023). Additionally, researchers have encouraged the use of translanguaging in therapy with an exploratory and liberatory purpose, helping individuals navigate emotional experiences freely and creatively for the most advantageous outcome (e.g., affirmation, acceptance, and growth) (Lê, 2024; Seto & Forth, 2020; Szoke et al., 2020). This research positions translanguaging as strategic to managing emotions, often adapting their language to suit their patient and the emotional content of the conversation to express emotions more effectively or avoid negative associations (Ladegaard, 2018). Translanguaging in therapy for bi/multilinguals can strengthen the therapeutic alliance and facilitate client self-disclosure. However, therapists may affect the alliance negatively if they prioritize their own language skills over understanding their clients' needs (Kapasi & Melliush, 2015; Oliva, 2019). Research suggests that translanguaging can help clients connect with their emotions and discuss difficult topics more comfortably, creating a new transitional space for client and clinician interaction, allowing

for “therapeutic play,” while supporting the patient’s sense of empowerment and human connectedness (Kapasi & Melliush, 2015). Lastly, translanguaging in therapy allows therapists to consider the bi/multicultural aspects of bi/multilingual individuals, aiding in understanding self-identity and self-image, offering a strategy to address the “dual sense of self” (Szoke et al., 2020).

Community Translanguaging

So far, we have explored the role of translanguaging for socioemotional and mental health support from the clinic perspective. Unfortunately, in the U.S., socioemotional and mental health providers who speak the language(s) of migrant communities and English are in high demand and are scarce, worsening existing psychological issues and impeding adjustment and societal inclusion (Kartal et al., 2019; Montemitro et al., 2021). In addition, deficit-based perspectives of the bi/multilingual and raciolinguism consistently correlate with heightened psychiatric symptoms and mental disorders (Montemitro et al., 2021). Then, psychological interventions and socioemotional support that is provided with the help of interpreters also present their own challenges, including concerns about confidentiality, the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship, and trust (Lay et al., 2024; Singh, 2012; Tannenbaum & Har, 2020).

Recognizing how these types of support are limited to migrant communities, grassroots socioemotional support and brokering through communities of translanguaging can help reduce the gap. Kim and Song (2019) positioned the term community translanguaging, highlighting how the creation of spaces where multiple families use translanguaging helps distribute agency and leadership roles, emphasizing the generation of collective meaning-making and knowledge sharing. Here, the authors defined community not only as a physical or institutional space, such as a school, but as a broader social field that includes networks, communication, decision-making, and shared knowledge. For the authors, community translanguaging extends beyond individual language use to one that is collective and multimodal, with meaning-making shaped by the social relationships, identities, and communication of those involved. As these communities interact with each other, each member’s linguistic repertoires intersect, expand, and nurture other members’ repertoires, resulting in community linguistic repertoires. A couple of years later, Kim and colleagues (2021) expanded on community translanguaging, merging the notions of “funds of knowledge.” The authors drew from what Moll and colleagues (1992) and Marshall and Toohey (2010) referred to as the cultural, historical, and experiential wisdom that families bring to their homes and other social spaces. Kim and colleagues (2021) reminded

us that community translanguaging is part of the everyday social relationships, cultural interactions, and mutual support of bi/multilingual families. As research on translanguaging in education still emphasizes classroom pedagogy, community translanguaging, in this scenario, honors the informality, relationality, and culturally grounded practices that naturally emerge between bi/multicultural families and community members. Kim and Song (2019) and Kim and colleagues (2021) reflected on how community translanguaging represents collective practices where members bring their identities, culture, and lived realities to the space to interact with and support each other, creating community.

As community translanguaging is still a recent concept, it has not yet been explored how community translanguaging can close gaps in socioemotional and mental health support for migrants outside schools, promoting their holistic well-being. Therefore, with this study, we take this concept outside of schools and emphasize the accessibility, genuine care, and socioemotional support that migrant families, especially Latina mothers, can receive from their peers, helping each other in more meaningful and horizontal ways through community translanguaging in different spaces. Our reflections in this study help us explore the use of community translanguaging within a grassroots support group for the well-being of migrant families and their children’s access to school.

Methods and Data Sources

Positionality

Author 1 is a first-generation college student from Guatemala pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership and policy analysis. She moved to the U.S. in 2019 when her child was three months old. Even though she was in a privileged position as an international graduate student when migrating, her gender, nationality, economic resources, home language, and phenotypes drastically challenged her access to parental and socioemotional support and resources. Author 2 is a Colombian leader mother who moved to the U.S. in 2022 when her two children were two years and four months old. Even though she has a degree in Psychology in Colombia, she cannot perform her profession in the U.S. and struggled to find a stable job until she got her state educator certificate to become an English Learner teacher in 2025. As with Author 1, her racialized conditions challenged her access to parental support, and she felt isolated when raising her children after moving to the U.S. Before moving to the U.S. (six and four years ago), neither of us, the authors, had heard about translanguaging but were highly familiarized with the term “Spanglish.” Spanglish is a well-known term in non-academic spaces, referring to the behavior of using both English and Spanish

when talking. Where we come from, this term can be used as a joke, subtly critiquing when someone is “forgetting” the home language, their roots. Today, we reflect on translanguaging (or Spanglish, as we used to call it) not as academics but as Latina mothers who translanguaged constantly with our communities at home, at work, in the supermarket, at our children’s schools, while driving or studying, in Amistades, etc.

Context

After a significant loss of an Author 1’s family member during COVID-19 and the lack of services for mental health in her home language, Author 1 decided to create a community support group for Latina mothers, Amistades. Since 2023, Amistades has been a support group specifically created for Latina mothers and their children, providing essential resources such as monthly packages of diapers and wipes, children’s books (in English, Spanish, and bilingual), connection to free services in the community, spaces for free play, and socioemotional support through pláticas and food sharing. This space has been a safe space for families, especially for newcomers in our city, a white and English-dominant city in the Midwest U.S. The support group was possible thanks to the donations, assistance, and space provided by a local organization that supports parents with young children. Since the creation of the group, the two authors met and decided to individually journal on Google Docs and notebooks, send voice or text messages in WhatsApp, or call each other to plan each session of Amistades or to reflect on previous sessions. After many of these collaborative reflections, we wondered about the linguistic and socioemotional support that we lacked prior to Amistades and that now we, the participating moms (40 and adding new mothers every month), were developing through community translanguaging.

With this curiosity, we discussed how we could prepare a study that does not position families as needing to be “rescued,” “developed,” or “trained”; rather, it would recognize that families already hold a wealth of capacities and resources for themselves and for other families. Therefore, our project focused on documenting how community translanguaging manifested in our informal interactions, supporting both children and mothers. Our study emerged not from a plan to study translanguaging (as none of us had heard this term before migrating to the U.S.), but from a deep, lived experience of supporting each other as bilingual mothers learning to navigate a new place. Additionally, our study did not focus on language development through translanguaging but on the holistic support that we provide to each other (and to our children) while translanguaging. Over time, we realized how our bi/multilingualism—and our fluid movement across languages—played a powerful role

in the ways we cared for each other and raised our children. As a result, we considered that community translanguaging was never a goal or an intervention in our daily interactions; it was, and continues to be, a natural practice of care, resilience, and belonging of bi/multilingual communities.

For this study, we referred to Author 1’s and Author 2’s journaling on Google Docs (14 pages), notebooks (10 pages), WhatsApp messages (chat logs), planning of activities for Amistades (8 pages), annual reports (5 pages), and written reflections from our monthly pláticas (n=16) and playdates (n=6) after meeting with the whole group. All these reflections were in Spanish and English as we felt sharing them without worrying about structure, grammar, spelling, or other regulations, representing what in Latin America we call pláticas y comidas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Flores Carmona et al., 2021; Ortega, 2024). After collecting all our journaling and reflections after meeting in Amistades, we followed a grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2014, 2017), examining the narratives we were jotting down, and what and how we were sharing them. First, we put all our written work into a single shared Google folder and read through it, open coding with comments on the margins as we were making sense of our reflections. Then, we revised our codes and comments, wrote research memos summarizing our interpretations, and identified the most predominant categories. Finally, we read the data again and organized it into clear themes that we share in the next section as results. Simultaneously, we added more notes from our embodied experiences with the context and culture we live in, building this study as a collaborative autoethnography (Adams et al., 2017; Boylorn & Orbe, 2021; Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Results

(English Translations Are Found in the Appendix)

In this section, we describe what we noted were results of natural community translanguaging in our support group designed only for Latina mothers and their families. To start, it is worth mentioning that bi/multilingual communities constantly create spaces of community translanguaging at grassroots levels, but they are not broadly recognized, documented, or shared as relevant practices for their education, well-being, and community development. Rather than identifying translanguaging as one domain (or aspect) of their experiences, in this case, we see it more as a lens through which these experiences become meaningful. The fluidity of the languages used helped create the forms of care and sharing of knowledge that supported the group. Therefore, in this section, we invested in positioning that community translanguaging not only helps develop community linguistic repertoires but also significantly impacts

the well-being of migrant, bi/multilingual, and bi/multicultural communities through recreation, mental health support, equity, friendships, and neighborhood support.

Community Translanguaging at the Grassroots

By January 2023, there was not a single space where families who spoke Spanish could get parental or socioemotional support in our Midwestern city. Amistades was, then, the only space where Latina mothers could meet, receive socioemotional support for themselves and their children, receive help to support their children's early education and readiness for kindergarten, and be able to support other mothers using their home language. Amistades was created to help reduce the gap in mental health services in Spanish, while truly understanding and valuing Latin American culture, bi/multilingualism, migratory experience, and grief.

This space supported every single mother and family who freely participated once, twice, or as many times as they wanted or needed. Even though we had more than 40 mothers participating in Amistades in total, for the monthly meetings, we would have only up to mothers ten who rotated based on their availability. Many mothers participated frequently for several months and then, for many reasons, stepped out for moments and then returned or never returned; then, we will have new mothers. In this space, we never required any document, commitment, or proof of residence, avoiding the creation of barriers to be part of Amistades. Every month, we sat in a circle, transmitting the idea that we were all experts in being mothers, raising our own children, and supporting their education. Even though Amistades was co-facilitated initially by two Latina mothers (the authors), this facilitation was more about organization, logistics, or promotion of activities, remembering that effective and equitable collaborations and brokering disrupt the notion that "other parents" are the ones in need of our help. After greeting everyone, we would do a check-in where every mother could share with the rest how she was, how her family was doing, and if she needed any type of help. Based on the responses, every mother would jump in and share advice, resources, encouragement, compliments, or even celebrations! If the time allowed and with no pressure of following an agenda or disrupting the environment, the co-facilitators would suggest a topic and an art activity to talk and share advice while doing something with our hands. Every mother was free to speak out loud or not, and to use one or more languages to express themselves.

For example, one month, we talked about how we can nurture our calmness as mothers. After the check-in, we used a sheet of paper with a drawing of a pressure cooker to reflect about what affects our calmness

(e.g., children being sick, not sleeping well, or children's meltdowns), and what things help us recover (e.g., reflect on if what happened was my fault or not, take a nap, take deep breaths). After moments of silence, we started sharing out loud what we wrote, and how we could connect things that help us recover calmness with things that disrupt our calmness (e.g., when my children have meltdowns, I can remind myself that it was not my fault, take deep breaths, and assist my children). While some mothers were sharing out loud, others were listening to them, making connections with their experiences, writing their advice down, or asking questions. We kept doing this until all mothers had the chance to share or ask—if desired. Meanwhile, and next to our "meeting space" (a rug), our children would be freely playing in an indoor playground, interacting with other Latin American children who spoke only Spanish, only English, or both languages. While we had these moments of pláticas, we also ate some snacks. At the end of the session, we asked how everyone felt and gave space for more discussions if needed. Then, we asked for ideas of what to talk about next month based on special dates or things that concerned them, and who would like to help co-facilitate the next activity. Finally, we shared a take-home kit with books and art supplies for children's activities, diapers, wipes, and food boxes if needed. The meeting lasted 90 minutes, although at times, we would stay talking even longer, losing track of time due to our engagement in conversations with each other.

Every month, our meetings would look like this, creating unique safe spaces where mothers could share and appreciate their *mujerismo*, *Latinidad*, migration experience, translanguaging (English-Spanish), and pedagogies of the home to support their own and their children's identity, multiculturalism, bilingualism, and protection after migrating. After meeting constantly, we could develop friendships, and plan playdates and birthday celebrations for our children, inviting other Latin American families. We did not have all these opportunities before Amistades.

Community Translanguaging for Mental Health and Recreation

When many of us needed any type of socioemotional support in our city and looked for it, we could not find it in Spanish, with culturally relevant approaches, or with people who could understand what we were going through as Latina mothers who moved to the U.S. with young children. Having a space of four, six, or sometimes ten mothers openly sharing about their experiences was impactful for our well-being. One of the authors stated in her journal before co-facilitating Amistades in 2023,

Hoy fue nuestra primera reunión de familias latinas, con mamás que solo hablan español, yo estaba muy emocionada porque era la primera vez que yo me reunía solo con latinos. Cuando recibí el correo [de invitación] pensé de una vez que no podía faltar a este evento... Como a mí siempre me gusta hablar mucho, saludé a cada una de [las mamás] y les pregunté su nombre y lugar de origen. Me alegró tanto escuchar a más personas hablar español.

Rápidamente me sentí que estaba rodeada de amigas de toda la vida, personalmente por estos días me he sentido muy deprimida, el invierno me ha parecido tan difícil, no estoy acostumbrada a estas temperaturas tan bajas, mi ánimo por hacer las cosas ha disminuido mucho... Ver a esas otras mamás, luchando por sus hijos igual que yo luchando por mis hijas, escucharlas hablar y conocer sus historias, saber que también en algún momento se han sentido igual que yo (deprimidas, con baja autoestima, etc.)... me dio ánimos.

Salí muy feliz del grupo Amistades, porque hice nuevas amigas, me regalaron pañales, toallitas y una caja de comida, mis niñas jugaron y se divertieron. Me sentí muy agradecida por tener la oportunidad de participar en este grupo y conocer más mamás y sentir que no estoy sola en mi papel como madre. (See page 241 for the English translation.)

A year after having started to meet once a month inside the local non-profit organization, we started to meet every two weeks. We decided that this additional time would be in a different place, so we could get to know more places, feel more comfortable visiting public spaces (instead of visiting the places by ourselves), and support each other with translations when needed (e.g., at the public library). Depending on the weather, we would choose to meet inside the public library, at a park, or at a public-school playground once classes were over. This second monthly meeting helped us feel part of the community where we live and recognize that we also have the right to access public spaces and use them. Community translanguaging, in this scenario, helped us have more connections with public services and reshaped how we think of ourselves as “migrants using the services.” We kept meeting, and two years later, one of the authors wrote in her journal,

El grupo Amistades se ha convertido en una red de apoyo donde las madres pueden preguntar cualquier cosa con confianza, desde recomendaciones sobre estilistas que hablen español hasta promocionar y vender sus productos de comida casera. Este ambiente de solidaridad ha creado una comunidad donde cada miembro encuentra ayuda y apoyo en las experiencias compartidas. (See page 241.)

This space assisted families by providing play and community-building opportunities that were culturally and linguistically responsive to their needs. These gatherings had a recreational focus but were also affirming from a linguistic standpoint. Attendees were able to speak in Spanish, English, or both with no judgment. For many participants, this was the first opportunity to use their full linguistic repertoire outside the home. Through storytelling, crafts, and pláticas,

families employed spontaneous translanguaging, which enabled them to meaningfully negotiate, relate, and resourcefully share without linguistic constraints. The sociolinguistic freedom to use their language(s) was crucial in filling the gaps that existing monolingual programs had failed to address.

Community Translanguaging for Equity

In March 2023, we invited a representative from one of these public spaces that we wanted to start visiting as a group to come to Amistades and share about their services. While the public representative was sharing about the different resources, she said, “All of these services are free for you.” One of the mothers immediately reacted saying, “no son gratis, ya hemos pagado por esos servicios con nuestros taxes.” Even though the representative did not speak Spanish, she understood what this person meant. Then, the representative said in a very friendly way, “Yes, you are right. You already paid for those services with your taxes. In fact, that makes all of you, our bosses!” Then, the same mother translated this into Spanish for the other mothers, and they all laughed together. This short sentence, “no son gratis, ya hemos pagado por esos servicios con nuestros taxes” changed the environment of the meeting completely. Suddenly, we all felt like we were in a more equal space with the public representative. With community translanguaging, the mothers’ empowerment made visible that migrant and bi/multilingual communities contribute taxes and pay for public services like any other member living in the district. The flexibility of being able to use the full linguistic repertoire in the space allowed mothers to speak out for themselves and reclaim their rights to be considered responsible community members who contribute to the district’s economic development, and that they are not only recipients of help.

Community Translanguaging to Position the Use of Spanish and Translanguaging as Important Practices

By creating spaces where Latina mothers and children interact and play with other Latin American families, the group has actively promoted Spanish as a relevant language. Through community translanguaging, we created a safe and respected space within a predominantly English-speaking context, challenging linguistic, racial, and cultural dominance. As one of us reflected,

Observé que, al llegar las madres con sus hijos [al grupo Amistades], los niños inicialmente hablaban en inglés, pero al entrar y escuchar a las demás personas, comenzaban a utilizar el español. Parecía que necesitaban unos minutos para sentirse cómodos al usar el español.

Me di cuenta de que algunas madres eran conscientes de que sus hijos estaban perdiendo el dominio del español, por lo que durante las actividades en

grupo, [ellas] animaban a sus hijos a usar más este idioma... En cuanto a la interacción entre los niños, observé que hablaban entre ellos en el idioma con el que se sentían más cómodos. Algunos niños se comunicaban principalmente en inglés, mientras que otros lo hacían en español durante todo el tiempo. Varias madres reconocieron que necesitaban hablar más español en casa, ya que les preocupaba que sus hijos pudieran perderlo...

El grupo de [Amistades] ha jugado un papel importante en ayudar a los niños a mantener su conexión con el español y fortalecer sus habilidades en el idioma... [En Amistades se han] compartido recursos en español y bilingües que las familias pueden utilizar con sus hijos para hacerlo más divertido. También [Amistades ha] creado espacios donde los niños pueden interactuar con otros [niños que hablan español], practicando el idioma de manera natural y sin presión. Este enfoque no solo refuerza el español como [lengua materna], sino que también ayuda a los niños a sentirse orgullosos de sus raíces culturales, fomentando su identidad bilingüe en un entorno que celebra la diversidad lingüística. (See page 242.)

Community translanguaging in this space helped us and our children realize how necessary and beautiful it is to be free to communicate without caring for what others expect or demand from us, using the language(s) that we want and need, and how we want and need them. Here, we appreciated what we used to joke about in our home countries with “Spanglish,” and used it as a tool to connect, play, and problem-solve with others. We ended valuing our and our children’s dynamism to communicate as something natural, necessary, and powerful to build community. Amistades served as a space where Spanish, along with the development of translanguaging, was not simply accepted but actively celebrated as an important form of emotional and communicative practice. Unlike other institutional spaces that either impose English or expect a separation of languages, Amistades gave families the freedom to draw from their entire linguistic repertoire to relate, articulate, and lead, resulting in a legitimate and empowering form of communication.

Community Translanguaging for More Amistades

Another beauty of community translanguaging was that it helped all of us develop more friendships! For one of the authors, it was the support she needed when facing what she calls *her darkest moment* and isolation after having recently moved to the U.S. and having a family member pass away during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the other author, Amistades “fue el único recurso social y sentido de comunidad” that she found after moving to the U.S. as well. Other mothers expressed their needs and desires to find more friendships, as they lacked Latina friends before Amistades. Other mothers shared about their depression and isolation while raising children as single mothers or being stay-at-home mothers without opportunities to interact with others in Spanish. One of the authors expressed in her journal,

[Luego en Amistades nos preguntaron cómo nos] sentíamos cómo mujeres latinas aquí en la ciudad y cada una expresó sus sentimientos con tranquilidad y calma. Creo que eso es lo que más me gusta en este grupo, que nos sentimos cómodas en compartir lo que pensamos y [nos] sentimos sin miedo a ser juzgadas o rechazadas. Entre todas las respuestas que escuché es que no es fácil para ninguna de estas mujeres estar aquí en este país y que de alguna manera están haciendo grandes sacrificios por sus familias. Cada una expresó lo mucho que extraña su hogar y las celebraciones... en sus países. Cada una expresó lo difícil que es ser mujer en una época en donde se nos exige ser perfectas, vernos lindas, tener la casa arreglada, estudiar, trabajar, cuidar de los hijos y no desatender al marido. Tenemos tanta carga como mujeres que considero que somos como superheroinas llevando todo este peso todos los días. Me encantó este día, pude ser yo, decir lo que pienso y siento. Mis hijas pasaron un buen rato y yo también salí muy feliz del grupo de Amistades. (See page 242.)

Experiences like this are what moved us to create a WhatsApp group for Amistades where we could continue talking with each other at any moment and not only once or twice a month. This support to develop more friendships was not only significant for the mothers but also for the children. For example, one day, a mother asked the group what we were going to do the following week, as our children’s schools were not going to be in session for three consecutive days. One of the authors shared how her child had never gone to the movies before, and another mother shared how her family had never gone to the movies all together. Three other mothers heard them talking about it and joined the conversation with excitement, with one of them saying, “sí vamos juntas, así nos ayudamos a cuidar a nuestros hijos cuando se porten mal,” and they all laughed. Finally, we planned to go to the movies with our whole families, all together! We definitely had a community here! For the next school breaks, the same happened; one or two mothers started the conversation in the group about what we were going to do with our children, so we could plan something together.

This benefitted us, mothers, as we had more opportunities to see our caring friends but also to our children as they developed more friendships and enjoyed spending time together. For one of the authors, Amistades’ children were the only Spanish-speaking and Latin American friends that her child had. She reflected on how these friends helped her child value his identity as Latino and bilingual, and helped him see it as “another normality.” After several playdates, the author’s child was constantly noticing when other children and adults were bi/multilinguals, and conversations about home languages, countries, flags, and nationalities started to flourish at an early age.

Community Translanguaging to Position Latina Mothers as the Experts

The local non-profit organization that hosted Amistades is an organization that has served families

with young children for more than 14 years, providing parenting support and resources, and helping families help their young children get ready for kindergarten. When we were having conversations with the organization's staff about having this support group for Latina mothers on a regular basis inside their building, they did not hesitate to offer as many resources as possible. Due to the organization's strong orientation toward social and racial justice, the staff was never uncomfortable with the idea of creating a space totally dedicated to Latina mothers and their children, as they recognized this was a real need in the city. Due to their experience serving families, they constantly reminded us that "parents are the experts," "parents know what is best for their children," "parents are the ones making decisions," "we don't suggest what to do," "we listen to families." All these messages were part of the foundation of Amistades: "migrant families are the experts!"

For more than three months, one of the authors and the staff (the founders of Amistades) were talking about how to create the group. In order to get more outreach, the founders partnered with local Organization B, which offered to help co-facilitate the group. A couple of months passed, and Organization B suggested having white co-facilitators leading the group and using a U.S.-based curriculum. This was a big surprise for the founders as they aimed for these groups to be culturally responsible and totally led by the Latina mothers in the community. The founders needed to clarify the purpose of the group several times in several meetings until Organization B agreed not to incorporate its suggestions. More months passed and the co-facilitator from Organization B started to talk about goals in the group and what success meant for them. It surprised the founders again as Amistades' purpose was to only reach out to Latin American families and serve them. Organization B started making comparisons with other support groups' success because they had *more people* attending the meetings every month, and these families had more consistent participation. These conversations were so intense that one of the founders had to explicitly explain that it is impossible to compare Amistades with support groups that serve English-dominant families, non-Latin American, and non-marginalized families. She explained the differences between the families we were serving and the reasons why we were serving them through Amistades, but Organization B kept questioning the success of the group because we had "few" mothers meeting every month. These conversations were very uncomfortable for the Latina founder, especially because she was the only non-white and non-native English-speaking person in those meetings. Finally, eight months later, the Latina founder decided to stop partnering with this organization, saying this,

I plan to have a different mom co-lead Amistades from now on because I want this to be sustainable and Latina mom-based. Also, I recognize that all Latina moms have so incredible knowledge and leadership that is ready to be shared with others. As much as we can, I don't want moms to feel there's an authority in the group—although I have had a different role the first months [as a co-facilitator]. But now that the group is getting stronger, I want this to be a community group. Up to [Organization B] if they still want to join us but understanding that this is a Latina mom-led group. [Organization B] is always welcome to participate!

This was just the beginning of an adventure of constantly positioning Latina mothers as the experts with partner organizations and with the participating mothers themselves, as Latina mothers are not considered leaders in many places. As one mother expressed, "Al iniciar este día me encontraba un poco nerviosa, ya que [la co-facilitadora] me había invitado a que dirigiera el grupo de Amistades. Era la primera vez que me sentía profesional otra vez desde que llegué a los Estados Unidos." (See page 243.) The recognition of Latina mothers as the most influential person in their children's lives was key in the design of every monthly meeting, in deciding what handicrafts to do, and in deciding how to seat and share every month through pláticas. Against what most of the research says about what migrant families and children lack, our children were always happy, safe, and well-nourished (well-nourished both emotionally and physically). For all the participating mothers, their children's nourishment was essential for their mental health, early development, and readiness for kindergarten. We were all, no doubt, the experts of our own children! And to answer Organization B's question of what success meant for Amistades, this is what a mother shared in March 2024 as a co-facilitator,

En este día yo planeé [la reunión de Amistades para] hablar sobre las estrategias de crianza que les funcionan a las mamás. Sin embargo, [ese día] llegó solo una mami con sus hijos. Así que compartí con ella lo que me ha funcionado con mis hijas y ella compartió conmigo lo que le ha funcionado con sus niños. Después de eso hablamos de cosas más personales y de algunos desafíos que hemos tenido en nuestros hogares. Me sentí feliz saber que pude escuchar a otra mamá desahogarse un poco con sus problemas y me di cuenta que ese es uno de los propósitos del grupo Amistades; apoyar a las mamás no importando de qué forma, así solo sea escuchándolas. A pesar de que solo habíamos dos mamás en este día, se cumplió el propósito por el que hemos formado este grupo. (See page 243.)

Community Translanguaging Online

A couple of months after starting with Amistades, we created a WhatsApp group—the app that all mothers used to communicate—and since then, we invited mothers to join and stay in the group without requiring them to participate in person in the monthly groups. By the end of 2024, we had 30 mothers in

the WhatsApp group, interacting constantly, asking questions, asking for recommendations, or providing support to others on a regular basis. By the summer of 2025, we had 40 members in the group. Every mother is welcome to participate in the WhatsApp group in English, Spanish, or using both languages, as any other mother can jump in and help. This online platform helps facilitate a more horizontal support as any mother is leading conversations, topics, or questions. This chat group is more of a 24/7 community support that mothers can use when needed. In this space, we have all helped with very relevant topics, including: (1) finding housing, (2) information about food pantries and free school supplies, (3) processes to renew passports in Consulates, (4) school enrollment and translation services, (5) promotion of home-based food businesses, among others.

For example, as migrant mothers with young children, usually newcomers to our city, navigating U.S. schools or schools in this precise district was challenging. For many of us, it was our first time ever approaching U.S. schools when enrolling our children in preschool or kindergarten. Amistades provided immediate support and guidance when mothers needed it, through the online community translanguaging, as evidenced in one of our reflections:

Uno de los temas principales que hemos abordado [en este grupo] es el proceso de inscripción de los niños en las escuelas públicas. En el grupo, compartimos información detallada sobre los documentos necesarios, como el certificado de vacunas y el acta de nacimiento. También explicamos cómo determinar la escuela que corresponde según la dirección de residencia. Además, [el grupo ha] ayudado a las madres a familiarizarse con la página web del distrito escolar, donde pueden acceder a recursos como la aplicación para almuerzos y desayunos gratuitos y los horarios escolares, que varían dependiendo de la institución.

Para las madres que no hablan inglés, [el grupo ha] proporcionado guía sobre cómo utilizar el servicio de intérpretes del distrito escolar, disponible en más de 50 idiomas. Esto ha sido especialmente útil para ayudarlas a completar los procesos de inscripción y comunicarse con las escuelas y maestros de sus hijos.

En "Amistades," hemos trabajado para ayudar a las madres a entender las fechas clave de inscripción y los significados de los colores y símbolos en el calendario académico... Al compartir información sobre el servicio de intérpretes del distrito escolar, hemos logrado que muchas madres se sientan más cómodas y motivadas para participar activamente en las reuniones escolares. Este paso ha sido fundamental para que puedan conocer el progreso y los desafíos de sus hijos, fortaleciendo su papel en el proceso educativo. (See page 243.)

In this reflection, we can see how multiple mothers responded to help others in the way they could and with the resources they had. Here, mothers were sharing posts, images, and websites in English, and leading the conversations mainly in Spanish to guide the newcomer mothers on how to use the resources

for their children's first enrollment. This dynamic happens almost weekly in the WhatsApp group chat. Instead of requesting institutional translators at school (support that usually takes time and is complicated for newcomers), the mothers in Amistades help each other by explaining school routines, processes, and regulations, adapting to each mother's questions and needs and responding almost immediately via WhatsApp. Thus, community translanguaging allows the bridging of institutional policies and practices with families' real experiences, which helps mothers feel more confident and adequately prepared to advocate for their children's education. This is a powerful practice that goes beyond linguistic support as it promotes social navigation and fosters collective agency.

Local Partners and Resources that Significantly Helped

Lastly, Amistades was possible thanks to the local organization and its caring staff who developed a whole system to support Latina mothers by: (1) inviting mothers to meet inside their building and let mothers lead their group by themselves, (2) letting their children use their indoor playground, (3) contacting bilingual volunteers to take care of the children while mothers could have some time for themselves, (4) collecting food boxes donated from the local pantry and sharing them with the mothers, (5) sharing packages of diapers and wipes for every child, (6) and buying snacks for the families to eat while spending time together. This local organization did this every single month at no cost! Even though the organization provided all these resources, the staff recognized that this space was for and led by Latina mothers only. The staff protected the space for Latin American families and did not impose any U.S.-based curriculum. The organization understood the need not to promote the space publicly as for "Spanish-speaking families" but for "Latin American families," to avoid gentrification by dominant families seeking exposure to Latin American culture, people, and language. The staff knew this space was the only one in the whole city and helped us keep it sacred for Latina mothers and their children.

Community Translanguaging for Holistic Support

We want to close the results reflecting on the broad supports that come with community translanguaging—far beyond language development, especially in an anti-immigrant and risky context for bi/multilingual families, as in 2025 and 2026. Through community translanguaging, Amistades provided Latina mothers and their children with a space where their socioemotional health and well-being were the most important! This community translanguaging enabled all participating Latina mothers to serve as cultural and language brokers for other mothers through equitable, horizontal, and peer collaboration/learning/support while developing community linguistic repertoires

(Kim & Song, 2019; Kim et al., 2021). Each mother's experience and advice were essential to uplifting other mothers, disrupting their isolation, and sharing essential resources through M(other)work (Caballero et al., 2019) while living in a challenging sociopolitical environment. This community translanguaging and cultural and language brokering were impactful not only for the mothers but also for their children. Through spaces of free and unstructured play with diverse children with Latin American backgrounds (e.g., some speaking Spanish, some English, and others both languages; some recently arrived, and others U.S.-born), children strengthened their linguistic repertoire, multiple identities, friendships, and kindergarten readiness! Through several playdates, participating children had more linguistic resources for expression, problem-solving, and socioemotional skills, and mothers felt more comfortable allowing and promoting their children's translanguaging at home (Baker & Wright, 2021).

This grassroots support and community translanguaging did not emerge within formal educational settings and with specific curricula in mind (Kim & Song, 2019; Kim et al., 2021). It emerged from genuine community care, resistance, and survival of each family, prioritizing migrant families' well-being and their dynamic use of languages. In this study, we recognized that community translanguaging mainly contributed to (1) a collective spirit and movement in action, (2) a partnership to help go through and overcome our challenges, and (3) the strengthening of our critical and collective consciousness, embracing our bi/multilingualism, bi/multiculturalism, expertise, and leadership as mothers. Additionally, this translanguaging in the community helped families increase access to public services and mental health support, and navigate the educational and social systems in the U.S. It helped preserve our Latinidad, home language, culture, and sacred backgrounds. Amistades, through community translanguaging, had a transformative power in the lives of the participating families by recognizing each mother not only as a caregiver but also as an advocate, educator, protector, and expert for their family and community. Importantly, this work on community translanguaging focused on family, friendship, and well-being rather than on structured supports, reflecting on how we, bi/multilingual and bi/multicultural families, live, communicate, and support each other without pressure, limitations, or external top-down guidance.

Among the limitations of this study, we note that the restricted anti-immigrant context did not allow us to recognize mothers' individual contributions by name or the supportive organization's name due to potential risks. Additionally, Amistades and this study took place between 2023 and 2025, when many immigration laws, policies, and practices shifted toward targeting

and persecuting migrant communities and the organizations that support them. This context influenced the interpretation and dissemination of the results. We also believe that this study could have benefited from a M(other)work lens (Caballero et al., 2019) when analyzing how mothers, specifically, led the organization of community support efforts and translanguaging while navigating a complex and restrictive anti-immigrant context. Future studies could examine how the current anti-immigrant context shapes community translanguaging and its use at the grassroots level. As stated above, there is limited research on community translanguaging outside formal, structured spaces (e.g., schools), so more research is needed on how migrant communities use it, how they benefit from it, and how schools can learn from it.

Significance and Implications

This study helps position community translanguaging as a natural and powerful asset that migrant communities have and benefit from, and that, researchers and educators can learn from these practices for more equitable collaborations when supporting migrant families. Moreover, this study reinforces the importance of intentionally creating caring and recreational spaces that protect families and help them build connections as peers. Finally, this study reminds us of the beauty of working together, as equals, from different sectors, identities, and spaces. As implications for practice, this study encourages the design of support for migrant families, co-led by them, ensuring that their voices, needs, and expertise are engaged from the very beginning. This work may inform schools and other educational organizations about the need to create more horizontal, grassroots spaces for community translanguaging, promoting different channels of support, mutual benefit, and respect. As implications for research, we recognize that academia, schools, families, and other local organizations need more research-practice partnerships and community-based work that is intentional in listening to families—not only as “participants of research” but as co-designers, co-facilitators, and co-researchers. Ultimately, an implication for local policy is the importance of supporting local non-profit, public, and private organizations to document their best practices and policies working with migrant families, publicly share their experiences, and promote peer mentoring with other organizations that aim to do similar work.

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Appendix

Translations of Quotes from the Results Section

Community Translanguaging for Mental Health and Recreation

Spanish	English
Hoy fue nuestra primera reunión de familias latinas, con mamás que solo hablan español, yo estaba muy emocionada porque era la primera vez que yo me reunía solo con latinos. Cuando recibí el correo [de invitación] pensé de una vez que no podía faltar a este evento... Como a mí siempre me gusta hablar mucho, saludé a cada una de [las mamás] y les pregunté su nombre y lugar de origen. Me alegró tanto escuchar a más personas hablar español. Rápidamente me sentí que estaba rodeada de amigas de toda la vida, personalmente por estos días me he sentido muy deprimida, el invierno me ha parecido tan difícil, no estoy acostumbrada a estas temperaturas tan bajas, mi ánimo por hacer las cosas ha disminuido mucho... Ver a esas otras mamás, luchando por sus hijos igual que yo luchando por mis hijas, escucharlas hablar y conocer sus historias, saber que también en algún momento se han sentido igual que yo (deprimidas, con baja autoestima, etc.)... me dio ánimos. Salí muy feliz del grupo Amistades, porque hice nuevas amigas, me regalaron pañales, toallitas y una caja de comida, mis niñas jugaron y se divertieron. Me sentí muy agradecida por tener la oportunidad de participar en este grupo y conocer más mamás y sentir que no estoy sola en mi papel como madre.	Today was our first gathering for Latina families, with moms who only speak Spanish. I was very excited because it was the first time I had met only with Latinos. When I received the [invitation] email, I immediately thought I couldn't miss this event... Since I always like to talk a lot, I greeted each one of the moms and asked their names and places of origin. I was so happy to hear more people speaking Spanish. I quickly felt like I was surrounded by lifelong friends. Personally, I've been feeling very depressed these past few days. Winter has seemed so difficult. I'm not used to these low temperatures, and my motivation to do things has diminished a lot. Seeing these other moms, fighting for their children just as I fight for my daughters, listening to them speak and hearing their stories, knowing that at some point they've also felt the same way I do (depressed, with low self-esteem, etc.)... encouraged me. I left the Amistades group very happy because I made new friends. In Amistades, they gave me diapers, wipes, and a box of food, and my girls played and had fun. I felt very grateful for the opportunity to participate in this group and meet other moms and felt like I'm not alone in my role as a mother.
El grupo Amistades se ha convertido en una red de apoyo donde las madres pueden preguntar cualquier cosa con confianza, desde recomendaciones sobre estilistas que hablen español hasta promocionar y vender sus productos de comida casera. Este ambiente de solidaridad ha creado una comunidad donde cada miembro encuentra ayuda y apoyo en las experiencias compartidas.	The Amistades group has become a support network where mothers can confidently ask anything, from recommendations for Spanish-speaking hairstylists to the promoting and selling of their homemade food products. This atmosphere of solidarity has created a community where each member finds help and support in shared experiences.

Community Translanguaging for Equity

Spanish	English
no son gratis, ya hemos pagado por esos servicios con nuestros taxes	They are not free; we have already paid for those services with our taxes.

Community Translanguaging to Position the Use of Spanish and Translanguaging as Important Practices

Spanish	English
Observé que, al llegar las madres con sus hijos [al grupo Amistades], los niños inicialmente hablaban en inglés, pero al entrar y escuchar a las demás personas, comenzaban a utilizar el español. Parecía que necesitaban unos minutos para sentirse cómodos al usar el español. Me di cuenta de que algunas madres eran conscientes de que sus hijos estaban perdiendo el dominio del español, por lo que durante las actividades en grupo, [ellas] animaban a sus hijos a usar más este idioma... En cuanto a la interacción entre los niños, observé que hablaban entre ellos en el idioma con el que se sentían más cómodos. Algunos niños se comunicaban principalmente en inglés, mientras que otros lo hacían en español durante todo el tiempo. Varias madres reconocieron que necesitaban hablar más español en casa, ya que les preocupaba que sus hijos pudieran perderlo... El grupo de [Amistades] ha jugado un papel importante en ayudar a los niños a mantener su conexión con el español y fortalecer sus habilidades en el idioma... [En Amistades se han] compartido recursos en español y bilingües que las familias pueden utilizar con sus hijos para hacerlo más divertido. También [Amistades ha] creado espacios donde los niños pueden interactuar con otros [niños que hablan español], practicando el idioma de manera natural y sin presión. Este enfoque no solo refuerza el español como [lengua materna], sino que también ayuda a los niños a sentirse orgullosos de sus raíces culturales, fomentando su identidad bilingüe en un entorno que celebra la diversidad lingüística.	I observed that when mothers and their children arrived [to the Amistades group], the children initially spoke in English, but as they entered and listened to other people, they began to use Spanish. It seemed like they needed a few minutes to feel comfortable using Spanish. I noticed that some mothers were aware that their children were losing their Spanish, so during group activities, they encouraged their children to use it more... Regarding the children's interaction, I observed that they spoke to each other in the language they felt most comfortable with. Some children communicated primarily in English, while others communicated in Spanish all the time. Several mothers acknowledged that they needed to speak more Spanish at home, as they worried their children might lose it... The [Amistades] group has played an important role in helping children maintain their connection to Spanish and strengthen their language skills... [Amistades] has shared Spanish and bilingual resources that families can use with their children to make it more fun. [Amistades] has also created spaces where children can interact with other [Spanish-speaking children], practicing the language naturally and without pressure. This approach not only reinforces Spanish as a [mother tongue] but also helps children feel proud of their cultural roots, fostering their bilingual identity in an environment that celebrates linguistic diversity.

Community Translanguaging for More Amistades

Spanish	English
fue el único recurso social y sentido de comunidad [Luego en Amistades nos preguntaron cómo nos] sentíamos como mujeres latinas aquí en la ciudad y cada una expresó sus sentimientos con tranquilidad y calma. Creo que eso es lo que más me gusta en este grupo, que nos sentimos cómodas en compartir lo que pensamos y [nos] sentimos sin miedo a ser juzgadas o rechazadas. Entre todas las respuestas que escuché es que no es fácil para ninguna de estas mujeres estar aquí en este país y que de alguna manera están haciendo grandes sacrificios por sus familias. Cada una expresó lo mucho que extraña su hogar y las celebraciones... en sus países. Cada una expresó lo difícil que es ser mujer en una época en donde se nos exige ser perfectas, vernos lindas, tener la casa arreglada, estudiar, trabajar, cuidar de los hijos y no desatender al marido. Tenemos tanta carga como mujeres que considero que somos como superheroinas llevando todo este peso todos los días. Me encantó este día, pude ser yo, decir lo que pienso y siento. Mis hijas pasaron un buen rato y yo también salí muy feliz del grupo de Amistades. sí vamos juntas, así nos ayudamos a cuidar a nuestro hijos cuando se porten mal	It was the only social resource and sense of community [Then in Amistades, they asked us how we] felt as Latinas here in the city, and each one expressed her feelings with tranquility and calm. I think that's what I like most about this group: that we feel comfortable sharing what we think, and [we] are not afraid of being judged or rejected. From all the responses, I heard that it's not easy for any of these women to be here in this country and that in some ways they are making great sacrifices for their families. Each one expressed how much they miss their home and the celebrations... in their countries. Each one expressed how difficult it is to be a woman in a time where we are required to be perfect, look pretty, keep the house tidy, study, work, take care of the children, and not neglect our husbands. We carry so much weight as women that I consider ourselves like superheroes carrying all this weight every day. I loved this day; I was able to be myself, say what I think and feel. My daughters had a good time, and I also left the Amistades group very happy. Yes, let's go together, so we can help each other take care of our children when they misbehave.

Community Translanguaging to Position Latina Mothers as the Experts

Spanish	English
Al iniciar este día me encontraba un poco nerviosa, ya que [la co-facilitadora] me había invitado a que dirigiera el grupo de Amistades. Era la primera vez que me sentía profesional otra vez desde que llegué a los Estados Unidos.	Going into this day, I was a little nervous because [the co-facilitator] had invited me to lead the Amistades group. It was the first time I felt professional again since I arrived at the United States.
En este día yo planeé [la reunión de Amistades para] hablar sobre las estrategias de crianza que les funcionan a las mamás. Sin embargo, [ese día] llegó solo una mami con sus hijos. Así que compartí con ella lo que me ha funcionado con mis hijas y ella compartió conmigo lo que le ha funcionado con sus niños. Después de eso hablamos de cosas más personales y de algunos desafíos que hemos tenido en nuestros hogares. Me sentí feliz saber que pude escuchar a otra mamá desahogarse un poco con sus problemas y me di cuenta que ese es uno de los propósitos del grupo Amistades; apoyar a las mamás no importando de qué forma, así solo sea escuchándolas. A pesar de que solo habíamos dos mamás en este día, se cumplió el propósito por el que hemos formado este grupo.	On this day, I planned [the Amistades meeting to] talk about parenting strategies that work for moms. However, [that day] only one mom arrived with her children. So, I shared with her what has worked for me with my daughters, and she shared with me what has worked for her with her children. After that, we talked about more personal things and some challenges we've had in our homes. I felt happy knowing that I was able to listen to another mom vent about her problems, and I realized that this is one of the purposes of the Amistades group: to support moms no matter how, even if it's just by listening to them. Even though there were only two moms there that day, the purpose for which we formed this group was fulfilled.

Community Translanguaging Online

Spanish	English
Uno de los temas principales que hemos abordado [en este grupo] es el proceso de inscripción de los niños en las escuelas públicas. En el grupo, compartimos información detallada sobre los documentos necesarios, como el certificado de vacunas y el acta de nacimiento. También explicamos cómo determinar la escuela que corresponde según la dirección de residencia. Además, [el grupo ha] ayudado a las madres a familiarizarse con la página web del distrito escolar, donde pueden acceder a recursos como la aplicación para almuerzos y desayunos gratuitos y los horarios escolares, que varían dependiendo de la institución. Para las madres que no hablan inglés, [el grupo ha] proporcionado guía sobre cómo utilizar el servicio de intérpretes del distrito escolar, disponible en más de 50 idiomas. Esto ha sido especialmente útil para ayudarles a completar los procesos de inscripción y comunicarse con las escuelas y maestros de sus hijos. En Amistades, hemos trabajado para ayudar a las madres a entender las fechas clave de inscripción y los significados de los colores y símbolos en el calendario académico... Al compartir información sobre el servicio de intérpretes del distrito escolar, hemos logrado que muchas madres se sientan más cómodas y motivadas para participar activamente en las reuniones escolares. Este paso ha sido fundamental para que puedan conocer el progreso y los desafíos de sus hijos, fortaleciendo su papel en el proceso educativo.	One of the main topics we've addressed [in this group] is the process of registering children for public schools. In the group, we share detailed information about the necessary documents, such as immunization records and birth certificates. We also explain how to determine the appropriate school based on their address. Additionally, [the group has] helped mothers familiarize themselves with the school district's website, where they can access resources such as the application for free lunches and breakfasts and school schedules, which vary depending on the building. For mothers who don't speak English, [the group has] provided guidance on how to use the school district's interpreter service, available in more than 50 languages. This has been especially helpful in helping them complete the registration process and communicate with their children's schools and teachers. At Amistades, we've worked to help mothers understand key enrollment dates and the meanings of the colors and symbols on the academic calendar. By sharing information about the school district's interpreter services, we've helped many mothers feel more comfortable and motivated to actively participate in school meetings. This step has been crucial for them to learn about their children's progress and challenges, strengthening their role in the educational process.



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Enacting Translanguaging Pedagogy through Informal Family Research: Preparing Elementary Preservice Teachers for Linguistic Justice with Refugee and Immigrant Children

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Received : 13 March 2025
Revised : 9 November 2025
Accepted : 7 March 2026
DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2026.431

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Abstract

Teacher education needs to prepare preservice teachers (PSTs) to develop linguistic justice and support the multilingual needs of all students. This article describes a qualitative study in which PSTs enacted an informal multilingual family research project to implement translanguaging pedagogy, creating learning experiences where students can validate their identities through learning in their home languages. Translanguaging remains a challenge for PSTs who have been trained in monolingual instructional norms. In this study, PSTs took on the roles of both researchers and teachers in a literacy methods course: observing immigrant families in an informal setting (a children's museum), reflecting on language use in home and community contexts, and designing lesson plans that incorporated translanguaging approaches. The study drew on field notes, reflective essays, and lesson plans to explore two questions: (1) How does engaging in a multilingual family research project shape PSTs' understanding of translanguaging pedagogy and their views of home language and cultural practices as learning assets? (2) How do PSTs apply translanguaging strategies in lesson planning after participating in multilingual family research? Findings showed the study facilitated PSTs to perceive translanguaging as a pedagogical stance and see home languages as legitimate resources for learning. However, some PSTs still struggled to reconceptualize home languages as anything more than a support mechanism in instruction. The study provides evidence that raciolinguistic ideologies must be challenged within teacher education, and that PSTs must be supported to maintain translanguaging practices to advance educational equity for refugee and immigrant children.

Keywords:



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ISSN: 1307-9298

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Introduction

Refugee and immigrant children in elementary school classrooms around the world bring a wealth of multilingual knowledge that is frequently under-

appreciated. Their academic achievement and well-being in school depend on pedagogies that respect and make use of their entire linguistic repertoire. For these students, translanguaging pedagogy offers a transformative, culture- and language-sustaining approach (Paris & Alim, 2017) that honors students' identities while challenging inequitable linguistic hierarchies. Translanguaging refers to the use of two or more languages by an individual speaker and is the active process by which learners access the combined linguistic resources at their disposal to make meaning. According to studies (Capstick & Ateek, 2021; García & Li, 2014), translanguaging reduces language anxiety, boosts students' confidence, and creates opportunities for more active participation in class for all learners. It acts as a corridor to more equitable pedagogical approaches, providing safe spaces for multilingual learners to build their sense of self and belonging. For refugee students especially, who often face trauma and displacement, translanguaging spaces (Li, 2011) can serve as "safe spaces" in classrooms for positive identity development and meaningful engagement. Moreover, translanguaging is inherently multimodal and multi-sensory. As Li (2018) emphasizes, bilingual communication spans not only languages but also gestures, visuals, and other non-verbal modes. Embracing this multimodality contributes to an inclusive environment where all means of meaning-making are valued.

Translanguaging holds great promise, yet it represents a fundamental departure from most teachers' training in monolingual pedagogical norms. Many prospective teachers lack exposure to linguistic diversity and may unknowingly maintain raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017) by unconsciously privileging "standard" English while stigmatizing other languages or dialects as deficient. Such ideologies can lead educators to see multilingualism as a liability rather than an asset, or to use students' home languages only sparingly as a scaffold toward "standard" English. Indeed, prior studies (e.g., Beauchemin et al., 2024; Burton et al., 2024) have found that preservice teachers (PSTs) may agree in theory that students' bilingualism is beneficial, while still enacting English-only, "language separation" practices in the classroom due to deep-seated beliefs and systemic pressures. It is then an urgent challenge for teacher education to prepare new teachers to take full advantage of translanguaging.

One promising means of addressing this challenge is to connect PSTs more directly with the language practices of students' families and communities. Decades of research on funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; González et al., 2005) and culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017) have documented transformative shifts in teacher beliefs when teachers learn from families,

seeing students' home experiences through an asset-based lens rather than a deficit lens (da Silva Iddings, 2016). In recent years, researchers have built on these ideas by exploring how translanguaging practices in home and community settings (Choi, 2022, 2024; Kwon, 2022) can inform classroom teaching. For instance, in our own prior research we found that multilingual families seamlessly integrate languages and modalities in everyday learning activities in informal settings like museums (Choi, 2022). This intermingling of languages across modes provided rich examples of how families use diverse semiotic resources to create learning opportunities for their children. Through observation and analysis of such community contexts, PSTs can begin to see children's home language practices as contextualized, purposeful, and integral to meaning-making rather than peripheral to "academic" learning.

The current study builds on a unique model of literacy teacher preparation that involves PSTs in community-based learning (e.g., Cárdenas Curiel et al., 2024). We used a multiphase informal family research project, the Family Learning Observation and Analysis (FLOA) project, to engage a cohort of nine elementary PSTs in developing their understanding of translanguaging pedagogy. As part of our work, PSTs observed immigrant families during visits to a local children's museum to learn how children use all of their linguistic and cultural repertoires with their families to construct learning experiences beyond school. The PSTs then engaged in guided reflection and discussion, drawing connections from these observations to their instructional planning. In this way, instead of passively receiving knowledge about translanguaging and linguistic justice in a university classroom, the PSTs were actively constructing such knowledge through participation in research on multilingual family literacy.

Our work emphasizes the importance of developing curricula that tie research and teaching together and balance fieldwork in both classrooms and communities in teacher preparation. We explore family learning research as a catalyst for PSTs' conceptual and pedagogical growth, building on literature about community-based teacher education (Moll et al., 1992) by explicitly connecting it to translanguaging. We aim to showcase how a literacy methods curriculum designed with a focus on asset-based pedagogies and research involvement can enable future teachers to enact linguistic justice for refugee and immigrant children in classrooms. We address the following research questions:

1. How does engaging in multilingual family research shape preservice teachers' understanding of translanguaging pedagogy, and their views of home language and cultural practices as learning assets?
2. How do preservice teachers apply translanguaging strategies in lesson

planning after participating in multilingual family research?

To address these questions, we examine how the FLOA project contributed to changes in PSTs' knowledge, beliefs, and instructional decisions. Our findings shed light on the learning processes PSTs undergo when they are encouraged to learn from multilingual families. We argue that this approach helps novice teachers move beyond theoretical recognition of bilingualism toward concrete, justice-oriented pedagogical actions.

Although our project has been implemented iteratively over multiple semesters, this study reports solely on the Fall 2024 implementation (the second iteration). This iteration featured a fully developed version of the FLOA project, incorporating targeted scaffolds (e.g., explicit moment-analysis protocols, structured data discussions, and extended reflection activities) that were added based on lessons from the initial pilot. By narrowing our analysis to this implementation, we provide a deeper examination of PSTs' practice-based engagement with translanguaging pedagogy.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Translanguaging Pedagogy and Linguistic Justice

Translanguaging has been conceptualized as the practice of going beyond and between named languages to maximize learners' participation and meaning-making (García & Li, 2014). Translanguaging pedagogy recognizes and embraces the full range of linguistic resources that bilingual and multilingual students use to communicate and learn. It aligns with a dynamic view of bilingualism (Hornberger, 1989), as opposed to additive models that simply stack a second language on top of the first. By bridging divides between languages, translanguaging inverts the monoglossic language ideology that only the dominant language is worthy of use in the classroom. In doing so, it challenges hierarchies of language practice and necessarily promotes linguistic justice. When teachers encourage students to fluidly use their home languages alongside English, they do more than facilitate comprehension, affirming students' identities and cultures.

Increasingly, research in multilingual education views translanguaging as a pathway to equity. For example, García and Leiva (2014) suggest translanguaging can be transformative by disrupting classroom power relations and giving agency to those marginalized learners. Similarly, Herrera (2023) finds that preservice teachers in California recognized that embracing translanguaging was part of their "continued effort toward transforming education and seeking to eradicate systemic injustices in schools" (p. 610). Thus, translanguaging pedagogy is not only a set of instructional strategies, but also a powerful

commitment to linguistic inclusiveness and the educational rights of minoritized children.

Translanguaging provides critical socio-emotional support for refugee and immigrant students whose schooling histories may be discontinuous and whose home languages are typically under-acknowledged in host-country schools. In classrooms with refugee students, the deliberate creation of translanguaging spaces has been linked to increased psychological safety. Capstick and Ateek (2021) suggest that such spaces as protective factors for esteem and identity enable refugee learners to engage with their linguistic heritage and participate meaningfully. Capstick (2019) further emphasizes that translanguaging spaces are important not only for language learning, but also for psychosocial well-being, resilience, and even trauma healing.

Beyond classrooms, translanguaging in community-based workshops can disrupt the dominance of mainstream languages. For instance, Helm and Dabré (2018) show that dialogic "contact zones" that welcome multiple languages can reposition refugees and migrants as competent speakers rather than "non-speakers," promoting conditions of equitable participation. Together, these investigations point to the need for educational policies and practices that move beyond monolingualism and actively develop translanguaging spaces in which the well-being and inclusion of displaced learners can be sustained.

Home Language, Family Literacy, and Educational Outcomes

A growing body of research highlights the value of students' home languages and cultural knowledge in supporting their academic development and identity. Studies have shown that families do not provide "deficient" linguistic input but rather offer funds of knowledge or rich resources that can boost school learning (Moll et al., 1992). For example, Machado-Casas (2012) explores Indigenous Latinx immigrant children and family members fluidly shifted between languages and communication modes as everyday practices in homes and communities. These activities supported bilingual development by aiding comprehension in one language while building vocabulary in the other. Families were not simply using all languages available in informal learning sites like homes or museums. They were co-constructing understanding using flexible repertoires of speech, gesture, and print. Choi (2022) finds that a sojourning Korean multilingual child and his mother translanguaged to jointly solve problems and explain concepts. Such findings reinforce that children learn best when invited to access their existing knowledge and discuss new ideas in the language(s) they know best. When students use their home language as part of learning, they can achieve deeper understanding

of content and form cognitive connections that might not emerge if everything is kept in English.

Research has also found that including families and their cultural practices in instruction can boost migrant students' academic motivation and sense of identity. When teachers recognize cultural practices like storytelling, oral history, or community traditions as part of classroom literacy activities, students often show greater engagement and confidence. de Araujo et al. (2018) show that when teachers allow and encourage the use of students' first languages and incorporate their cultural backgrounds in mathematics classrooms, students are better able to make sense of academic content and develop positive self-concepts. The study underscores that leveraging these linguistic and cultural resources is vital for connecting school learning with students' lived experiences and supporting their holistic development, particularly for those from immigrant and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Translanguaging in Teacher Education

We position translanguaging pedagogy within the larger lens of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), which argues that educators must not only value but actively maintain students' cultural and linguistic practices in school. For children from linguistically diverse homes, this means their home languages should be nurtured and sustained, not treated merely as temporary scaffolds on the way to English. We use the term linguistic justice to describe the moral obligation to respect all languages and provide opportunities to learn through them. This perspective is consistent with a raciolinguistic framework (Flores & Rosa, 2015), which warns that even well-intentioned "additive bilingual" models can inadvertently reinforce racialized hierarchies. From a raciolinguistic viewpoint, simply allowing occasional home language use is not enough if underlying biases about language superiority remain unchallenged. Therefore, our theoretical lens merges translanguaging with a critical stance that teachers must actively work to decolonize language practices in the classroom, interrogating and undoing the notion that academic knowledge can only be constructed through "standard" English. We aimed to cultivate in PSTs what Baker-Bell (2020) calls a stance of linguistic justice. She argues that teachers should be aware of their role in reversing linguistic oppression and creating educational spaces where multilingualism is the norm and a source of pride.

In practice, this framework influenced the design of the PSTs' learning experiences in our study. We deliberately structured the FLOA project around the idea that PSTs need to see translanguaging in action in real contexts in order to grasp its instructional significance. Through observing families in an informal environment, PSTs

ventured into a translanguaging space beyond the school walls, witnessing how meaning-making occurs fluidly across languages and modes. We anchored reflective discussions in the concept of funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005), operating on the understanding that families hold rich knowledge and cultural resources that should inform teaching.

The literature points to several key levers for new teachers to cultivate a translanguaging stance (García et al., 2017): (a) engaging in critical reflection to disrupt monolingual biases and deficit perspectives about linguistic diversity; (b) gaining direct exposure to the assets of students' home languages and cultures through community engagement; and (c) having opportunities to plan and implement translanguaging strategies, ideally with guidance or mentorship. Our research extends this work by involving PSTs in an informal family research project that brings together all three aspects. This approach aligns with recent calls in the field. García et al. (2021) have urged teacher education to center community and family ways of knowing as part of a translanguaging "manifesto" for equity, and Seltzer (2022) argues that preservice teachers need explicit support to adopt a translanguaging stance in their teaching practice.

Thus, the theoretical orientation underlying our study intertwines translanguaging, critical sociocultural views of language (addressing power and identity), and asset-based pedagogy (recognizing community knowledge). This integrative lens guided our approach to analyzing PSTs' learning. We specifically looked for evidence that PSTs were developing a translanguaging pedagogical stance, that they were becoming critically aware of linguistic power dynamics, and that they were recognizing students' home language practices as valuable assets for learning. Our theoretical and methodological orientation reflects our goal of not only observing PST change but also actively engineering experiences that facilitate such change through a design-based research approach in teacher education.

Methodology

Research Design and Context

This study employed a design-based research approach within a practice-oriented teacher education setting. The research took place in an Elementary Literacy Methods course and its co-requisite Practicum course at a public university in the southeastern United States. As teacher educators, we (the authors) redesigned the course curricula to help PSTs develop competence in implementing translanguaging pedagogy through direct research involvement in multilingual families' literacy experiences. The course was (re)designed by the first author (also the instructor) to integrate a multilingual

Family Learning Observation and Analysis (FLOA) project as a core component. This project served both as a rich learning experience for PSTs and as a data source for our study on their development.

All nine PSTs in the Fall 2024 cohort (all in their junior year of a B.Ed. program) participated in the FLOA project as part of required coursework. For the purposes of research, we obtained informed consent from four of the PSTs to analyze their coursework artifacts and to conduct individual interviews. These four focal PSTs (all females; pseudonyms Lily, Ava, Ellie, and Sophia) who self-identified as monolingual White American. The full cohort was seven White and two Black PSTs, and all self-identified as monolingual English speakers. Pseudonyms are used for all preservice teacher participants when reporting findings.

To ensure conceptual anchoring to our research focus and to examine the FLOA model when fully operationalized, we purposefully narrowed our data collection and analysis to the Fall 2024 cohort. By Fall 2024, the FLOA project included enriched supports (compared to a prior pilot run) such as a more structured “moment analysis” protocol, stronger discussion prompts, and extended peer-to-peer debriefings. These features provided a coherent dataset that allowed us to trace PST learning across phases, from initial family observation to lesson design, in an integrated, practice-based manner. The PST cohort reflected the broader demographics of the teacher education program at this university (a predominantly English-monolingual program). Few participants had extensive prior experience with immigrant or refugee communities, and most had limited coursework related to teaching English learners. This context set the stage for the transformative learning we hoped to foster.

FLOA Project Implementation

The FLOA project was implemented twice during the 16-week semester (once in October, once in November) and consisted of three main phases each time: Observation, Analysis, and Report. In the Observation phase, teams of three PSTs observed an immigrant or refugee family during an informal learning experience at the children’s museum (a community partner). The families were recruited through “Family Day” museum tour events co-organized by the museum and the instructors. Each participating family was asked to spend time at a designated exhibit while PSTs observed. Three families (one per PST team) participated, each with at least one young child (ages approximately 4–8). For example, one family spoke primarily Mandarin Chinese at home, and another spoke primarily Spanish. All family participants gave informed consent to be observed and video-recorded during their museum visit. The PSTs did not direct the families’ activities but simply accompanied

(at a respectful distance) and recorded the families’ naturally occurring interactions in the museum setting.

During observations, PSTs were required to videotape segments of the family’s interaction (with permission) and to take detailed ethnographic fieldnotes (Frank, 1999) on the family’s language and literacy practices. They noted, for example, when parents or children used the home language or English or both, how family members labeled objects or narrated activities, how they supported the child’s understanding (e.g., through explanations or questions), and any cultural practices or references embedded in the activity. PSTs were instructed to pay particular attention to translanguaging moments, broadly defined as instances of fluid language mixing or switching and the use of multiple semiotic modes (gestures, images, etc.) to facilitate learning or interaction. To prepare PSTs for these observations, the first author provided a workshop beforehand on researching multilingual families in informal environments and on using recording devices ethically and effectively. We also discussed possible behaviors to look for (e.g., a parent translating exhibit text aloud for a child, a child using a home language to explain something to a sibling, or family members using gestures and bilingual labels while problem-solving). PSTs were encouraged to keep “open jottings” of anything surprising or insightful they noticed.

In the Analysis phase, each PST independently selected one significant 4–5 minute video-recorded literacy event from their observation and examined it closely. Drawing on course concepts, PSTs analyzed the moment in terms of the family’s language practices, resource use (signage, gestures, artifacts, etc.), and the roles family members played as knowers or learners. They looked for patterns of communication such as code-switching between languages, use of tactile or gestural strategies, and collaborative explanations or problem-solving, and they considered how these practices shaped the child’s meaning-making and literacy development. PSTs supported their analyses with evidence from their fieldnotes, video clips, and transcriptions of dialogue. This “micro-analysis” exercise functioned as a mediating step between observation and broader reflection, helping PSTs make sense of how certain interactions unfolded and why they were educationally significant. It pushed them to articulate what they saw happening (e.g., “the father repeated the instructions in Arabic, then gestured to demonstrate”) and why it mattered (e.g., “this helped the child overcome confusion and engage with the activity, showing literacy was being co-constructed multimodally”). This analytic phase thus guided PSTs to recognize that ordinary family interactions are rich sites of complex literacy practices.

The Report phase required PSTs to synthesize their observations and analyses in a written reflection (approximately 2 pages, single-spaced) addressing guiding questions such as: What did you learn about the family's language use and cultural practices? How did family interaction support learning? What implications does this have for literacy teaching? PSTs were prompted to connect their reports to course readings on translanguaging, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and funds of knowledge. In between the two iterations of FLOA, a debriefing seminar (led by the first author) provided students an opportunity to share and discuss their key findings with peers. The class engaged in a collaborative "data session," collectively watching and analyzing selected video segments from different teams to deepen their insights and to surface cross-cutting themes across the family experiences. All PSTs completed this sequence of Observation → Analysis → Report twice (with either the same family or a different one, due to some overlap in volunteers).

Finally, after completing the FLOA project, PSTs were tasked with developing an original translanguaging-infused lesson plan for their practicum classrooms (Grades 1–5). They were explicitly instructed to draw on what they learned from the family research when designing this lesson. The assignment prompt asked them to design a literacy lesson (e.g., a reading or writing activity) that intentionally incorporated students' home languages and/or cultural knowledge. They had to justify their design by referencing specific examples from their family observations. For instance, if a PST noticed a parent using both Spanish and English to scaffold a science concept at the museum, the PST might plan a science-themed read-aloud in class with key vocabulary taught in both Spanish and English. The lesson plans needed to include standard components (objectives, materials, procedures, assessment) as well as a rationale explicitly highlighting the translanguaging strategies or culturally relevant methods used (such as bilingual partner reading, multilingual vocabulary charts, inviting family members as guest readers, etc.).

Due to the rigid and prescriptive nature of the curriculum provided during their practicum placements, most PSTs were unable to implement their designed lesson plans in the actual field classrooms. Instead, they presented their lesson plans to our methods class, explaining how they would adapt and apply asset-based pedagogies in practice for their future classrooms if given the opportunity. These peer presentations became a space for collective reflection and discussion, allowing PSTs to consider ways to navigate constraints while still honoring students' linguistic and cultural resources. Notably, the lesson plan assignment was iterative. Each PST first shared a draft lesson idea informally with peers (and received oral feedback from the instructor and classmates), then refined and submitted a final

written lesson plan and rationale. The rubric for the lesson plan had been modified to explicitly require that PSTs demonstrate how their plan supports equity, inclusiveness, and asset-based approaches. In this way, the assignment simulated a design cycle (draft → feedback → revision), encouraging PSTs to integrate the asset-based elements thoughtfully rather than treating them as an afterthought.

The overall multi-phase design of our intervention (from community observation to lesson planning) was deliberately crafted to connect research and practice for PSTs. It allowed us as researchers to examine PSTs' growth across different forms of evidence. Fieldnotes, analyses, and reports revealed changes in their understanding, while lesson plans and class discussions revealed changes in their envisioned teaching practice. By focusing on a single semester where the FLOA model was fully realized, we had a coherent snapshot to analyze how PSTs' knowledge, beliefs, and instructional planning evolved.

Data Sources and Collection

We gathered multiple qualitative data sources from the PSTs' work, aligned to the phases of the project:

- **Observational Fieldnotes:** Each PST submitted detailed fieldnotes (2–4 single-spaced pages) documenting what they observed during the family museum visit, along with personal reflections on those observations. These field notes provided a firsthand account of what each PST found salient in the family's translanguaging and literacy practices. They captured initial impressions and wonderings (e.g., noticing a parent translating for a child, or a parent using a cultural reference to explain something). These notes served as an entry point into PSTs' awareness and were later coded for evidence of what caught PSTs' attention (e.g., instances of translanguaging, family interaction patterns).
- **Moment Analysis:** After selecting a key moment from their video, each PST produced a written analysis (~1 page) of that literacy event, using concepts from the course (translanguaging, funds of knowledge, etc.) to interpret it. These analysis documents acted as a bridge between raw observation and broader reflection. They were rich, interpretive narratives that combined description and analysis, often including direct transcriptions or detailed descriptions of interactions. They allowed us to see in PSTs' own words how they were making sense of specific interactions (e.g., a PST noting how a father's use of both languages and a physical demonstration helped the child solve a puzzle). The moment analyses were particularly valuable for answering RQ1, as they showed PSTs beginning to articulate the pedagogical value of what they observed (e.g., recognizing "gesture and home language together scaffolded understanding here").

- **Reflection Reports:** Each PST wrote a synthesis report (about 1–2 single-spaced pages) after each observation cycle, answering the guiding questions about what they learned and implications for teaching. These reflective essays were narrative and often deeply personal. PSTs frequently connected what they saw to their prior assumptions and future aspirations. The reports essentially provided a window into PSTs' evolving conceptual knowledge regarding RQ1 (translanguaging stance and understanding of home language practices) in a more holistic form. For analysis, we treated the reflection reports as key data for PSTs' overall shifts in beliefs and perspectives, since they typically summarized each PST's takeaways from the entire experience in narrative form (often including statements like "I used to think..., now I realize..."). In terms of our research questions, these reports directly informed how we answered RQ1, since they explicitly addressed what PSTs learned about translanguaging pedagogy and home language/culture.
- **Lesson Plans and Rationales:** Finally, each PST's lesson plan and accompanying rationale paragraph constituted a critical data source for RQ2. The lesson plans (2–3 double-spaced pages plus a rationale) provided concrete evidence of how PSTs attempted to apply translanguaging strategies in designing instruction. Because PSTs were largely unable to carry out these lessons in their actual field placements (due to mandated curricula), these plans represent their intended practice as a sort of proxy for implementation. We asked PSTs to be explicit in their rationales about how family observations influenced their lesson design. For example, a PST might write, "Seeing the family mix Spanish and English during play made me realize I can allow students to use Spanglish during class discussions. So, in my lesson plan I included a bilingual 'turn-and-talk' segment." The lesson plan documents, therefore, show both the imaginative leaps PSTs made (projecting what they would do in a more flexible environment) and the constraints they anticipated (many PSTs noted in their rationales that they chose modifications that could fit within a typical class). During analysis, we viewed the lesson plans as the primary data for RQ2 as evidence of how PSTs translated their new understandings into pedagogical designs. Even though these were hypothetical implementations, their content (and the reflective statements within them) revealed a great deal about PSTs' developing pedagogical agency and any remaining tensions.

In addition to these coursework artifacts, we also collected post-course interview data for validation and follow-up. Specifically, a few months after the semester (when the PSTs had entered a 6-credit, part-time school placement "residency I" in spring), we conducted brief written interviews (via email) with three of the four focal PSTs. We asked them to reflect on whether and how they had been able to use anything from the FLOA project in their student-teaching so far. This served as a form of member-checking and

longitudinal insight, allowing us to see if their espoused changes persisted and to verify our interpretations of their growth. These follow-up responses are incorporated in our discussion (they were not part of the initial coding dataset for findings but rather used to triangulate and enrich our understanding of sustained impact). All data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board, and we adhered to ethical guidelines (informed consent, the right to withdraw, confidentiality of records, etc.) throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Our analysis examined how PSTs made sense of and utilized insights from the FLOA project, with the theoretical framing of translanguaging and asset-based pedagogy guiding our lens. We used a qualitative thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify changes and patterns in PSTs' understanding, beliefs, and instructional planning.

The dataset for analysis consisted of the various artifacts described: observation field notes, moment analysis write-ups, reflection reports, and lesson plan rationales (from all four focal PSTs, across the two FLOA cycles). A central aspect of our FLOA project was that PSTs had to select and investigate a particular literacy moment in detail. These 4–5 minute video clips and their analysis became key evidence of what PSTs noticed and valued in family interactions. Using guiding prompts, PSTs considered each moment in terms of linguistic, cultural, and embodied resources and what learning dynamics were occurring. These prompts aligned with our theoretical focus, ensuring that PSTs (and we as analysts) paid attention to translanguaging in practice, social interaction patterns, and asset-based elements.

We engaged in a two-phase coding process, combining deductive and inductive coding. First, we developed a preliminary codebook deductively based on our research questions and conceptual framework. Broad code categories included: (1) Translanguaging awareness (e.g., PST notes or reflections indicating recognition of bilingual practices or shifting language use), (2) Literacy as social/embodied practice (e.g., PST noticing or valuing collaborative, multimodal aspects of literacy events), (3) Asset-based recognition (e.g., PST explicitly reframing a family behavior as a strength or resource, or acknowledging family knowledge), and (4) Pedagogical application (e.g., PST discussing how they would or did incorporate these insights into teaching plans, or noting constraints). Under these broad categories, we then derived more specific sub-codes inductively from the data, essentially as themes emerged from PSTs' own language and ideas.

Two researchers (the authors) coded the data. To enhance reliability and reduce instructor bias, the

second author (who was not the course instructor) independently coded a subset of data first. This subset included samples of each type of artifact from at least two participants. We then compared coding and discussed any discrepancies to refine the code definitions. After reaching consensus on the codebook, we coded the entire dataset. We performed regular cross-checks and memo-writing to ensure consistency and to capture emerging patterns. During this process, we wrote analytic memos addressing each research question, which enabled us to trace each PST's learning trajectory through the FLOA phases (Observation → Analysis → Reflection → (imagined) Application).

Throughout analysis, we remained cognizant of our positionality as both researchers and (in one case) the course instructor. To limit potential bias in interpretation, the initial coding phase (and much of the memo drafting) was conducted by the second author, who did not have a direct role in teaching the PSTs. The first author then reviewed and contributed, allowing us to incorporate insider knowledge of the course while still challenging interpretations. We engaged in reflexive dialogue about how our identities (e.g., both authors are Asian immigrants and bilingual education researchers) might shape what we see as significant, and we made a conscious effort to let participants' own words drive the theme development.

We organized our final thematic findings around the two refined research questions. As described above, we extracted representative excerpts from PSTs' written work to illustrate their emerging understandings (RQ1) and envisioned pedagogical applications (RQ2).

Findings

Overall, engaging in the informal family research project led PSTs to undergo two major shifts. First, they significantly reframed their understanding of translanguaging pedagogy, moving from viewing home language use as peripheral to recognizing it as a purposeful, holistic pedagogical approach, and they came to appreciate students' home language and cultural practices as vital assets for learning (addressing RQ1). Second, they attempted to carry these insights into practice by designing instruction that integrated students' linguistic and cultural resources, though they encountered systemic constraints that limited direct implementation (addressing RQ2). We include illustrative quotes from PSTs (pseudonyms Lily, Ava, Ellie, Sophia) to amplify their voices in the narrative.

Shaping a Translanguaging Stance and Valuing Home Language & Cultural Practices

Developing a translanguaging stance: Prior to the FLOA project, PSTs had a somewhat limited or abstract notion of translanguaging, often seeing it as something

remedial (to be used only until English "takes over") or equating it with simple code-switching. Through the FLOA, PSTs' conceptualization of translanguaging became far deeper and more practice-oriented. PSTs expressed that actually seeing a multilingual family using two languages fluidly during everyday interactions fundamentally changed their perspective on what bilingual learning looks like. As Lily wrote after her observation,

"He [the child, 'James'] commonly switches between speaking English and Chinese, and changes the language based on who he is talking to. When talking to himself, he tends to speak in English, but when talking to his dad, he usually speaks in Chinese. For him, literacy is a combination of both languages." (FLOA Reflection).

By witnessing this natural interweaving of languages in context, PSTs began to view translanguaging not as a hindrance or crutch, but as a normal mode of communication that could be leveraged in teaching. Lily's surprise that James used both languages so flexibly and her conclusion that his literacy spans languages signaled a pivotal realization that bilingual children do not compartmentalize languages the way schools often force them to.

All PSTs wrote about having one or more "aha" moments during the observations where they noticed translanguaging supporting learning or communication in a breakthrough way. For example, Ava reflected on her selected video moment, saying: "the moment I chose has informed my understanding of how dynamic and multifaceted literacy really is. Many people think that literacy solely involves reading and writing, but it is so much more. It includes speaking and listening, as well." (FLOA Analysis). Ava's realization indicates a shift from a narrow, print-centric concept of literacy to one that encompasses oral language and auditory understanding.

Other participants echoed these realizations, increasingly articulating translanguaging pedagogy as purposeful dual-language support rather than a fallback for English deficiencies. Instead of seeing instances of home language use as students "falling back" or "lacking English," PSTs began to reframe such instances as teachers intentionally using the home language to facilitate academic growth in both the home language and English. As Ava explained in her lesson plan rationale, "Students' knowledge of another language should be seen as an ability and called upon as a way to support students as they develop and express their understanding in a new language." This reframing illustrates how PSTs began to view home language use not as a hindrance, but as a means to enhance content learning and reinforce understanding.

The FLOA project not only helped PSTs understand the theory behind translanguaging, but also expanded their awareness of concrete instructional strategies available to them. By watching multilingual family interactions, PSTs saw children making meaning across different modes (verbal, gestural, and tactile) and many started enumerating practical ideas they wanted to try. For example, Ava noted:

"Before observing bilingual/multilingual families, I did not realize how many forms of communication these families utilize. I am now able to see that gesturing and tactile communication serve as main ways of getting thoughts and messages across, especially for those that are learning a new language, like the child I observed." (FLOA Report).

This insight moved her (and others) from a vague consciousness of "multiple modalities" to specific pedagogical content: PSTs identified strategies like using gestures or physical demonstration alongside speech, creating vocabulary journals with side-by-side entries in English and the home language, or doing read-alouds in English while encouraging follow-up discussions in students' preferred languages. Ava, for instance, suggested in her lesson plan that students be provided with bilingual dictionaries, vocabulary lists, and opportunities to write in their home language. She formed this idea after observing a parent at the museum label objects in both languages for their child. This example shows how directly the PSTs were drawing teaching ideas from what they saw families do.

A second significant transformation was PSTs' understanding of translanguaging as a natural and holistic communicative approach, rather than an unusual or piecemeal tactic. Through documenting how multilingual families learn in informal contexts, PSTs found that children do not rigidly separate language use like they might be required to in school. Instead, the children and parents drew on a complete array of semiotic resources (e.g., spoken words, gestures, printed text, even body movement) to interact and make meaning. Ava illustrated this holistic view with an example from her video analysis:

"Because the child was so young, communicating with just words did not suffice in this instance. The dad needed to physically show his son how to solve the problem he was facing. It not only worked in that moment, but it also aided him later on." (FLOA Analysis).

In this scenario, a father used a combination of demonstration (non-verbal) and bilingual labels to help his child connect two Velcro blocks. The PST initially might have interpreted the child as "silent" or "not understanding," but later recognized the child as learning through observation and imitation. Instead of viewing the child's silence as a sign of confusion or lack of understanding, Ava came to understand that the child was actively learning by watching and

doing, expanding her definition of what counts as communication and literacy learning.

Not every PST, of course, demonstrated a fully formed understanding of translanguaging pedagogy across the assignments; some still grappled with deeply ingrained notions about language use in literacy instruction. Two PSTs in our sample continued to describe translanguaging primarily as a scaffold, implying they saw it as a temporary support to "flesh out" or supplement English instruction. Even these individuals, however, acknowledged that the FLOA project had pushed their thinking significantly. For instance, Sophia admitted in her report that she still thought she needed to build more confidence in how to assess learning in two languages, but she wrote: "(All) students should be encouraged to make use of their home languages when at school. They must know that their unique backgrounds hold value, and that one culture is not better than another." (Lesson Plan). This statement exemplifies the movement toward an asset-based lens, even if some PSTs were cautious in how to implement it. It suggests a willingness for continual development and a shift in ideology. By the end of the project, all four focal PSTs explicitly expressed a commitment to honoring students' linguistic backgrounds in their future teaching. They saw translanguaging as a multifaceted pedagogy: natural for communication, supportive for understanding, and essential to honoring students' identities.

Recognizing home language and cultural practices as learning assets: Beyond shifting their abstract understanding of translanguaging, PSTs' reflections revealed a parallel transformation in how they viewed students' home languages and cultural practices in the context of learning. Initially, some PSTs had implicitly regarded families' language use and cultural habits as something separate from (or even inhibiting to) "real" academic learning. After engaging with the families, however, they began to see home linguistic and cultural practices as foundational resources for children's development. The FLOA project gave PSTs a deep appreciation of how home language and culture influence children's informal learning and, importantly, how these can be leveraged in formal education. Their reflections converged on the idea that a student's home language is not a barrier to learning at all, but rather essential to their cognitive and emotional development.

PSTs observed numerous instances of parents and caregivers using the home language, along with gestures and modeling, to enhance children's understanding. For example, Lily reflected, "Watching Jenni and her father navigate both Chinese and English shows literacy as flexible. The father's actions—reading signs, examining the fruit, and then

translating based on context—demonstrate literacy as a process of interpretation and understanding.” (FLOA Reflection). Her observation highlights the child’s adaptable language skills and social awareness, showing that multilingualism should be seen as an asset, not a challenge.

Ellie, another PST, noted that literacy is collaborative and relational after watching the family interact. She highlighted how literacy “emerged through shared experiences” and was continually shaped by collaborative interactions among family members. Ellie wrote: “It was something made and resourced in common between James and his family, and was adapted to suit their modes of play and context. It tells me that literacy is cognitive, but it is social and emotional.” (FLOA Report). Her insight widened the understood parameters of literacy to include embodied, relational, and plurilingual sense-making. This was a significant broadening of perspective – from thinking of literacy as an individual skill (reading/writing in English) to seeing it as a family-mediated, culturally embedded practice that involves feelings and relationships.

Many PSTs reflected on how the family research project directly challenged their previously held beliefs about multilingual families. For example, before the project some equated “good parent support” with things like assisting children with English homework or showing up to school events. After observing families in the informal learning space, they realized that such a narrow definition was missing a lot. The project revealed to them how much effort and intentionality parents invest in their children’s learning outside of school, and how resourceful these families are, even when English is not their first language. As Ellie explained,

“This family is constantly practicing literacy, even if it does not look like school literacy. The mother explained things to her child in Chinese, and he repeated back to her in English. They were telling stories and making sense of things together, which is literacy, just not how school defines it.” (FLOA Reflection).

This reflection shows a breakdown of that deficit assumption and a newfound respect for families’ contributions.

A particularly enlightening moment for Ellie was when she saw just how complex a child’s bilingualism can be. She described an observed interaction that helped her see this complexity: “This interaction reflects James’ bilingualism and the way he may use Chinese for direct conversation but may use English for self-expression. Both languages have a distinct time of when they are used for James.” (FLOA Analysis). By noting how James switched languages depending on context and audience (Chinese with his dad, English when talking to himself), Ellie recognized the fluidity

and subtlety of bilingual literacy practices. She saw that multilingual children navigate their languages in sophisticated ways, and that this is a strength. This is evidence of a high level of communicative competence and adaptability.

Other PSTs realized that their initial understanding of “literacy” had been too narrow and too centered on school-based, English-only notions. As Ava pointed out in her reflection, literacy involves speaking and listening too – and we would add, in any language. Observing families communicate across languages and through various channels (oral storytelling, conversation, oral explanations) made it clear that literacy in multilingual homes typically encompasses much more than just reading and writing print text. In another reflection, Ellie elaborated on how the project challenged her understanding of what literacy could be in the lives of multilingual families:

“Through my FLOA analysis, field notes, and in-class data session I gained a new experience in what literacy means in terms of multilingual families. I observed how literacy can be in terms of communication, body language, and even emotional expression.” (FLOA Report).

As a whole, these reflections framed a significant pedagogical shift. Instead of thinking of home language and cultural practices as something other than school learning, PSTs began to see them as the very foundation of school learning. The experience encouraged them to develop an asset-based perspective on bilingualism, viewing parent involvement as extending beyond support for English-language learning. This means recognizing families’ languages and cultures as essential to student learning.

Through their observations, PSTs started questioning their assumptions about the way multilingual and culturally diverse families learn. Many also wrote that learning did not always take the predictable question-and-answer form that often characterizes classrooms. Instead, children often learned by observing, imitating, and participating in shared activities with adults and siblings. For example, Ava described a situation in which a child had trouble connecting two Velcro blocks. Instead of verbally providing instructions, the child’s father covered the child’s hand with his own to assist him. Instead of interpreting the child’s silence as confusion or a lack of understanding, Ava recognized that the child was learning by closely observing, imitating, and sensing what was happening. This experience broadened her understanding of literacy and learning.

Overall, PSTs learned in a holistic way that home languages and cultural practices are helpful and represent important resources in the learning of multilingual children. They found evidence that

using the language spoken at home can enhance understanding; that embedding cultural references can contextualize and even “decolonize” learning; and that families make an enormous impact on children’s education. These insights address RQ1, showing how PSTs came to value and seek ways to leverage home language and culture in their future classrooms. They now see students’ linguistic backgrounds as layers of knowledge to build upon rather than hurdles to overcome. All four focal PSTs ended the course voicing intentions to continue involving families and using students’ home languages in some form during student teaching or beyond. This is a clear testament to the shift in their stance from the beginning of the semester.

Translating Insights into Practice: Designing Multilingual and Culturally Relevant Lessons

Despite their conceptual growth and eagerness to embrace translanguaging, PSTs found it challenging to apply what they learned in their actual field placements, which were governed by strict curricula and policies. Many PSTs were confronted with rigid English-only curricula, strict pacing guides, or mentor teachers who expected adherence to scripted lessons. As one PST wrote in a course discussion, “We were told to use the scripted materials as they are. There wasn’t room to experiment.” These structures left little room for the kinds of innovative, responsive design that PSTs were imagining. Recognizing this, the mentor text lesson plan assignment was intentionally framed as an “alternative space,” a chance for PSTs to reflect on their FLOA experiences and envision how they would enact culturally sustaining literacy instruction if the usual confines were lifted. Instead of treating lesson planning as a technical exercise, the assignment became a venue for articulating emerging ideological shifts and exploring more responsive classroom possibilities on paper.

Although PSTs did not implement their FLOA-inspired lessons in the actual field at the time (for the reasons noted), they did integrate their understanding of translanguaging and sociocultural aspects of literacy into these lesson designs. The lesson plans blended course themes with creative strategies. For example, Ava, who had seen how tactile communication between a father and child supported problem-solving at the museum, focused her lesson plan on multimodality and student choice. She designed a writing unit in which students could compose biographical narratives either by writing, recording audio, or drawing, and she explicitly allowed bilingual options. In her rationale, she wrote: “Bilingual/multilingual students will be allowed to write in their home language if it is deemed necessary. If unable to write, students will be given the option to either record or draw their biographical narratives.” (Lesson Plan). This lesson plan signals a shift in her thinking

from earlier in the semester. She went from a view of literacy as print-bound to a view of literacy as embodied and multimodal, a sensibility directly molded by her FLOA realizations. As she noted in discussion, she might not have thought to allow drawing as a form of “writing” if she hadn’t seen how the child at the museum communicated through action and gesture. Ava’s approach in the lesson pushes back against monolingual norms typically taken for granted in elementary literacy instruction. She deliberately created space for home language use and alternative expression modes in a writing assignment, which counters the usual “English essay only” expectation.

Ellie, for her lesson, chose a culturally relevant literature approach. She selected *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi (a picture book about a Korean girl’s name and identity) as a mentor text and invited students to reflect on the cultural significance of their own names and family naming traditions. In her rationale, Ellie emphasized the importance of storytelling and community building in literacy learning, noting: “Sharing their stories helps students connect with peers and celebrate the diverse communities they belong to.” (Lesson Plan). Her instructional objectives even asked students to “structure narrative writing that draws on the cultural meanings of their names.” This pedagogical stance echoed the ideological shift visible in her FLOA reflection (where she observed that literacy is social and emotional). She concluded the rationale by directly linking it to what she saw with the family: “This shows me that literacy is cognitive, but also social and emotional,” she wrote, effectively paraphrasing her earlier insight and embedding it as a design principle. In other words, her lesson aimed to reproduce the kind of familial, culture-rich storytelling context she saw James experiencing with his family, but in a classroom setting.

To make this lesson concrete, Ellie incorporated what she understood about multilingual meaning-making from her observation. She had noted in her FLOA assignments how a young child learned fruit names in English through an interaction of language and touch (pointing, handling fruit). Inspired by this, her lesson had students engage with artifacts related to their names (like bringing an object or heirloom that represents their name story), thus engaging sensory and personal connections. In her reflection she wrote: “An object being seen as an entity of more than one language or culture helps show that literacy is dynamic and multifaceted.” (FLOA Report). Her lesson plan disrupted narrow understandings of text and language by charting a relational, material, and cultural framework for literacy development. The students would write about their names by interacting with real objects and telling oral stories, bridging written and oral, personal and academic.

Collectively, the lesson plans demonstrated that PSTs were beginning to imagine possibilities that extended beyond the expectations of their practicum placements. They were, in essence, creating what García and Kleyn (2016) might call “counter-hegemonic translanguaging spaces” within their lesson designs, creating spaces in which students’ full linguistic and cultural repertoires would be not only allowed but celebrated. Our PSTs had to keep their FLOA-inspired work separate from their actual teaching experiences, indicating that the raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015) we discussed theoretically are actively maintained and reproduced by institutional and curricular structures. These structures embed normative English as the default mode of “acceptable” instruction and frame all other forms of communication as supplementary or deficient. PSTs could clearly see this once they had one foot in each world: the university world encouraging translanguaging innovation, and the school world often insisting on monolingual conformity.

As such, the mentor text lesson plans became more than just pedagogical exercises on paper. They turned into ideological artifacts, capturing insights into PSTs’ changing identities as teachers and their commitments to linguistic justice. They also laid bare the tensions PSTs must navigate between what they are learning to value (multilingual, family-connected practices) and what they are currently allowed to do in rigid school environments. These tensions highlight a need for PSTs (and teacher educators) to be prepared to not only know how to write asset-based lessons, but also to understand, name, and ultimately work to subvert the structures in the field that narrow their pedagogical agency.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the transformative potential of integrating informal family learning research into teacher education to develop PSTs’ translanguaging pedagogy and critical multilingual awareness. Grounded in asset-based approaches, including translanguaging (García, 2009) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), our study shows that engaging PSTs with multilingual families and communities can cultivate epistemological shifts, pedagogical innovation, and a critical awareness of raciolinguistic ideologies in teaching.

Translanguaging pedagogy as a lived practice: Our findings demonstrate that PSTs shifted their perception of translanguaging from a theoretical concept to a pedagogical stance they personally value. This aligns with Galante and Dela Cruz’s (2024) account of critical plurilingualism, which emphasizes that effective teacher preparation must go beyond abstract lectures to include real opportunities for meaning-making in multiple languages. In our study, PSTs were

not just learning about translanguaging; they were learning translanguaging by witnessing multilingual families engaging in fluid, multimodal communication in authentic contexts. These lived encounters sparked PSTs’ imaginations of what language use might look like in their future classrooms. As Ojha et al. (2024) highlight, linking language to identity and power in teacher education makes it possible for PSTs to critically understand how embracing confrontational multilingual practices can challenge dominant linguistic hierarchies and promote student voice. We saw this happen in our project: through observing families, PSTs began to confront their own biases (seeing that “English-only” is not inherently superior for learning) and to envision classroom language use that includes translanguaging as a norm.

Engaging in the FLOA project was crucial in developing what Mahalingappa (2024) describes as PSTs’ “linguistic critical consciousness.” By attending to the way families talk and interact across languages, PSTs began to challenge school-centric framings of literacy. They recognized storytelling, gesturing, and translanguaging as legitimate and powerful ways of constructing meaning, often undervalued in formal schooling. This awakening accords with Stillman and Palmer’s (2024) call for teacher preparation to work toward transformation by developing candidates’ capacity to view language as a social and political practice rather than simply as content to be managed. Our PSTs started to see language use in the classroom as something inherently tied to social relationships and power dynamics (e.g., who gets to use their home language, whose knowledge is validated).

From awareness to action: cultivating projective agency: In addition to raising critical awareness, our findings indicate that PSTs started to practice what Banegas et al. (2024) frame as projective agency, the capacity to imagine and formulate future pedagogical moves bound to social justice commitments. The creation of their “ideal” lesson plans allowed PSTs to rehearse this projective agency. They engaged in prospective thinking, asking: “If I could teach freely, how would I incorporate what I’ve learned about translanguaging and culture?” As PSTs planned lessons that brought in students’ home languages and stories, they exhibited a reframing of not just their ideology but their pedagogical imagination. However, the need to situate these lesson plans outside of their actual field placements highlights systemic barriers. As Cárdenas Curiel et al. (2024) argue, moments of linguistic community engagement and critical reflection (like FLOA) must be complemented by pedagogical freedom and institutional support if PSTs are to be fully enabled as change agents. Our PSTs had the critical insight and creativity but found themselves in placements that did not easily accommodate it. This suggests a need to reconsider, structurally, the model

of practicum in teacher education. If we truly want PSTs to plan for culturally sustaining lessons, we must also provide them opportunities to bring these lessons to life in real classrooms or at least support them in advocating for such opportunities.

This reflection echoes Burton et al.'s (2024) suggestion that PSTs would benefit from scaffolding to gauge the dissonance between the discourses and curricula they are taught to value and those they encounter in schools. Developing critical consciousness in teacher candidates is not sufficient on its own. Programs also need to prepare PSTs to advocate for pedagogical agency within monolingual school systems. In our case, that might mean equipping PSTs with strategies to introduce translanguaging practices in small ways despite curricular constraints, or to diplomatically work with mentor teachers and administrators to create room for experimentation (e.g., perhaps during small-group time or special projects). This calls for bridging the vision–practice gap present in our data.

Through the lens of teaching: how residency influences uptake: To gain further understanding of the long-term effects of the FLOA experience, we carried out follow-up written interviews with three PSTs a few months after our course, when they were in their part-time student teaching residency. These interviews provided rich details about how and whether PSTs were implementing FLOA-inspired dispositions and practices in their new teaching placements. The results were cautiously encouraging. Participants reported that they had begun applying what they learned about multilingual family engagement to notice and support students in nuanced ways. One PST shared that she reexamined a normally quiet English learner's silence in class and interpreted it through a FLOA lens as possibly the student observing or processing internally. She thus started pairing that student with a same-language buddy for discussions, giving an opportunity to voice understanding in the home language. Another PST recounted how she proactively offered multimodal options (drawing or speaking) for a writing task when she noticed an emergent bilingual student struggling with pencil-and-paper writing, reflecting the kind of flexibility she practiced in her lesson plan design.

These anecdotal cases indicate that FLOA influenced not only PSTs' lesson planning at the university but also their "in-the-moment" pedagogical judgments and relational work in their classrooms. While not generalizable, the cases offer hopeful evidence that community-based field experiences like FLOA can instill durable orientations toward culturally sustaining pedagogy, even in deeply standardized field placements. The PSTs found ways to bring their newfound asset-based lens into their actual teaching: noticing a student's behavior differently, adjusting an

activity to be more inclusive, or adding a culturally responsive touch to the routine. More systematic future longitudinal research is needed to investigate how such experiences influence early-career teachers' classroom enactments of translanguaging. These results suggest seeds were planted that continued to grow.

Reframing teacher education for refugee and immigrant learners: This study supports Stillman and Palmer's (2024) claim that reform in teacher education cannot be isolated tweaks but should be embedded in program-level coherence. Our course scaffolded PSTs through multiple iterations of observation, analysis, and reflection, followed by application. This sequence supported not only theoretical uptake but also practical translation (in planned form), indicating a measurable path for programs interested in incorporating translanguaging pedagogy at the heart of teacher preparation. In addition, our study bridges a gap in the literature by foregrounding pedagogical preparation for refugee and immigrant elementary students. As recent research notes (e.g., Mahalingappa, 2024; Ojha et al., 2024), preparing teachers to support students who have experienced displacement, language loss, or interrupted schooling requires approaches that are culturally and linguistically responsive and relevant. PSTs in our program began to see home language practices not as hindrances but as key resources for restoring students' voice, power, and agency in classroom learning. This shift is essential in counteracting the marginalization of refugee and immigrant children in rigid, monolingual educational systems.

Our emphasis on learning from families rather than about them proved especially important in this context. The community-based inquiry enabled PSTs to observe immigrant families' linguistic dexterity firsthand. These observations disrupted commonly held assumptions about family "involvement" and literacy, leading PSTs to reposition families as co-educators and cultural experts rather than as outsiders to the educational process. For children trying to make sense of displacement or navigate a new culture, such pedagogical stances in their teachers are essential. They validate children's lived experiences and help create classroom spaces where linguistic belonging is possible.

Limitations

We acknowledge several limitations of this study and suggest directions for future research. First, because PSTs were not able to implement their translanguaging lesson plans in classrooms during this study, our evidence of "application" is based on planned and self-reported intentions rather than observed teaching practice. This limits our ability to assess actual classroom effectiveness or student

outcomes. Second, the research was conducted with a single cohort of four focal PSTs in one teacher education program, which may limit generalizability to other contexts (e.g., different regions or secondary-level teacher candidates). Our findings should be transferred cautiously, with consideration of context. Third, as the first author was both instructor and researcher, there is an inherent risk of bias in interpreting PSTs' growth (e.g., seeing what we hoped to see). We mitigated this through independent coding by the second author and through reflexive analysis (discussing alternative explanations for any observed change), but some influence of the dual role may remain. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights. Future research could address these limitations by examining similar community-engaged teacher education interventions across multiple programs and by following participants into their early careers to observe actual classroom practice over time. Future work might also examine how novice teachers navigate constraints when implementing translanguaging pedagogies in different school contexts, and what supports might improve success.

Conclusion

Based on our findings, we recommend that teacher education programs consider the following actions to better prepare teachers for linguistically diverse classrooms:

Integrate community-based family learning experiences into teacher preparation: Providing PSTs with structured opportunities to learn with and from multilingual families (through home visits, community observations, etc.) can disrupt deficit views and cultivate asset-based mindsets early in training. These experiences help PSTs develop empathy and concrete strategies by seeing translanguaging and culturally embedded learning in action.

Explicitly foster critical multilingual awareness and translanguaging stance development: Coursework and reflections should prompt PSTs to interrogate their language beliefs and examine power dynamics in language education. Programs can incorporate assignments (like our FLOA project) and readings that urge PSTs to value students' home languages and cultural knowledge, and to plan instruction leveraging those assets. Seltzer (2022) suggests embedding translanguaging stance work throughout methods courses, and our results support this.

Collaborate with schools and policymakers (or prepare PSTs to advocate): It is necessary to collaborate with multiple stakeholders to create space within mandated curricula for translanguaging and culturally sustaining strategies, essentially, for helping new teachers navigate and challenge restrictive structures.

By taking these steps, teacher educators can move beyond merely raising PSTs' awareness and towards enabling them to enact and sustain linguistically inclusive pedagogies. This work suggests an emerging model of teacher education grounded in community, which frames multilingualism as a right and a resource and pedagogical design as an act of justice. Our findings underscore that through carefully designed community-based clinical experiences, we can better prepare PSTs not just to manage linguistic differences, but to actively build classrooms in which refugee and immigrant students thrive as multilingual, multicultural learners.

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Exploring Elementary Teachers' Experiences in Enacting Translanguaging Practices with Migrant and Refugee Students

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Received : 21 April 2025
 Revised : 23 November
 Accepted : 7 March 2026
 DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2026.432

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Abstract

The increasing presence of migrant and refugee children in U.S. schools necessitates a critical examination of instructional practices and the development of resources that support their educational experiences. While translanguaging has gained recognition as a promising pedagogical approach, existing literature seldom addresses its application among elementary educators working with this demographic. This qualitative longitudinal case study, conducted within a refugee resettlement community, examines how two White monolingual elementary teachers navigate teaching multilingual migrant and refugee students—both as graduate students and later as in-service educators in diverse elementary classrooms. Grounded in a translanguaging framework, the study explores how the participants' beliefs and instructional practices evolved to promote educational equity, justice, and inclusivity within predominantly English-speaking contexts. Using thematic analysis, findings reveal that the teachers adopted culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies that recognized and celebrated students' linguistic and cultural diversity. Through reciprocal teaching and collaborative dialogue, they honed asset-oriented perspectives and created a safe environment in which students became co-constructors of knowledge. By validating students' identities and displaying their own vulnerabilities, the teachers transformed power dynamics in the classroom, demonstrating how translanguaging enhances language and literacy development and leads to more equitable educational outcomes. This study advocates for pedagogical shifts that honor multilingual migrant and refugee students' linguistic resources, identities, and humanity.

Keywords:

Multilingual Refugee and Migrant Students, Translanguaging, Elementary School



www.iejee.com
 ISSN: 1307-9298

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Introduction

The growing enrollment of migrant and refugee children in U.S. schools (Sugarman, 2023) calls for a critical examination of instructional practices and the development of culturally and linguistically responsive resources to support their academic success (Koubek &

Wasta, 2025). While the terms migrant and refugee are often used interchangeably, they hold distinct legal and sociopolitical meanings. Rodríguez-Gómez (2025) calls for the reconceptualization of the term refugee—from a descriptive category to an analytical object—to open space for destabilizing the term itself. Such destabilization entails theorizing refugee beyond the parameters established by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, its subsequent protocols, and regional legal frameworks. She argues that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (2025) definition of a refugee (as an individual who has been forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, or threats to their life or freedom and is legally protected from being returned to their home country) is an over-simplified and neutral term that stereotypes and commodifies refugee populations. Similarly, Mohamed (2024) proposes "a reevaluation of international refugee policies through a lens of social justice and anti-racism" (p. 25) since "the legacies of colonialism and imperialism continue to influence notions of deservingness and vulnerability among refugees, with certain groups perceived as more deserving of protection and support based on their race, ethnicity, or nationality" (p. 27).

In contrast, the International Organization for Migration (2025) uses the term migrant as "an umbrella term covering a vast range of people moving away from their home" (para. 2) across international or within state borders voluntarily or involuntarily regardless of the causes for their movement and the length of stay. In the U.S., migrant students often face economic instability and frequent relocation, yet they are eligible for federal support services through Title I Migrant Education funding (Gray, 2023). However, Erdal and Oeppen (2017) argue that "a discursive construction of 'the migrant' or 'the refugee' veers away from the complexity of reality and reifies the binary of forced vs. voluntary; it turns it into two boxes between which migrant experiences necessarily ... must be divided" (p. 993). In our study, we did not make a distinction between refugees and migrants due to a lack of information from the Migrant Education Organization that provided placements for our participants. Consequently, we used the term migrants in our study to align with this organization's mission, even though some of their populations might be considered refugees.

Despite the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in elementary classrooms, research on pedagogical approaches that effectively support migrant and refugee students remains limited. One promising strategy is translanguaging—a pedagogical approach that leverages students' full linguistic repertoires to enhance learning (García et al., 2017; Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025). While translanguaging has been widely studied in bilingual and secondary

education contexts, its implementation in elementary classrooms serving migrant and refugee students remains an underexamined area of research (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; Li & Qin, 2022). Therefore, our qualitative longitudinal case study aimed to explore how two White monolingual elementary teachers navigated the complexities of teaching multilingual migrant students, and how their beliefs about teaching and learners affected their practices over time—both as graduate students and later as in-service educators in diverse elementary classrooms.

Relevant Literature

Educational Experiences of Migrant and Refugee Students in U.S. Educational Contexts

Understanding the educational experiences of migrant and refugee students in U.S. schools requires examining both their strengths (Moll et al., 2006; Yosso, 2005) and the challenges they face, including the pedagogical strategies that support them. Dryden-Peterson (2016) reminds us that "rather than starting anew upon arrival in the United States, most contemporary refugee children have experienced education in countries of first asylum, which are in most cases low-income countries... [thus] it is also the continuation of global trajectories" (p. 144). The main themes of these global trajectories of refugee education include "language barriers, teacher-centered pedagogy, and discrimination in school settings" (p. 144). Crawford (2023) highlights that "refugees are still denied recognition of respect and self-esteem, even in districts experienced in working with a variety of immigrant populations" (p. 19). Several studies (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; Cho et al., 2019; Dryden-Peterson, 2024; Li & Qin, 2022; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2018; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Reinking, 2019) have explored these issues, highlighting the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL), culturally responsive teaching, and equity-driven approaches.

In an exploratory study, Cho et al. (2019) interviewed six White monolingual elementary school teachers to understand their perceptions of multilingual refugee students' (MLs) social-emotional competencies and the strategies they used to support their development. Teachers emphasized the importance of social awareness and relationship-building skills, employing methods such as direct instruction, individualized support, fostering a positive classroom environment, and collaboration. However, their perspectives and self-reported teaching practices often reflected a deficit-based approach, suggesting a need for more asset-oriented pedagogical frameworks.

Building on these findings, Li and Qin (2022) examined broader challenges faced by migrant and refugee students in U.S. public schools. Their review of prior research identified key barriers, including deficit-

based perspectives from schools and society, linguistic and cultural disconnects between home, community, and school, limited access to resources, and subtractive educational practices. To address these challenges, their two qualitative case studies highlighted how three urban White teachers enacted equitable pedagogies to foster more inclusive learning environments. These teachers worked to counteract subtractive educational practices by building caring relationships with students and families centered on equity, access, and advocacy. Similarly, Mendenhall et al. (2017) examined education of refugees in an international high school in New York City, highlighting factors that contribute to their academic success, including linguistic support, learner-centered pedagogical strategies, and flexible and responsive curriculum and assessment approaches. Additionally, Dryden-Peterson (2024) emphasized the teacher's role in establishing a sense of belonging in the classroom that helps students access learning and strive for their life goals. She called this way of teaching and building relationships as "pedagogies of belonging, rooted in predictability, adaptability, and future-building" (p. 88).

Beyond classroom practices, broader systemic factors also shape refugee and migrant students' educational experiences. Reinking (2019), for example, explored how pre- and post-arrival experiences impact refugee students' learning and adjustment. Key themes from the findings emphasized the necessity of providing resources, fostering a strong sense of community, and actively involving families in their children's education. Bajaj (2023) echoed these observations by advocating for safe, informative family spaces in schools, purposeful home visits, and planned community walks in their students' neighborhoods to provide meaningful connections to families and their environments. These asset-oriented approaches can help schools nationwide create more inclusive and supportive environments for refugee and migrant students, reinforcing the idea that they, alongside their American-born peers, are vital contributors to the nation's future.

Further reinforcing the role of culturally responsive teaching, Newcomer et al. (2020) investigated how teachers can humanize learning experiences for refugee students. Their case study findings revealed that teachers may require additional professional support in this work. Despite lacking specialized training, the teachers in the study adapted by prioritizing relationship-building and seeking to understand their students' lived experiences, fostering deeper empathy and support. The study highlighted that while teachers play a critical role in advocating for refugee students, ongoing professional development is essential to help them move beyond deficit-based perspectives and implement more equitable pedagogies.

Expanding on these discussions, Bajaj and Bartlett (2017) proposed that a critical transnational curriculum can better address the needs of minoritized students and their families. Drawing on a decade of qualitative research in U.S. public schools, they identified four key dimensions of such a curriculum: (1) leveraging student diversity as a learning resource, (2) incorporating translanguaging, (3) engaging students in civic participation, and (4) preparing them for transnational experiences by nurturing multidirectional aspirations. Their research demonstrated how newcomer schools have successfully implemented culturally sustaining curricula that build on these students' strengths and interests, moving away from deficit-oriented frameworks. Similarly, when examining refugee students' experiences in two international schools in New York City, Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018) advocated for a critical transnational curriculum "that uses diversity as a learning opportunity, promotes civic engagement as curriculum, and cultivates multidirectional aspirations as well as a socio-politically relevant pedagogy that gives youth tools to analyze ... the distinctions between school requirements and authentic learning" (p. 115). Additionally, they encouraged schools to provide extracurricular support, such as tutoring, by teachers, community members, and university students, to support academic achievement and future aspirations.

Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of shifting from deficit-based perspectives to asset-oriented approaches when educating migrant and refugee students. By integrating culturally responsive teaching, equitable pedagogies, translanguaging, and transnational perspectives, educators can foster inclusive learning environments that empower students and affirm their linguistic and cultural identities.

Equity-Focused Pedagogies to Challenge Deficit Narratives in Education

Our research is grounded in culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, drawing from foundational scholarship on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2007), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). These pedagogical frameworks build upon one another, sharing the common goal of dismantling deficit-based approaches that position racially and linguistically minoritized students as lacking the skills or knowledge necessary for academic success. Instead, they center students' cultural, linguistic, and experiential assets as integral to learning.

Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework designed to support students of color while challenging educators to rethink

deficit-oriented assumptions about their academic potential. This approach encourages teachers to critically examine student-teacher relationships, curriculum content, and the broader societal structures that shape education. The framework is built on three key dimensions: student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Student learning emphasizes intellectual growth and problem-solving rather than remediation. Cultural competence promotes an appreciation of students' own cultural backgrounds while fostering understanding of others. Critical consciousness develops students' awareness of systemic inequities and equips them to challenge injustice. Recognizing shifts in student demographics and educational research, Ladson-Billings (2014) later revised her framework to emphasize the need for pedagogies that actively incorporate students' cultural and linguistic practices, fostering deeper engagement and academic success. By focusing on students' strengths rather than perceived deficits, culturally relevant pedagogy actively counters the notion that minoritized students must assimilate into dominant cultural norms to succeed.

Building on these ideas, Gay (2018) developed culturally responsive teaching (CRT), which emphasizes the importance of leveraging students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and perspectives to make learning meaningful and impactful. Unlike culturally relevant pedagogy, which focuses on fostering critical consciousness, CRT is grounded in a funds of knowledge perspective that validates and integrates students' lived experiences into instruction. Gay outlined five key characteristics of CRT: validation, multidimensionality, empowerment, transformation, and emancipation. A culturally responsive curriculum acknowledges and builds upon students' assets, ensuring that their identities are central to classroom instruction. Its multidimensional nature extends beyond curriculum design to classroom management, assessment, and student-teacher relationships. CRT also empowers students by fostering self-confidence, academic competence, and resilience, while its transformative and emancipatory goals aim to expose students to diverse cultural knowledge, freeing them from the burden of assimilation. By situating student culture at the heart of instruction, CRT disrupts deficit-based educational practices that assume minoritized students need to be "fixed" to succeed in school.

Expanding on the principles of CRT, Villegas and Lucas (2007) provided a six-principle framework for culturally responsive teaching, offering concrete ideas for educators seeking to implement equity-driven instruction. Their first principle emphasizes that students construct knowledge based on prior experiences, requiring educators to make learning relevant to their backgrounds. The second principle calls on teachers to learn about their students'

lives, including their family structures, strengths, and interests, to build meaningful connections. The third principle highlights the impact of social class, race, ethnicity, and gender on both students' and educators' perspectives, encouraging critical self-reflection. The fourth principle stresses the importance of affirming diversity, advocating for high expectations and the integration of students' cultural resources into a rigorous and engaging curriculum. The fifth principle centers on equitable instructional practices, including incorporating students' home languages, using culturally relevant examples, and providing appropriate scaffolding. Finally, the sixth principle urges educators to actively challenge inequities by advocating for students and collaborating with a broader community of equity-focused educators. By operationalizing CRT through these principles, Villegas and Lucas (2007) provided a roadmap for moving from theory to practice in dismantling deficit narratives.

Paris and Alim (2017) extended these frameworks by introducing culturally sustaining pedagogy, which shifts the focus from simply recognizing student strengths to actively sustaining and nurturing cultural and linguistic diversity. While culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies validate students' backgrounds and make learning relevant, culturally sustaining pedagogy calls for curriculum and assessment practices that maintain and expand students' linguistic and cultural identities over time. Paris and Alim emphasized that culture is fluid and dynamic, rather than fixed or tied solely to historical traditions. They argued that since language and culture are integral to personal identity, schools should not merely acknowledge them but actively cultivate them within instruction. This perspective directly challenges deficit-oriented approaches that see students' home languages and cultures as barriers to academic success. Instead, it positions linguistic and cultural diversity as essential assets that enrich learning environments and promote educational equity.

By tracing the evolution of equity-focused pedagogies—from culturally relevant pedagogy to culturally responsive teaching to culturally sustaining pedagogy—this review highlights how each framework builds on and expands the previous one. Collectively, they reject deficit-based models of education and advocate for an approach that recognizes, affirms, and sustains students' diverse identities. As educators work to dismantle systemic inequities in schooling, these pedagogies provide a foundation for transformative teaching that positions students not as passive recipients of knowledge, but as active participants in shaping their educational experiences.

Translanguaging: Disrupting Language Hierarchies in Multilingual Classrooms

Translanguaging as a pedagogical practice (García et al., 2017; Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025; Kleyn & García, 2019) challenges socially constructed language hierarchies that marginalize minoritized students, advocating for equitable teaching and assessment practices that embrace their full linguistic repertoires. In a systematic review of translanguaging in U.S. PreK-12 education, Hamman-Ortiz et al. (2025) identified seven key themes that highlight its role in multilingual classrooms. First, translanguaging occurs naturally as students fluidly draw upon their linguistic resources. Second, it supports academic comprehension while fostering a strong sense of identity. Third, it enhances participation and collaboration, promoting an interactive and inclusive learning environment. Fourth, it challenges deficit perspectives by shifting the focus to students' linguistic assets. Fifth, translanguaging raises critical awareness of language ideologies. Sixth, exposure to translanguaging encourages educators to adopt more linguistically responsive pedagogies. Finally, its impact varies across different educational settings, shaping instruction in diverse ways.

Translanguaging transcends traditional language boundaries, functioning as a dynamic, knowledge-construction process rather than a simple language practice. Wei (2018) describes it as an empowering pedagogical tool that equilibrates teacher-student dynamics, centers meaning-making and identity, and transforms learning experiences. Similarly, Otheguy et al. (2015) argue that translanguaging is not restricted by socially or politically defined language norms but instead reflects the fluid use of an individual's entire linguistic repertoire. This perspective positions translanguaging as a natural and necessary approach to education in multilingual settings.

To implement translanguaging effectively, García et al. (2017) outline three essential elements of translanguaging pedagogy: stance, design, and shifts. A teacher's stance reflects their beliefs about multilingual learners and the value of their home languages as learning resources. The design involves intentionally crafting learning environments that facilitate translanguaging, while shifts capture the teacher's ability to adapt instructional strategies to enhance student learning. Together, these elements disrupt entrenched power structures in education by affirming multilingual identities and fostering more inclusive classrooms (Kleyn & García, 2019).

The traditional additive bilingualism model, rooted in monoglossic ideologies, views languages as separate and hierarchical. In contrast, Flores and Rosa (2015) propose a heteroglossic perspective, recognizing multilingualism as the norm and rejecting rigid distinctions between first and second languages.

They further emphasize the need for critical language awareness, which examines the stigmatization of marginalized language varieties. By shifting away from monolingual norms, translanguaging challenges assimilationist ideologies and promotes linguistic justice.

Other scholars have built upon this conceptual foundation by exploring the cognitive and sociocultural dimensions of translanguaging. MacSwan (2017), for instance, argues that multilingual individuals integrate their linguistic knowledge psychologically and universally, making practices such as code-switching and translation integral components of translanguaging pedagogy. He asserts that translanguaging creates welcoming environments for multilingual students, families, and communities, reinforcing the role of schools as inclusive spaces.

For monolingual educators, translanguaging pedagogy serves as a critical tool for self-reflection on biases toward non-dominant language practices (Ponzio, 2020). By fostering a humanizing approach to language education, translanguaging promotes critical consciousness of power dynamics (Freire, 1970) and encourages educators to embrace linguistic diversity rather than enforce assimilation. Developing a translingual disposition—which Lee and Canagarajah (2019) define as an educator's humility and willingness to engage with linguistic differences on equal terms—is central to translanguaging pedagogy. This disposition rejects deficit perspectives and repositions teachers as collaborators in meaning-making. García et al. (2017) conceptualize this stance as central to translanguaging pedagogy, positioning it as a direct challenge to the hierarchical structures that privilege standardized, monolingual language norms in education. By embracing translanguaging, educators reject assimilationist ideologies and instead foster linguistic justice, ensuring that multilingual students are not only included but empowered as legitimate contributors to knowledge production. However, tensions persist between translanguaging practices and dominant language ideologies, necessitating further research into its implementation across diverse educational contexts (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019).

Methods

We conducted a qualitative longitudinal research study to explore two elementary White monolingual teachers' experiences within a refugee resettlement community as they navigated instructing multilingual migrant students, both during their graduate studies and as in-service educators in diverse elementary settings. Our research questions were: What were elementary teachers' experiences in navigating the complexities of teaching multilingual migrant and refugee students, and how did their beliefs about teaching and learners affect their practices

over time? We employed a qualitative longitudinal research approach (Bren, 2019; Saldaña, 2003) in which we gathered data through several iterations: first, when these participants started our TESOL-oriented graduate program; second, when they were at the end of the program; and third, several years after they graduated with their master's degree. Our study spanned several years from 2018 to 2023.

Our study is considered qualitative longitudinal in nature because it allowed us to depict change over time and to analyze factors influencing shifts in perspectives (Saldaña, 2003). Bren (2019) describes this research approach as more of a creative process than prescriptive, "offering endless scope for variations in design and innovation in the research process" (p. 50). However, the components of this research design include data reflecting prospective-retrospective approaches and intensive-extensive tempos. Our participants engaged in both retrospective (looking backwards) and prospective practices (looking forward). The latter is a fundamental part of longitudinal research, which is "the prime way to build cumulative knowledge about dynamic processes" (Bren, 2019, p. 52). As he explains, "The most effective QL [Qualitative Longitudinal] designs build retrospective elements into a prospective study, creatively blending them so that the temporal gaze oscillates between past, present and future and explores their complex intersections" (p. 53).

Additionally, our study employed both intensive and extensive tempos in our data collection. At the beginning of the study in 2018-2019, which we consider as the baseline of our study, we continuously collected data over 16 weeks, ranging from participants' weekly tutoring journals to cumulative projects from both second language acquisition and diversity courses, exemplifying an intensive tempo. The two follow-up interviews in 2020 and 2023 were considered punctuated revisits, suggesting an extensive tempo, due to the short-term and spaced-out timeframes.

Our study was qualitative since we were interested in the lived experiences of these teachers reflected in qualitative data sources, such as semi-structured interviews, weekly tutoring journals, and coursework artifacts. The study was also a case study because each teacher represented a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), having entered the same TESOL-oriented master's program, completed their degree, and continued teaching multilingual students in the same school district.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a mid-sized, master's comprehensive university, recently reclassified as an R2 institution, in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. We used pseudonyms for names of participants

and their tutees throughout our study. Participants, Mary and Katie, were enrolled in a TESOL-oriented master's degree program that emphasized second language acquisition theories, cultural competence, methods and language assessment, and immigration and education, among other areas. As part of their graduate studies, both participants completed the required tutoring experience with multilingual migrant students. Since they were full-time teachers, they opted to work with students in their own schools through a Migrant Education Organization, which provides educational support to children from seasonal agricultural worker families.

Mary enrolled in the program in Fall 2018 as a part-time graduate student while working full-time as an elementary teacher in a school serving a predominantly low-income, linguistically diverse student population. Nearly all students at her school qualified for free or reduced lunch, reflecting the socioeconomic challenges they faced. At the start of the study, Mary had four years of teaching experience in fourth and fifth-grade classrooms at this school. She completed her master's degree in 2021. Katie, the second participant, began our program in Fall 2019 while working as an elementary teacher at another highly diverse elementary school in the same district. She also had four years of teaching experience in third and fifth grade classrooms at her respective school. After completing her master's degree in 2022 and passing the state's required assessments, she transitioned to a full-time English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teaching position, which she continues to hold.

During their graduate studies, both participants engaged in tutoring experiences with migrant students. Mary worked with two Latina sisters, Maria and Sarita, while Katie tutored Ana from Puerto Rico and later Melinda from Sudan. None of these migrant students were students in their regular classrooms. The tutoring sessions, conducted weekly for one semester, provided opportunities for participants to apply TESOL methodologies in real-world teaching contexts. A few years after their graduation, follow-up interviews were conducted to learn about their experiences working with multilingual migrant and refugee students in their respective schools. While there were other graduate students in our program, we used purposive sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), by intentionally focusing on the experiences of two in-service teachers, Mary and Katie, since they self-identify as White, female, monolingual, elementary teachers. They represent the profile of typical U.S. elementary teachers (Taie & Lewis, 2022). Our other graduate students were not in-service teachers; therefore, they were not part of our study. This sampling unit also supports the characteristics of a qualitative longitudinal study (Bren, 2019) because of its focus on a few individuals and the communities in which they reside.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple sources to capture shifts in participants' perspectives and instructional practices over time. First, artifacts from participants' graduate coursework were analyzed, including weekly tutoring reflection entries (10–11 total, two-pages in length) (2018–2019), an action research project completed in a second language acquisition course (2018–2019), and a philosophy of diversity teaching statement written at the beginning of the program (2018–2019). This philosophy served as a baseline for understanding participants' initial beliefs about teaching multilingual students.

In addition to these artifacts, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview was voice-recorded without any video component. The first interview took place in April 2020, while participants were still enrolled in the graduate program. The second interview occurred in June 2023, at least one to two years post-graduation, after participants had gained further experience working with multilingual migrant and refugee students. Both interviews lasted approximately an hour. These interviews provided insights into how participants' beliefs and instructional approaches evolved over time. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim, using the Zoom transcription services. We both listened to the recording of each transcript to ensure accuracy in data representation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to identify patterns in participants' experiences and beliefs. Initially, both researchers read the data in its entirety to generate an initial set of codes. These codes were then systematically applied to all data sources, and new codes were introduced as they emerged. Periodic meetings were held to review and refine the coding process, ensuring consistency and credibility in the analysis.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, we employed member checking, a means of internal validity, where participants reviewed their interview transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their statements and interpretations. Additionally, as researchers, we engaged in critical discussions to interrogate our assumptions and interpretations, maintaining mutual accountability throughout the analysis process. We are both White cisgender female teacher educators with over 50 years of combined collegiate teaching experience. One researcher is trilingual, with English as an additional language, and was raised outside of the United States. The other researcher was raised in the United States and is a native English speaker with a working knowledge of Spanish. Our diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds enabled

us to analyze the data from distinct perspectives while also finding common ground. By employing a qualitative longitudinal case study approach, this research provides a nuanced understanding of how monolingual elementary teachers navigate the complexities of teaching multilingual migrant and refugee students and how their perspectives evolve over time.

Findings

Based on thematic analysis, three main themes emerged pertaining to these teachers'

experiences teaching multilingual migrant students: (1) Dispositions grounded in asset- and equity-oriented beliefs, (2) Instructional strategies that promote cultural and linguistic affirmation, and (3) Reflections on educational and personal practices to move more toward educational justice. These themes are explored in detail below.

Dispositions Grounded in Asset- and Equity-Oriented Beliefs

Both educators conveyed unwavering beliefs about their multilingual students' strengths and abilities over the multi-year study, demonstrating an asset-oriented mindset. These beliefs shaped their expectations for students and their commitment to learning more about their students' lives and interests. Alongside these asset-oriented ideas, both teachers also expressed equity-oriented beliefs that emphasized student identities, representation in learning materials, and structural support such as dual language programs. These two dimensions—asset-oriented and equity-oriented—were interconnected as they both represented the teachers' beliefs about students' abilities and experiences.

Mary

Mary's asset-oriented beliefs emerged early in her teaching career. In her philosophy of diversity statement, written while tutoring two migrant students, Maria and Sarita, she stated: "It was clear to me after just a few sessions that both girls were full of strengths, talents, and ideas that could not be measured by a test." She recognized that nurturing these strengths required building strong relationships with her students. In her 2020 interview, she elaborated:

I think that [relationship building] is really crucial in terms of working with students who fall into this population of culturally and linguistically diverse because it's impossible to make assumptions about what students can do or about what things will hold value for students without actually taking time to get to know them and to build those relationships. (Koubek & Wasta, 2023, p. 29)

Mary also held firm beliefs in maintaining high expectations for multilingual students, which she viewed as essential for their academic success. In her 2018 philosophy of diversity statement, she noted: “While working with Maria and Sarita, I noticed that their determination and work completion was greatly influenced by the expectations I had for their abilities.” These reflections continued in her journal entries, where she questioned the impact of teacher expectations on multilingual learners:

I am left wondering about the influence teacher expectations have had on Sarita and Maria's education... Both girls are reading below grade level for their respective grades, but they were able to understand and connect with a book written several grade levels above their reading levels. (Journal 10, 2018)

Years later, in her 2023 interview, Mary reaffirmed her commitment to asset-focused instruction, explaining how she actively incorporates students' strengths into her teaching:

I think my philosophy comes from a deep commitment to asset-focused instruction. So, I try to start with: What can my students do? and not What can't my students do?... So essentially starting with what strengths my students have, doing as much as I can to make sure that I am including listening, speaking, reading, and writing in as many lessons as possible, trying to make sure that the instructional materials that I use are reflective of the students in my classroom.

Her continued emphasis on strengths-based instruction indicates a deep-rooted, evolving commitment to asset-based teaching. Her remarks show her consistent convictions for recognizing students' abilities and creating a learning environment that accentuates their strengths and experiences.

In addition to her asset-based beliefs, Mary held strong equity-oriented convictions, particularly regarding representation in curriculum and access to dual-language programs. She viewed language as central to student identity, which shaped her instructional decisions. In a 2018 journal entry, she reflected: “After reading about hybridity, I feel even more confident that seeking resources such as texts in Spanish is important in helping Maria and Sarita develop their own identities and feel more connected to their learning” (Journal 5, 2018).

By 2023, Mary had expanded her commitment to culturally and linguistically responsive materials, including multiple languages spoken by her students:

Whether that be finding nonfiction texts or fiction texts that represent... the home countries of my students, or texts that have... Spanish words in them, or in some cases... even Kurdish words or Arabic words to try to help them—all of my students, but especially my multilingual learners—feel connected and represented in the curriculum.

Mary also believed that dual-language programs were a means of promoting linguistic equity. Observing the experiences of her tutees Maria and Sarita, she noted that Maria, who was enrolled in a dual-language program, had more opportunities to develop bilingual proficiency, whereas Sarita, in an English-only setting, seemed to rely more on English: “Maria will speak to Sarita in Spanish and ask her if she can help describe a word. It has been nice to see both girls support each other” (Journal 5, 2018).

Mary's evolving beliefs show a commitment to both recognizing student assets and addressing structural inequities, reinforcing her belief that multilingual learners thrive in affirming, high-expectation environments.

Katie also demonstrated an asset-oriented mindset, particularly emphasizing bilingualism as a strength. During her tutoring sessions, she worked with Ana, a student in a dual-language program, and reflected on the importance of Ana's bilingualism: “I hope that Ana will continue to find safety in her dual-language classroom, and she will grow in confidence as she realizes that asset she is because of her bilingualism” (Journal 5, 2019). Katie valued dual-language programs, believing that they foster students' confidence and validate their linguistic identities. In her 2020 interview, she reflected on Ana's experience:

I think by being able to participate in a dual language program, she's [Ana's] seeing the value in being able to speak English and Spanish. And what I mean specifically about the safety parts was that she is seeing adults who are reinforcing that language is valuable.

Additionally, Katie worried about the potential loss of home languages among multilingual students, particularly for her second tutee, Melinda:

I spoke briefly with her [Melinda] about this [concern with loss of L1] and it seems as though she continues to speak her L1 at home, which is certainly beneficial. As far as I know, there are no other speakers of Melinda's L1 in the 5th grade, so she has no way to practice using academic language in her L1... I want to be sure that my students understand that additive multiculturalism is an asset. (Journal 10, 2019)

In her 2019 writings and 2020 interview, Katie emphasized her belief in the value of multilingualism. She worried that students might abandon their home languages because they did not experience others valuing these languages. She also acknowledged her desire to better support her students' bilingualism and lamented her limitations as a monolingual teacher.

Related to those beliefs was Katie's commitment to high expectations and honoring the many aspects of students' identities as she expressed in her 2019

philosophy statement, "I want to be an educator who values the diversity of her students and holds high expectations for all students" (Koubek & Wasta, 2023, p. 34). Later when asked to describe her beliefs pertaining to her teaching philosophy in 2023, her convictions about asset-oriented teaching had deepened, stating:

I think one of the biggest things is helping teachers and any individual in the school setting understand all of the things that multilingual learners can do...and how teachers can use that [multilingualism] to help students learn, so whether it's kind of helping them see some cognates that could be helpful in language learning or finding ways for those students to be able to share their native language. (Interview, 2023)

Katie's equity-oriented beliefs aligned with these asset-based views. She sought to ensure that students' identities were affirmed through representation in literature and curriculum. In her 2019 philosophy of diversity statement, she wrote: "I believe that students are multicultural beings with many factors impacting them inside and outside of school... I want students to take pride in who they are and have the freedom to be cultural beings." Her 2020 interview reinforced these beliefs, as she described how students engaged more deeply when materials reflected their experiences:

I think it's very important for students to see themselves in the curriculum. And so, I have been working to include more texts where there are other types of main characters rather than maybe traditional Anglo-Saxon main characters.

Katie also supported dual-language programs as an equity measure, noting their role in fostering students' sense of safety and belonging:

Ana has shared that she does not like being forced to speak Spanish; however, she also shared that she was very upset being in an English-only classroom in Texas. I feel like Ana flourishes in a bilingual classroom because she can speak English and Spanish throughout the day in a safe place. (Journal 5, 2019)

By having opportunities to use their home languages, Katie believed that migrant students could be more successful in their academic work. Additionally, multilingual students needed to feel comfortable and safe with their linguistic choices.

Even years later, Katie remained committed to fostering inclusive, affirming learning spaces for multilingual learners. In her 2023 interview, she reflected:

How can we support learners as a whole rather than just the student that comes into our classroom each day? And I also do feel like through this program, it's helped me to become an advocate for multilingual learners and to be a safe place for students.

Both Mary and Katie consistently upheld and advocated for asset- and equity-oriented beliefs in their work with multilingual migrant students.

They recognized bilingualism as an asset and an integral component of their students' identities. Their instructional choices reflected a commitment to inclusivity, as they actively sought out bilingual and culturally representative materials to enhance student engagement and learning. Additionally, they emphasized the importance of maintaining high academic expectations for all students, ensuring that multilingual learners received rigorous and meaningful instruction. Their support for dual language programs further demonstrated their dedication to fostering equitable learning environments that honored and sustained students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Collectively, their beliefs emphasized a deep commitment to affirming and empowering multilingual learners within their classrooms.

Instructional Strategies that Promoted Cultural and Linguistic Affirmation

The second theme that emerged focused on the instructional strategies Mary and Katie implemented, reflecting their beliefs about culturally and linguistically responsive teaching. While not all their practices were explicitly designed as translanguaging strategies, many incorporated elements of scaffolding, cultural connections, and student identity affirmation. These instructional approaches demonstrated their commitment to fostering an inclusive learning environment that valued multilingual students' linguistic resources and cultural backgrounds.

Mary

One of Mary's key instructional strategies involved incorporating students' home languages as a scaffold to support their comprehension of course concepts. She employed this approach when tutoring migrant education students during her graduate studies. Reflecting in a journal entry, she wrote, "I think having to talk through each word problem in both English and Spanish has given her [Maria] some really solid practice in determining how to approach [math] problems with solutions that are not straightforward" (Journal 5, 2018). Mary recognized that processing mathematical problems through both Spanish and English provided cognitive benefits. However, as a monolingual English speaker, she also acknowledged the challenges she faced in supporting Spanish-language homework:

It is sometimes difficult for Maria to describe what is happening in math word problems in English. It is somewhat difficult for me to support Maria in solving the questions when we are both working very hard to accurately describe what is happening. (Journal 4, 2018)

Despite these challenges, Mary remained committed to integrating bilingual support into her sessions. One of her initial strategies was incorporating bilingual books. In an early journal entry, she noted:

It seems like they both feel comfortable speaking in Spanish, but I think I can do more intentional things during my time with them to help support their native language. For our next session, I will select some books that are written in both English and Spanish. (Journal 3, 2018)

Throughout the semester-long tutoring, Mary repeatedly implemented this practice, selecting multilingual and multicultural texts that reinforced her belief in providing representative literature. This approach also facilitated reciprocal teaching, as the students supported her in learning Spanish while she assisted them in improving their English. Reflecting on this experience, she stated:

Both Sarita and Maria were so engaged in the book; they were so excited to read the Spanish words out loud. They were really eager to teach me what the words meant and to have me practice the words as best as I could...that was nice to have some practice with them as well as one book that I felt helped us build... connection as a group. (Interview, 2020)

Mary believed that her students benefited from witnessing her struggles with learning Spanish, as it encouraged them to persist through their own challenges with English. Her reflections indicate that she aimed to normalize the difficulties inherent in language learning while fostering a growth mindset:

I hope to find ways to encourage Maria and Sarita to be comfortable with the "struggle" that sometimes accompanies learning. I think it is important for Maria and Sarita to see me struggle when trying to read Maria's homework in Spanish or working to learn the new Spanish words I encounter in a book. Learning a language is difficult, and becoming proficient in the academic terminology of a language is even more difficult. (Journal 4, 2018)

These reflections also highlighted Mary's high expectations for her students. She resisted deficit-oriented perspectives that often placed multilingual learners in lower academic tracks, instead designing rigorous learning experiences that challenged their capabilities. She summarized her evolving teaching philosophy:

I began to incorporate more challenging materials into our sessions after I became aware of Maria and Sarita's true capabilities. I noticed that because of their "label" as students who need extra support and help, Maria and Sarita were missing out on rigorous learning opportunities that could support their growth and development. (Koubek & Wasta, 2023, p. 33)

Mary has continued to integrate linguistically and culturally responsive strategies into her current teaching. She incorporates students' home languages whenever possible, explaining: "If a student ever wants to write something in Spanish, I try to give them that opportunity" (Interview, 2023). However, she also observed that while Spanish-speaking students frequently expressed interest in using their home language, students who spoke other languages did so less often. Additionally, Mary described a unit

she designed, Rhythm and Recipes, which allowed students to explore their cultural and family traditions. As part of this unit, students wrote poems about significant family dishes, created accompanying artwork, and participated in a culminating event where they shared their work with family members. She reflected: "Just the language that they were able to use to explain how important that [family dish] was to them was something that was really powerful" (Interview, 2023). While it was unclear whether students were explicitly encouraged to write in their home languages, the project provided a meaningful space for cultural expression. Mary viewed the unit as an opportunity to affirm students' cultural identities through literacy and storytelling.

Katie

Katie prioritized supporting her students' academic vocabulary development, which became a central focus of two research projects she conducted during her graduate studies. Initially, she explored strategies for enhancing multilingual students' reading comprehension through English-language support. Reflecting on this work, she stated: "In my research, I found that one of the aspects that can sometimes hold language learners back is that they struggle to access vocabulary, particularly academic and content-specific vocabulary" (Interview, 2020). In her later thesis project, Katie expanded her focus to include home language cognates as a strategy for vocabulary instruction. While co-teaching science and social studies as a first-year ESOL teacher to multilingual learners—some of whom were migrant or refugee students—she guided them in identifying cognates to aid their comprehension. As she described: "My thesis project...was on helping students kind of create, think about connections between words and think about: Are there cognates that they could use to help explain?" (Interview, 2023). Katie intentionally incorporated home language cognates as a part of students' vocabulary instruction and continues to use this strategy as part of her instructional practices.

Like Mary, Katie also incorporated bilingual books into her instruction, particularly when tutoring her migrant education students. She found this practice to be an opportunity for reciprocal teaching, where students helped her with Spanish pronunciation as she assisted them in English. Recalling a tutoring session using *Adelita*, a bilingual Mexican Cinderella story, Katie shared:

The thing that I really like about that experience was the Tomie de Paola book had a lot of Spanish words in the text. And I felt like it was one of those great examples of when I got to be a participant with my student because...we were taking turns reading. And so she, of course, read the Spanish words with great fluency. And I stumbled over them. And so, I would ask her to correct me. And then she helped me to say it or pronounce it correctly. (Interview, 2020)

Beyond literacy, Katie encouraged students to leverage their home languages in writing. However, like Mary, she often responded to students' requests rather than proactively designing translanguaging activities. She described how students would ask to use Spanish during pre-writing exercises, and she consistently affirmed their choices while guiding them toward transferring their ideas into English: "Sometimes there will be times where students will be like, 'Can I say this in Spanish?'" and they'll ask a partner or peer to translate for them...I always try to make sure that they know that that's absolutely okay" (Interview, 2023).

Katie also intentionally incorporated connections to students' backgrounds and cultures in several units she described in her 2023 interview. One weekly class she instructed was a cooking course that was comprised of about 50 percent multilingual learners. In this experience, Katie welcomed conversations about the foods students ate with their families and implemented some in her lessons. She stated:

That's [food class] been a fun way for me to try to connect with some of our students who come from other cultural backgrounds and trying to think about what maybe are things that they've had experience making at home that we can try to make in the classroom. (Interview, 2023)

Katie also noted that an emphasis in her school was to inspire students to build from their personal experiences and to utilize them in their writing or personal narratives. As she described:

We're always encouraging students that they can write from whatever experiences they've had...So, trying to kind of create a culture where we are celebrating and respecting everybody from where they come from and for the uniqueness that they bring, and seeing that as a positive thing. (Interview, 2023)

Overall, both Mary and Katie implemented instructional strategies that affirmed students' linguistic and cultural identities. Their approaches included bilingual books, home language scaffolding, cognate-based vocabulary instruction, and culturally meaningful projects. While their use of translanguaging was often responsive rather than systematically planned, they consistently sought to create inclusive learning spaces that valued students' multilingualism.

Reflections on Practices to Move More Toward Educational Justice

Both Mary and Katie engaged in ongoing reflection about their instructional practices, biases, and challenges related to multilingual education in their schools. Their reflections reveal both personal and professional tensions they encountered when working with multilingual learners and their families. These insights highlight their commitment to creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments,

even as they grappled with how to best support their students within the constraints of an English-dominant educational system. While they valued multilingualism, they struggled with issues such as language bias, linguistic inclusivity, and the balance between fostering English proficiency and affirming students' home languages. This theme captures their evolving perspectives on educational justice for multilingual learners and their continuous efforts to refine their approaches.

Mary

As a monolingual English speaker, one of the tensions Mary experienced when instructing multilingual learners was their use of several languages in the classroom space and her lack of proficiency in their home languages. She acknowledged that her tutees in the Migrant Education Program preferred to use Spanish between each other and then would speak to her in English. While she supported this practice, Mary felt a bit uncomfortable when the two girls spoke to each other in their home language. This observation helped her consider how multilingual learners may feel in an English-dominated classroom in which they may not know the language of instruction well (Journal 3, 2018). Mary summarized her takeaway from this experience:

I was always very interested, and I really was eager and wanted to know what they were saying. And so, it kind of helps me think about how the girls might have felt in class sometimes really trying and trying their best to tend to the language that's being shared and trying to make meaning of it. And, you know, that was how I felt. And so, it kind of helps me to think about the importance of valuing and honoring individuals' linguistic choices. (Interview, 2020)

Mary's reflections suggest a shift in her awareness—she moved from viewing multilingualism as a challenge to recognizing the importance of honoring students' linguistic choices. However, she also wrestled with the tension between affirming home languages and ensuring students developed English proficiency. She remarked: "There's also a lot of importance in affirming their [MLs'] native language or other languages that they choose to use in learning spaces. So, that was interesting for me" (Interview, 2020). Mary frequently used the phrase "that was interesting for me," signaling her ongoing contemplation about these issues and her desire to act on these insights.

In her 2023 interview, she further reflected on her own biases and how they shaped her perceptions of multilingual learners. She acknowledged the internal struggle of wanting to correct students' English errors while also understanding that minor mistakes did not reflect their intelligence or academic potential. She shared:

I've really had to work a lot as an adult to unpack a lot of the biases that I carry with me... especially with working with multilingual learners, I have had to adjust my view of proper English... trying to just not nitpick the way that my students communicate with me, while still trying to encourage my students to access the English language. (Interview, 2023)

Mary's awareness of her own language biases reflects her commitment to fostering a more inclusive and affirming classroom. She also recognized the importance of strengthening connections between home and school, particularly through partnerships with families. She envisioned more opportunities for parents and caregivers to contribute their knowledge and cultural perspectives: "I would love to have opportunities for families to come in and be the experts on things that we're learning" (Interview, 2023).

She viewed these collaborations as a way to increase multilingual representation in the classroom, though she acknowledged the logistical challenges of implementing such initiatives. Reflecting on her Rhythm and Recipes unit, she admitted that while it was a step toward integrating students' cultural and linguistic identities into the curriculum, it was only a starting point: "The Rhythm and Recipes was an awesome experience, but it was sort of just dipping our toes into what a connection between home and school and language... can look like" (Interview, 2023). When asked about anything else she wanted to share during this interview, she immediately mentioned how she has benefitted from learning about the world through her interactions with her students and their families: "And I'm just really grateful for the opportunity to work with multilingual learners, and it is a huge responsibility that I do not take lightly" (Interview, 2023).

Mary's reflections suggest that she is actively working toward educational justice by interrogating her biases, advocating for family engagement, and striving to create more linguistically and culturally inclusive spaces. However, she also recognizes the complexities of these efforts, particularly within a system that prioritizes English.

Katie

Similar to Mary, Katie grappled with her monolingualism and its impact on her ability to support multilingual learners. When tutoring Melinda, a Sudanese student, she wished she had the language skills to communicate with her more effectively: "I wish that as her teacher, I could do a better job of supporting Melinda in her bilingualism" (Journal 10, 2019). In her interview from 2020, she elaborated more on her own monolingualism and the benefits that she perceived of being bilingual:

That's always something that I wished I had learned was another language so fluently that I would be able to be bilingual as well...it opens up a whole other

world. I, unfortunately, I'm not bilingual, so I need to rely on others to help me communicate with families or parents or things like that.

Her reflections indicate that she valued bilingualism and recognized its cognitive and social benefits. She also acknowledged the barriers her own linguistic limitations posed when communicating with families, noting that she often had to rely on others for translation support. Despite this challenge, she remained committed to fostering an affirming space for multilingual learners:

I think that the multilingual learners that I serve do help me to become a better teacher. They do challenge me to always be looking for new ways to make learning more meaningful... and to keep them engaged in the learning process. (Interview, 2023)

Katie's reflections also highlight her growing awareness of implicit biases. She credited her graduate studies with helping her recognize how her own background shaped her perceptions of multilingual learners and their families:

It [graduate program] really did help me to be reflective on the biases that I bring to the classroom and potential implicit biases that I might not have even realized I had about language learners...many of our families also are coming from immigrant backgrounds, and I also recognize that is not the same experience that I have had...through the master's program that I did I really do feel like it helped me to be able to take a step back and think about what are things that I maybe take for granted that I need to be more intentional in thinking about? (Interview, 2023)

Beyond personal reflection, Katie took concrete steps to advocate for multilingual learners within her school. She mentored a colleague who was initially skeptical about using cognates as a strategy for supporting multilingual learners. Through collaboration, Katie helped this teacher shift their perspective: "I was actually able to help that teacher realize all of the great assets that multilingualism brings to the classroom... and I really have seen a difference in that instruction this year" (Interview, 2023).

However, despite her advocacy efforts, Katie continued to wrestle with the role of English in her teaching. She recognized the systemic pressure placed on students to develop English proficiency and questioned how to balance this with linguistic affirmation:

It is a tricky balance because my job is to help them [multilingual learners] acquire English so they're able to be successful in an English-speaking classroom. They have to take all of their SOLs [Standards of Learning State Exams] in English, and so it sometimes maybe looks like I favor English, or I think that English is better. But I do feel like my role is always to try to think about how I can bridge their cultural background to what they need to do in order to be successful in school. (Interview, 2023)

In these remarks, Katie acknowledged that the SOL process did not honor students' multilinguistic

backgrounds and sent the message their home languages were not valued in her state. It seems that Katie viewed educational justice to be more inclusive, but she struggled to create an appropriate plan of action to realize these goals.

Like Mary, Katie brimmed with enthusiasm when sharing about her work with multilingual learners. She repeatedly said, "I love my job" (Interview, 2023). She summarized her experience:

I just feel really grateful for all of the ways that they enrich my life and make me a better teacher and a better global citizen...all the respecting the uniqueness that they have, and really trying to find ways to celebrate that and to honor that diversity that they are bringing to our community. (Interview, 2023)

Katie's reflections suggest that she views educational justice as a commitment to supporting multilingual learners in ways that validate their linguistic and cultural identities and honor the experiences they bring to the learning environment.

Mary's and Katie's reflections reveal a deep commitment to multilingual learners, as well as the tensions and challenges they face in striving for educational justice. Their insights suggest that reflection is an essential component of moving toward more equitable teaching practices. By questioning their assumptions, acknowledging their biases, and seeking ways to improve their support for multilingual students, they demonstrate an ongoing journey toward more inclusive and affirming educational spaces. While both teachers have taken steps to incorporate students' home languages, engage families, and advocate for multilingual learners, they also recognize that achieving true educational justice requires systemic change. Their reflections emphasize the need for continued professional learning, institutional support, and collaborative efforts to create classrooms where all languages and cultures are valued.

Discussion

The findings of our study align with prior research on supporting migrant and refugee students through culturally responsive teaching and translanguaging practices. Both Mary and Katie embraced a caring, relationship-building mindset, actively seeking opportunities to learn about their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Dryden-Peterson, 2024; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Li & Qin, 2022; Newcomer et al., 2020; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). They aimed to create engaging, meaningful, and equitable learning experiences by incorporating students' home languages, affirming multilingual identities, and adopting asset-based perspectives on bilingualism.

One way they enacted culturally responsive pedagogy was through the selection of bilingual books, which they hoped would reflect students' experiences and provide opportunities for linguistic inclusion. Their use of partner reading exercises encouraged students to showcase their home language skills, reinforcing the value of multilingualism in the classroom (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; Gay, 2018; Li & Qin, 2022; Paris & Alim, 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Additionally, both teachers sought to integrate students' cultural knowledge into instruction. By designing lessons that centered on family traditions and culturally significant foods, they fostered welcoming learning environments (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017) and provided students with opportunities to engage in meaningful, identity-affirming experiences (Gay, 2018; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). These instructional choices supported a multidimensional and empowering learning experience, exemplifying equitable teaching practices that scaffolded learning and included home languages where possible (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019).

In addition to enacting culturally responsive pedagogy, both teachers critically reflected on systemic barriers that shaped their students' educational experiences. Mary expressed concerns about the placement of her migrant tutees in low-level reading groups and questioned the validity of standardized assessments in evaluating multilingual learners. Similarly, Katie grappled with the dominance of English in school practices, particularly in state testing, and appeared to advocate for more pluralistic approaches to student learning (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017). Their reflections suggest an awareness of the broader structural inequities that impact multilingual students and the need for systemic change to foster greater educational justice (García et al., 2017; Gay, 2018).

Our study also revealed important connections to research on translanguaging theories and practices. Specifically, García et al.'s (2017) translanguaging pedagogy—comprising stance, design, and shifts—was evident in both Mary's and Katie's approaches. Both teachers demonstrated stance by viewing their students' home languages as resources rather than barriers to learning. Even when Mary initially felt discomfort with her tutees using Spanish during lessons, she came to recognize that they were using their full linguistic repertoires to support each other's understanding of academic content. By the time of our follow-up interview in 2023, she had fully embraced an asset-based philosophy, advocating for students' right to use their home languages in school. Her experimentation with translanguaging prompted her to adopt more linguistically responsive pedagogies (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025). Similarly, Katie expressed a deep commitment to honoring students' bilingualism, even as she struggled with

the constraints of an English-dominant educational system and her own monolingual abilities. Her reflections on state testing suggested a growing recognition that home languages should not only be viewed as instructional tools but as fundamental rights for multilingual learners (García et al., 2017).

In terms of design, both teachers integrated bilingual resources into their instruction. During their graduate studies, they intentionally planned lessons that included bilingual books for their migrant education students, and Mary continued this practice in her later teaching. She actively sought out multilingual literature that reflected the diverse linguistic backgrounds of her students, rather than centering only Spanish English texts. Meanwhile, Katie incorporated cognates as a pedagogical tool in social studies and science lessons, modeling an approach that helped students bridge their home languages with English content. These instructional choices align with translanguaging design principles that intentionally create spaces for multilingual meaning-making and inclusivity (García et al., 2017; MacSwan, 2017), which equilibrate teacher-student dynamics and transform learning experiences (Wei, 2018).

However, much of the translanguaging observed in this study occurred in the form of shifts, or spontaneous adaptations to students' linguistic needs (García et al., 2017). Rather than consistently designing lessons that incorporated translanguaging, Mary and Katie primarily responded to students' requests to use their home languages in writing assignments or partner work. While these moments supported student engagement and identity affirmation, they highlight an area for growth: greater intentionality in planning translanguaging opportunities rather than relying on student-initiated language use. Our findings suggest that both teachers would benefit from further professional development (Newcomer et al., 2020) on how to embed translanguaging more systematically into their instructional design, one way to provide more equitable instruction to migrant and refugee students.

Our research findings also align with Hamman-Ortiz et al.'s (2025) extensive analysis of 111 empirical studies, which found that translanguaging emerges both naturally and purposefully in multilingual classrooms. In our study, spontaneous translanguaging occurred frequently during tutoring sessions and partner writing activities, reflecting patterns observed in broader research. Additionally, our participants noted how translanguaging fostered student engagement and collaboration—an outcome well-documented in prior scholarship (MacSwan, 2017; Ponzio, 2020).

Mary's observations of her tutees illustrate how translanguaging can facilitate deeper comprehension and meaning making. When her students switched

between Spanish and English to discuss academic concepts, they were actively processing content through their full linguistic repertoires (García et al., 2017; Kleyn & García, 2019; Otheguy et al., 2015). Similarly, Katie's incorporation of cognates in vocabulary instruction provided students with a bridge between their home languages and English, supporting both comprehension and confidence (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025).

Beyond cognitive benefits, both teachers also viewed translanguaging as a means of affirming students' linguistic identities (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025). They recognized that students' identities are deeply intertwined with their language practices, and by embracing translanguaging, they positioned students' linguistic resources as assets rather than deficits (Ponzio, 2020). Both Mary and Katie frequently reflected on their guiding principle of looking for "what students can do," highlighting an asset-oriented perspective that aligns with humanizing pedagogical approaches (Wei, 2018). Their use of reciprocal teaching, where teachers and students co-learn new languages together, further disrupted traditional power dynamics in the classroom, reinforcing a more equitable learning environment.

At the same time, contextual constraints shaped the ways in which Mary and Katie enacted translanguaging practices. Both teachers grappled with the dominance of English in school policies and assessments, particularly in relation to standardized testing (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025). These reflections highlight the systemic barriers that continue to limit multilingual students' opportunities for linguistic expression in schools. While Mary and Katie made strides toward fostering linguistically inclusive classrooms, their struggles with English hegemony suggest a broader need for institutional support in implementing translanguaging pedagogies at the school and district levels.

By documenting the reflections of two White monolingual elementary teachers over an extended period, our study stresses the importance of ongoing professional development in fostering meaningful translanguaging practices (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025). While both teachers demonstrated growth in their understanding of multilingual education, their implementation of translanguaging remained largely spontaneous rather than systematically planned. This suggests a need for school-wide initiatives that provide teachers with concrete strategies for embedding translanguaging into their curriculum.

Additionally, our findings highlight the value of building relationships with migrant and refugee families as a foundation for culturally responsive teaching (Bajaj, 2023; Newcomer et al., 2020; Reinking, 2019; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Both Mary and Katie expressed a desire

to collaborate more closely with families but faced logistical challenges in doing so. Schools must consider how to create sustainable structures for family engagement that involve parents and caregivers as linguistic and cultural partners in education.

Our study also has a few limitations inherent to qualitative research. First, it focused on the experiences of two in-service teachers in one district that represent a unique sociocultural setting. Second, we explored particular aspects of each teacher's beliefs and approaches to instructing multilingual refugee and migrant learners in their educational contexts that might not be generalizable to other educators and settings. Third, our study would benefit from additional interviews to clarify some translanguaging practices the teachers currently use. Nonetheless, our research, that utilizes a case study approach, provides nuanced understandings of each participant's journey in becoming a culturally responsive and humanizing educator.

Overall, our study supports existing research that emphasizes the benefits of culturally responsive pedagogy and translanguaging practices for multilingual learners. While Mary and Katie made meaningful strides in fostering inclusive classrooms, their experiences also portray the challenges of implementing translanguaging within an English-dominant system. Moving forward, intentional professional development, systemic policy changes, and stronger partnerships with families will be key to advancing educational justice for multilingual refugee and migrant students in U.S. K-12 educational contexts.

Conclusion

Our study highlights how White monolingual elementary teachers can shift toward asset-based perspectives on multilingualism by engaging in reciprocal teaching and fostering collaborative dialogue with students (Wei, 2024). By sharing power with their students, Mary and Katie created linguistically inclusive spaces where students' voices, identities, and home languages were valued as essential learning resources. Our findings revealed that both teachers continued to embrace culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017) that recognized and celebrated students' linguistic and cultural diversity. Through intentional and spontaneous translanguaging strategies, they demonstrated how multilingual practices can enhance language and literacy development (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025), disrupt traditional power dynamics in education (Wei, 2018), and foster more equitable learning environments (Kleyn & García, 2019). Their reflections suggest the importance of critically examining teacher biases (Ponzio, 2020), challenging English hegemony in schools, and embracing multilingual students' full linguistic repertoires as

assets rather than obstacles (Flores & Rosa, 2015). This study reinforces the urgent need for pedagogical shifts that honor the humanity of multilingual refugee and migrant students and advocate for cultural and linguistic justice in education (García et al., 2017). However, for meaningful and sustainable change, these efforts must extend beyond individual teachers. Systemic professional development, school-wide translanguaging initiatives, and stronger partnerships with multilingual families are essential to ensuring that students receive the inclusive, equitable education they deserve.

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Evaluating Pedagogic Translanguaging: Priorities in Foregrounding Context

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Received : 21 April 2025
Revised : 12 December 2025
Accepted : 7 March 2026
DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2026.433

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Abstract

As pedagogic translanguaging (PT) gains global traction for its claimed potential to advance social justice, questions arise about its effectiveness across diverse contexts. Responding to this need, this study a) takes a bird's-eye view approach to the question of which contextual factors to prioritize when evaluating PT's efficacy; and b) iteratively refines and ground-truths its proposed theoretical framework through empirical research. Specifically, drawing on interviews with teachers and analysis of education policy documents in the context of refugee education in Lebanon, where PT is used in both Arabic-and English-medium classrooms, the study finds that while PT may appear effective within individual classrooms, it can interact with systemic factors to undermine literacy development goals when not designed and implemented within an informed, curriculum-wide plan. Grounded in and illustrated by the case at its center, the study identifies five key contextual considerations to guide the use and assessment of PT: (1) literacy development targets, particularly in which language(s); (2) students' existing language and literacy skills; (3) the language(s) of instruction across school subjects; (4) prevailing language ideologies; and (5) the linguistic distance between the varieties used in PT and those targeted for literacy development. Overall, findings underscore the need for more context-sensitive research, policymaking, and pedagogical design to ensure that PT supports—rather than compromises—multilingual learners' access to quality education.

Keywords:

Pedagogic Translanguaging; Literacy Development; Multilingual Education; Refugee Education; Language of Instruction; Context-Sensitive Pedagogy; Lebanon.

Introduction

Research on translanguaging has gained significant momentum worldwide over the past decade. Theoretically, some of this research challenges the notion of separate languages, positing that bilinguals draw from a single linguistic repertoire to meet their communicative needs (García et al., 2021; Otheguy et al., 2015). Pedagogically, instructional use of translanguaging involves encouraging multilingual students to utilize their full linguistic repertoires for learning (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Cummins, 2021; García et al., 2017; García & Wei, 2017). The rapid growth of research on pedagogic translanguaging (PT) is driven in part by



www.iejee.com
ISSN: 1307-9298

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social justice commitments to support multilingual learners from marginalized groups (Chaka, 2020; Wei & García, 2022), as reflected in the call for papers for this special issue (IEJEE, 2024) and a recent review from the TESOL field, where PT's benefits are reported to include enhanced support for English (language) learning, the promotion of an inclusive learning environment, and valuing students' linguistic and cultural resources (Kim & Weng, 2022).

However, just as research instruments designed for one population can be inappropriate for use with another (Henrich et al., 2010), theories that are even revolutionary in one location risk becoming authoritative and dogmatic in another, as the father of postcolonial theory, Edward Said, argues in his work on "traveling theory" (Bilgin, 2021; Said, 1994). Therefore, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should critically examine whether PT practices truly advance social justice and/or decolonial goals across borders, settings, and population groups. Indeed, researchers have increasingly emphasized the importance of context in evaluating PT's effectiveness for language learning, often focusing on specific contextual variables (Ballinger et al., 2017; Fortune & Tedick, 2019; Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025; Mendoza et al., 2024). Fortune and Tedick (2019), for instance, highlight the significance of the type of program where PT is used, advising caution when recommending or applying PT in immersion programs designed to produce bilingual, biliterate graduates, such as French immersion programs in the U.S. and Canada. Ballinger et al. (2017) make a similar recommendation while centering language status as a key contextual factor to consider. More broadly, a recent review of empirical studies on translanguaging emphasizes the centrality of context in its recommendations for future research and calls for more research across a wider range of educational settings (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025).

Sharper attention to context can also help in determining which insights from the vast and growing body of research on PT are relevant to one's research or practice. For example, study findings on PT for learning Arabic as a heritage or second language in U.S. English-speaking contexts (e.g., Abourehab, 2024; Deiri, 2024; Oraby & Azaz, 2023), are not necessarily generalizable to settings across the Arab world, where Arabic is learned as a first language. The opposite is also true (e.g., Bin Zarrūq, 2024; 'Wbah & Li'jaly, 2025), even if all these studies address how dialectal variation can be leveraged to support literacy in Standard Arabic. Likewise, research on PT for English learning by Arabic speakers may not transfer well across contexts, as different patterns in students' oral and literate proficiency in both Arabic and English mediate how PT can draw on students' existing linguistic resources.

In alignment with calls for more research on PT's

efficacy for learning, I limit my discussion to social justice concerns that are related to access to quality education, specifically the impact of PT on language and literacy development. One could argue that PT brings positive psychological and social benefits to students, and that this, if true, should take precedence over any harms it may cause to learning outcomes, if such harms are found. But psychological, social, and literacy development outcomes are plausibly deeply interconnected, particularly over the long term. This is evident in the far-reaching negative effects of lacking basic literacy on the wellbeing of youth in the Boston area (Martin, 2024), and in the role that sustaining Indigenous languages in Australia plays in supporting the wellbeing of their speakers' communities (Angelo et al., 2019). Therefore, this article's focus on learning outcomes in relation to PT should not be read as privileging one set of outcomes over another, but rather as elevating for consideration an angle important in both areas, and where a gap in the field exists (Kim & Weng, 2022; Prilutskaya, 2021), as discussed later.

But what contextual factors should be prioritized when evaluating PT for language and literacy development? Language learning environments are abundant with contextual variables that interact with one another and with a child's developing cognitive, perceptual, and other skills (Rowe & Weisleder, 2020). Examining all these factors is not only impractical but also likely unhelpful, as more information does not always lead to deeper understanding (Elgin, 2017). Instead, strategically selecting a set of relevant contextual data is necessary to better understand PT's impact on learning.

I propose a framework of five factors to be considered when evaluating PT practices, grounding my investigation of the study's research question in a specific case: the efficacy of PT in fostering literacy development in both English and Arabic within the multilayered language-in-education policy context of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. This exploratory study draws on conversations with five experienced educators—who are refugees themselves—alongside an analysis of language-in-education policies at the teacher, school, and government levels that mediate the effectiveness of PT for literacy development in the target languages.

Several qualities make this case particularly rich for answering the study's research question. First, PT is not new to the studied context and its use is generally assumed to be beneficial, allowing for deeper discussions about its usefulness compared to a setting where it has only recently been introduced. Teachers of Syrian children in Lebanon, who share their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, engage in what can be characterized as two types of PT practices to

support learning, even if they do not explicitly identify these practices as such:

- a. When teaching literacy or subject matter in Arabic, teachers alternate between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and one or more language varieties, locally referred to as the Syrian dialect. This practice is widespread across the Arab world, where MSA is used in textbooks and traditional media; with varying “dialects” across countries and regions predominantly used for oral communication (Abu Kwaik et al., 2018; Eghbaria-Ghanamah et al., 2020). In this case, teachers view Arabic and the Syrian dialect as a single language, considering themselves and their students to be languaging within one repertoire.¹
- b. When teaching literacy or subject matter in English, teachers switch between English and Arabic (primarily the Syrian dialect), treating English and Arabic as distinct languages.

Second, most of my interviewees were teachers in Syria before their displacement as refugees. This event led to shifts in some of their PT practices due to changes in the education policy environment, while other PT practices remained unchanged despite the altered educational setting. These shifts provide teachers with a unique opportunity to reflect on the impact of their and others’ pedagogic practices across different contexts; not only in relation to language-in-education policies but also concerning their community’s evolving language ideologies, mediated by displacement from Syria to Lebanon.

Third, unlike most PT applications and research in the U.S. and Canada, which introduce a minoritized language into a dominant language-mediated classroom, PT in the studied context brings linguistic resources associated with a dominant language or variety into spaces where linguistic resources linked to a less dominant language or variety have traditionally prevailed and been nurtured. In this sense, the refugee education space in Lebanon parallels the language immersion and bilingual education programs discussed by Fortune and Tedick (2019), cautioning against the use of PT. The existence of this pattern beyond immersion programs highlights the need for careful evaluation of PT’s implications in other, less readily recognizable educational contexts with similar dynamics. Finally, the studied case provides valuable insights for evaluating PT’s efficacy in settings where multiple linguistic and dialectal resources are engaged and learning targets span several languages and dialects.

Findings of this study’s empirical component suggest that while PT practices have the potential to support students in learning specific literacy-related content and skills, their use can risk undermining the achievement of learning objectives when not embedded within a curriculum-wide plan for literacy

development in the languages prioritized by both the community and the government (Arabic and English). These findings align with existing cautionary advice regarding the broad recommendation of PT as an empowering pedagogic strategy (e.g., Ballinger et al., 2017; Fortune & Tedick, 2019; Jaspers, 2018; Sah & Li, 2022), and their implications extend beyond refugee education to other contexts where PT is increasingly promoted as a means of advancing social justice for learners.

The findings ground and illustrate five factors that I argue are essential for context-sensitive assessment of PT’s impact on learning outcomes: (1) literacy development targets (e.g., in which language and in relation to what content), (2) students’ existing language and literacy skills, (3) the language(s) of instruction in the school setting where PT is or will be used, (4) prevailing language ideologies related to the languages involved in PT, and (5) the linguistic distance between the languages or language varieties used in PT and those targeted for literacy development. The findings also reinforce calls for PT to be implemented on a stronger evidence base, with the five proposed factors offering a heuristic for determining which existing research is most relevant to specific educational contexts.

A few notes on terminology are warranted. Building on Leonet et al. (2017), Lin (2020) distinguishes between “spontaneous” and “planned” PT: The former scaffolds students’ learning in the moment, while the latter involves systemic planning informed by in-depth knowledge of students’ multilingual resources.² Following Lin, I adopt a broad definition of PT that encompasses both spontaneous and planned practices. In this article, I use PT to refer to instructional practices through which teachers draw on students’ full linguistic resources to support learning, whether or not such practices are fully intentional, explicitly articulated, or systematically designed.

Additionally, while some scholars emphasize a fundamental epistemological difference between translanguaging and code-switching in how languages are conceptualized (García & Lin, 2017), others argue that research on their classroom use is best viewed as interconnected (Bhatt & Bolonyai, 2019; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2024). At the study site, two vernacular (rather than externally introduced or imposed) orientations to translanguaging emerge: one in which diverse linguistic resources from the Syrian dialect and MSA are treated as part of a single language (Arabic), and another in which they are seen as belonging to two distinct languages (Arabic and English). In this article, I retain the socially recognized names of languages and dialects to reflect the salience of these categories in lived reality, and not to represent a particular view on whether

distinct languages exist. At the same time, the diversity of local perspectives on what constitutes a language both enriches the data and strengthens the study's relevance across scholarly debates on whether bi-/multilinguals draw from multiple linguistic repertoires or a unified one (MacSwan, 2017).

In the following sections, I review relevant literature, then introduce the study's empirical component's setting, design, and results regarding the effectiveness of PT in the specific context of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Findings related to contextual variables that should be prioritized when analyzing PT's efficacy for learning are interwoven within this analysis and take center stage in the subsequent discussion section.

The Role of Context in Language Learning

The importance of context in studying learning has gained greater recognition over recent decades; since Bronfenbrenner (1977) urged scholars to shift research on human development from laboratories to real-world settings, conceptualizing the environment as a set of interconnected systems, including sub-systems such as the family, school, and social values. Beyond such work by psychologists, Sobe and Kowalczyk (2013) in the field of comparative education emphasize treating context as a "matter of concern" rather than a "matter of fact," a perspective further developed by Bartlett and Vavrus (2018). It has been emphasized that the environment's components are not merely a static backdrop for individual development but interact with it bidirectionally (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This means that elements of the environment, such as culture, should be studied not only as independent variables in educational settings but also as dependent, interactive variables (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

In educational linguistics and related fields focused on language and literacy development, similar calls for attention to the various systems and actors involved in language learning exist. This concern can be encountered in research focused on language development (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Rowe & Weisleder, 2020), as well as scholarship on language policy and planning (LPP) (e.g., Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Spolsky, 2019). In the latter, Ricento and Hornberger (1996), for example, use the metaphor of unpeeling an onion to conceptualize LPP layers; ranging from national legislation to the interpretation and implementation of policy in institutional settings like schools and media organizations, down to the actions of individual professionals such as teachers and textbook writers.

Context in language and literacy development encompasses both external and internal processes, which continuously interact. In their review of relevant literature, Rowe and Weisleder (2020) distinguish

between a child's surrounding environment and the child's developing mind, body, and skills, indicating the need for future research to examine both. A complexity theory approach to language development goes beyond this perspective by framing these elements as context for one another—sometimes referred to as external and internal contexts, contextual processes, or systems—while emphasizing their dynamic interplay (De Bot et al., 2007; Gopalakrishnan, 2021; Larsen-Freeman, 2011). This view aligns with Bronfenbrenner's revision of his "ecological" model into a "bioecological" one that more explicitly highlights the interactive relation between the developing individual and their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Following this approach, I consider both external and internal contextual factors in this study and discuss them as context.

Contextual Variables in Studies of Pedagogic Translanguaging

Studies on PT incorporate various contextual variables based on my analysis of Prilutskaya's (2021) review of 233 empirical research articles that use translanguaging as their primary theoretical framework. These contextual variables include perceptions of translanguaging among teachers, school leaders, and/or learners; teachers' training in translanguaging theory and pedagogy; and specific characteristics of the languages used in PT, as seen in a study involving several South African languages (Carstens, 2016). Other factors include the availability of learning materials in students' home languages, plus student proficiency in their home language, which Afitska (2020) identifies as a key determinant of PT's success. The goals of the program in which PT is implemented are also discussed, such as whether the emphasis is on literacy development in a particular language or on fostering content learning in a more inclusive and 'safe' space (Adamson & Yamauchi, 2020, p. 111; cited in Prilutskaya, 2021, p. 12). Similarly, program design and organizational structure—such as decisions to facilitate student interactions based on the languages spoken by different groups (Lang, 2019)—have been examined as relevant contextual considerations.

Despite the breadth of factors considered across studies, existing literature appears to focus more on how context shapes the adoption or resistance of PT itself rather than how PT impacts language and literacy development, mediated by context (Prilutskaya, 2021). Recognizing this gap, as well as critiques of PT as universally empowering, at least three publications have placed context as an analytic category at the center of their PT-related analyses. Fortune and Tedick (2019) stress the importance of contextual considerations when assessing whether it is appropriate to use PT, with a particular focus

on education program types and their associated language learning goals. Drawing on empirical evidence, they question PT's efficacy in language immersion programs (e.g., Spanish immersion in the U.S.) and bilingual ones (e.g., two-way programs) that aim to graduate bilingual, biliterate students with high proficiency. Ballinger et al. (2017) similarly advocate for a context-sensitive approach, emphasizing the social status of the languages involved—specifically whether they are majority or minority languages—and raising concerns about PT's suitability in French immersion programs in Canada (also see Cenoz & Gorter, 2017).

Finally, Mendoza et al. (2024) propose a “contextual framework” for critically examining translanguaging. However, rather than identifying specific contextual variables to consider, this framework emphasizes three core components: viewing translanguaging as political, employing ethnographic research, and conducting research in partnership with teachers. It also highlights societal language ideologies and language-related power relations in spaces such as classrooms and schools as key areas of inquiry. Notably, the framework assumes translanguaging to be inherently critical, transformative, and empowering, rather than inviting an investigation of whether it holds these qualities across different contexts.

Overall, despite some discussion of factors that mediate the learning outcomes of PT interventions, there appears to be a critical research gap in this area—an observation that aligns with multiple calls in the field for more rigorous, longitudinal research on various PT practices to better understand their impact on language learning (Kim & Weng, 2022; Prilutskaya, 2021). Scholars have begun addressing this gap by explicitly advocating for more context-sensitive research on translanguaging. However, this line of research has thus far predominantly focused on a narrow set of contextual variables. The present study invites an expansion of such research, both theoretically and empirically.

The Need for Prioritization

While comprehensive models—such as Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework and approaches informed by complexity theory—encourage attention to more contextual factors, the challenge lies in determining which variables to prioritize when resources are limited and which must always be included to avoid distorted understanding. In fact, focusing on fewer but strategically selected variables may advance understanding more effectively than attempting a more exhaustive account of context, while also responding to practical resource constraints.

Philosopher Catherine Elgin (2017) posits that greater amounts of truth or knowledge do not necessarily yield greater understanding and may, at times, obscure it. Scientists, for example, routinely employ models, idealizations, and what she terms “felicitous falsehoods” for productive purposes. Astronomers sometimes disregard planets' actual shapes and dimensions, treating them instead as point masses—not because the complexities are unknowable, but because narrowing attention to what matters for a specific purpose improves understanding.

What is needed, then, is not merely to expand the range of contextual variables under consideration, but to strategically identify those most relevant to the question at hand. Prioritization in this sense functions as a way of reducing complexity in order to deepen understanding, without losing sight of the complexity itself. Accordingly, this article proposes a framework for establishing such priorities in the evaluation of PT practices. The proposed framework was developed with a broad perspective to minimize the risk of overlooking significant factors. The rationale behind the proposal is grounded in a specific case, with insights from that case illustrating both the importance and contours of each included priority.

Method

The Study's Setting

Between 2011 and 2021, approximately 13 million Syrians—roughly one in two people—were displaced (UNHCR, n.d.), fleeing persecution and threats to their lives by an authoritarian regime, as Syria became a site for proxy wars, arms trade, religious extremist plots, and imperial greed.³ Of these displaced individuals, around half a million school-aged children resided in Lebanon in 2021, with only about 40% going to school (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In contrast, primary school attendance for their parents' generation stood at 97.3%, reflecting much higher literacy levels.⁴

The majority of Syrian children in Lebanon attend school in a “second shift” that is housed within public school premises and where they follow the Lebanese curriculum. Syrian refugees also attend public schools in the “first shift” alongside Lebanese peers, as well as private schools (either for a fee or on scholarships) and double-shift schools run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or community groups, commonly referred to as “non-formal education” (NFE) (Adelman et al., 2019, pp. 7–8). While the two-shift system maximizes the use of limited school buildings, it also results in shorter school days that are 3.5 to 4 hours long (Abla & Al-Masri, 2015, p. 9; Jesri, n.d.).

This study focuses on NFE programs—estimated to collectively serve about 100,000 children (Buckner et al., 2018)—because of the flexibility these programs

have in interpreting and adapting language-in-education policies at both the classroom and school levels, including setting their own curricula and language of instruction policies—unlike Lebanese public schools, which face more constraints in these areas (Adelman et al., 2019). Additionally, NFE schools are largely staffed by Syrian refugee educators (Buckner et al., 2018) who share their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.⁵ These schools have been considered better equipped to meet the needs of Syrian refugee students compared to formal Lebanese schools, resulting from factors such as curricular flexibility, cultural proximity, and targeted programming (Buckner et al., 2018). I interviewed five educators from two NFE schools in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley that serve elementary school-age children, with the goal of eventually transitioning them into Lebanese public schools. The schools had also recently introduced an early childhood education program.

Finally, refugees in Lebanon are situated within the broader language ecology of their host country, where Arabic is the official language and mother tongue of the majority. English and French are also taught in schools and are commonly heard in Beirut, the capital, though less so in other regions, such as the Bekaa Valley (Guillotte, 2020; Orr & Annous, 2018). Among the host population, multiple language ideologies coexist, reflecting mixed views on the value of learning Arabic relative to other languages (Al-Batal et al., 2020; Zakharia, 2009).

Data Collection and Analysis

In November and December 2020, I conducted semi-structured interviews with four teachers (all women) and one former school administrator (a man), all of whom grew up in Syria and had either completed or begun their college education before being displaced. These interviews were part of a project undertaken during my graduate training and therefore did not require IRB approval according to my institution's policies. Nevertheless, I ensured that participants provided informed, voluntary consent and were aware that their contributions might be used in future published research, even though no such plans existed at the time. Interviews were recorded and de-identified, and I obtained IRB approval to use these data for the present study. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, with my own upbringing in Syria helping to establish rapport with participants.

The interviews focused on exploring the language of instruction experienced by Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. Viewing my interlocutors as deeply knowledgeable about their world (TallBear, 2014), I sought their insights on classroom and school language use, related learning outcomes, and community perspectives on language learning, particularly regarding Arabic and English.

I began the formal analysis by transcribing interviews for main ideas (Weiss, 1995), followed by conducting a thematic analysis of the transcripts, searching for patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I revisited recordings, transcripts, and emerging themes iteratively, transcribing in more detail as needed and consulting the notes I had taken after each interview. All quoted material captures participants' authentic language use, which draws on multiple linguistic and dialectical resources. Additionally, adopting a constructivist epistemic perspective, which acknowledges that researchers and participants co-construct meaning during interviews (Mojtahed et al., 2014), I was mindful of how my questions and presence may have influenced participants' responses. During the analysis, I was cognizant of my own belief in mother-tongue education as a right and my research interests in language of instruction policies and practices, in order to ensure that these perspectives did not bias the analysis.

Three of the four teachers had substantial teaching experience before their displacement to Lebanon. Yusra⁶ taught Arabic language arts to 1st and 5th graders, and history and geography to 8th graders for ten years. After completing her teacher training, Hiba taught for six years in public schools before her family left Syria. Samar taught preschool children and English as a subject in elementary and middle schools before leaving the country. The fourth teacher, Rana, moved to Lebanon as a college student, interrupting her studies. Afterward, she worked as a research assistant at a Lebanese university before teaching at several nonprofit-run schools, bringing this diverse training and experience to her work as an educator.

In addition to interview data, I analyzed six policy documents to gain a clearer understanding of the language-in-education policies shaping the environment of PT practices. Guillotte (2020) distinguishes between three layers of education policymaking for Syrian refugees in Lebanon: the outer layer, consisting of policies from international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the national policies aimed at refugees; and the policies enacted at the school and classroom levels. Buckner et al. (2018) supplement this list with local and municipal governments as additional policymakers, along with non-state actors such as international and humanitarian NGOs, national NGOs, community-based organizations, and unofficial schools.

This study prioritizes the investigation of formal Lebanese government policies concerning refugee education, given the significant influence the government holds within this domain. I analyzed national policies directly related to refugee education at the primary and secondary school levels (grades

1-12), published in the five years preceding the collection of interview data (2015-2020). This time range was selected due to the dynamic and evolving nature of the Syrian refugee policy landscape in Lebanon. I also leaned on secondary data sources to better understand the historical trajectory of language-in-education policy development in Lebanon concerning both refugees and Lebanese nationals.

The policy documents analyzed in this study are the "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan" (LCRP) in its 2015-2016 and 2017-2020 editions, along with three related annual policy updates; plus the 2nd edition of the "Reaching All Children with Education" (RACE) policy, covering 2017-2021. While RACE is published by the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) (2016), the LCRP is jointly published by the Government of Lebanon (LEB) and the United Nations (UN) (LEB & UN, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). The LCRP serves as both a policy framework for regulating and setting priorities for refugee education in Lebanon and an appeal for funding to achieve the goals outlined in various iterations of this policy. Moreover, the LCRP highlights its collaborative development in partnership with numerous domestic and international entities—93 organizations listed in 2015 and 112 in 2020—underscoring not only the wide range of actors involved in refugee education in Lebanon, but also the government's intent to coordinate these actors and centralize refugee education planning within its offices.

Focusing on language-in-education content and following Cardno's (2018) framework for policy document analysis, I considered not only the content of the texts but also their authorship and intended audiences. I was also mindful of the forces and values shaping the policies' development, relevant to the study's question, as well as their evolution over time, drawing insights from both the documents themselves and related research. Given that the policy documents contained limited content related to language and language education, I captured this data in a dedicated document and considered it iteratively alongside the emerging themes from the interview analysis.

It should be noted that while interview data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, interview questions did not focus on the pandemic's impact on education, nor did the topic emerge organically during the interviews. Data from policy documents cover the period from 2015-2020 and do not reference the pandemic. However, I examined a policy update published in 2021 related specifically to the pandemic and include some relevant details from it in the analysis.

Results

In this section, I present key findings relevant to evaluating the efficacy of PT-in-context for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Rather than being predetermined, relevant contextual variables for this evaluation emerged through the investigation. These variables extend beyond straightforward questions such as "what is the language of instruction?" or "which language holds higher social status?" Instead, they reflect a complex picture that requires analysis to contextualize PT practices when assessing their role in language and literacy development. Grounded in the findings presented in this section, the discussion section to follow outlines more explicitly the set of contextual variables proposed as warranting consideration before recommending or implementing PT practices aimed at language and literacy learning.

Consensus on Multilingual Learning Priorities

During the studied period, education policies targeting Syrian refugees in Lebanon prioritized integrating them into the national education system rather than providing separate educational services. This is evident in the Lebanese government's explicit commitment to serving Syrian refugees and the design of policies that jointly target both displaced Syrians and "vulnerable Lebanese." For example, one LCRP policy sets targets for 1.5 million displaced Syrians, 1.5 million vulnerable Lebanese, and 0.3 million Palestinian refugees (including those displaced from Syria and historically residing in Lebanon) (LEB & UN, 2015). Additionally, the government sought to centralize refugee education efforts by regulating the NFE sector and legitimizing only NFE programs that aim to eventually transition students into the formal education system, emphasizing their role "as a pathway to formal education" (Buckner et al., 2018; MEHE, 2016, p. 3). Consequently, language-in-education policies designed for Lebanese citizens are intertwined with those targeting Syrian refugees.

Lebanon's constitution, promulgated in 1926 during the colonial French mandate, designates Arabic as the official national language and mentions French only as an additional language, leaving its regulation to other legal instruments. While English use in education was initially limited to missionary or foreign schools, it expanded significantly after Lebanon's civil war with the establishment of American schools and universities in the country, and with English gaining prominence as a global language of communication, business, and technology (Esseili, 2017). The 1994-1997 national education reforms, formulated after Lebanon's civil war and still in effect today, established language of instruction policies as a compromise between two opposing perspectives: one advocating for a multilingual, multicultural Lebanon and the

other emphasizing the country's Arab language and identity (Shuayb, 2016). This compromise translated into offering multiple language-teaching options across school levels, coupled with using two languages of instruction in secondary education. In elementary school, English or French is taught as a "foreign language" subject, and schools choose among Arabic, English, and French as a language of instruction for math and sciences, with other subjects being taught in Arabic. In middle school, it becomes mandatory to teach math and sciences in either French or English, with the two languages being also taught as language subjects, and the remainder of the curriculum being taught in Arabic. In high school, the other foreign language (English or French) is introduced as an additional foreign language subject (Guillotte, 2020; Shuayb, 2016). In contrast, Syria's education system uses Arabic as the sole language of instruction, with English introduced as a subject in 1st grade. Additionally, as of 2014, students select either French or Russian as a second foreign language, starting in 7th grade (Al Hessian et al., 2016).

All study participants affirmed the importance of learning one or more languages in addition to one's mother tongue, emphasizing the necessity of English in Lebanon for education, work, communication in public spaces, and supporting children's educational attainment. Yusra, whose own children learned English and Portuguese and now reside in Brazil, viewed multilingualism as beneficial for employment. One of her sons, who missed three years of schooling due to what she called "the events in Syria," also independently studied Turkish. Other teachers shared a preference for learning English from childhood, particularly with a focus on practical usage—possibly meaning oral conversation—rather than grammar instruction, and expressed a desire to make language learning enjoyable. A consistent theme across the interviews was an instrumentalist perspective related to English and other foreign languages, seeing them as pathways to better job opportunities or as tools to assist one's children or students in their education. Notably, only Issam, the former school administrator, suggested that in the Bekaa Valley, where the two schools are located, literacy in Arabic likely offers better employment prospects. He explained that available jobs for Syrians in the area are primarily in sales and agriculture, and that English proficiency is generally more favorable to have in Beirut, where stronger language skills can enhance employment opportunities, but not necessarily in other locations.

In parallel, when explicitly asked to rank learned languages by importance, all educators placed Arabic first and emphasized that learning additional languages should not come at the expense of learning Arabic. Rana, an English language teacher, expressed this view with reasoning tied to identity and pride, pushing back against what she described as a

prevailing perspective in the host country that tends to devalue Arabic. (My note: this claim cannot be generalized across the Lebanese population (Al-Batal et al., 2020; Zakharia, 2009)). Rana shared that:⁷

It's very important that [the child] learns their mother tongue first because it's their main language... Regardless of how society or people around him deal with Arabic, like here in Lebanon, it's an Arab country but they're embarrassed with [the] Arabic language and always think that if I speak English, then I'm 'wow!' That I've become a perfect person... I'm against the child absorbing that mentality. Why? The child could speak their mother tongue, their main language, and then it's very important of course to learn English. I'm not against that at all. On the contrary, it's very important that they learn English, but it ranks second, with any other second language.

كثير مهم إنه هو [الطفل] يتعلم أول شي لغته الأم، لأنه هي اللغة الأساسية بالنسبة إله... بغض النظر كيف المجتمع حواله أو كيف الشعب يتعاملوا مع العربي. يعني هنن هون لبنان بلد عربي، بس حتى إنه هنن بيستحو أصلا باللغة العربية وعطول بيفكروا إنه إذا حكيت English فأنا 'واو!' هيك إنه صرت شخص perfect... أنا ضد إنه يتشرب الطفل هذا التفكير. إنه ليش؟ هو يحكي الولد لغته الأم. يعني لغته الأساسية. وبعدين، بس كثير مهم، أكيد يتعلم إنكليزي. أنا مالي ضد أبداً. بالعكس، هو كثير مهم يتعلم إنكليزي. بس هي بتجي بالدرجة الثانية. مع أي لغة ثانية.

Yusra, who teaches Arabic language as a subject, alongside science and math in English, and whose children learned multiple languages and were now living in Brazil, placed the child's mother tongue first. She also advocated for the benefits of learning as many languages as possible, asserting that a child "who masters their language well will master other languages." Similarly, Samar, an English language teacher, firmly stated, "certainly Arabic language first," swiftly adding, "[but] also English," sharing in the view that children are capable of developing two or more languages simultaneously.

Regarding language-learning sentiments in the community, I recorded differing views. On one hand, Hiba, who teaches all subjects except English language to preschoolers (ages 3.5-4), shared that parents, whom she described as illiterate in English but able to support their children's education in Arabic, expressed a strong desire for the school to focus more on English. Hiba herself regretted that the adult generation in Syria had not learned English well, as it would have made it easier for her, personally, to teach and benefit from a training program she was part of at the time of our conversation. On the other hand, Samar highlighted concerns raised by families about sequencing and the school's level of difficulty for their children. For instance, some parents asked, "How can you teach [the child] to count in English when they cannot count in Arabic yet?" Issam agreed, noting that if schools teaching in Arabic were available, parents would likely favor them, as it would make it easier for parents to support their children's education—with homework support, for example.

Pedagogic Translanguaging-in-Context and Learning Outcomes

According to Issam, the anticipation of students' need to learn math and science in English starting in 7th grade, along with the potential challenges this might present for them, led the schools to gradually shift the language of instruction for one subject from Arabic to English each year. This decision was made despite concerns about teacher and parent proficiency in English. As a result, while Arabic language as a subject remained taught in Arabic, the language of instruction of subjects like math, science, and sometimes "life skills" was gradually switched to English. This practice should be understood within the context of the school operating on a double-shift system to allow more students to access education. This means dividing the day into two sessions—one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, each lasting 3.5 to 4 hours. Given the limited curricular time, if math, science, and English (as a foreign language subject) are taught in English, the remaining subjects taught in Arabic would be limited to Arabic (as a language subject) and, occasionally, life skills.

However, while English was the language of textbooks and assessments for most subjects, it was not always used in the classroom. Teachers alternated between English and Arabic when explaining concepts and assessment questions. Samar, an English language teacher for children aged five to ten, who taught in Lebanon for five years, explained:

It's true that I teach English, but I think that in Lebanon there is much emphasis on the English language. Students learn science in English, math in English, etc. There is very little focus on Arabic... And when teachers teach in English, they don't use... how to say? correct language. For example, I am teaching a lesson, let's assume about plants. I say roots and stem... etc. but explain in Arabic:

'These are called roots [أسمهم جذور]... I feel that the child gets lost. They're not able to master Arabic language... nor are we familiarizing them with English sentences for example. We just use [English] terminology. That's all.

أنا صحيح بدرس باللغة الانكليزية، بس عن جد هون لقيت بلبنان التركيز أكثر صابر عالغة الانكليزية. يعني عم ياخدوا science بالانكليزي، الـ math بالانكليزي، كذا. اللغة العربية كثير قليل التركيز عليها... حتى وقت الاساتذة عم يعطوهم هذول المواد بالانكليزي ما عم يستخدموا... كيف بدى قللك؟ مو اللغة الصحيحة يعني. مثلاً، أنا عم أعطيهم درس، لنفترض عن النباتات، فقلتلهم roots و stem وكذا، بس عم أشرحهم بالعربي: 'هذول أسمهم roots'. فعم حس الولد تشتت. يعني ما عم يقدر يتقن اللغة العربية... ولا أنا عم استخدم اللغة الانكليزية وأعطيهم مثلاً جمل تكون ألفة عليهم. يعني مجرد إني عم استخدم المصطلحات. بس.

Based on this description, usage of both languages also likely took place in the math classroom, with teachers resorting to PT to facilitate students' understanding of the material and their engagement in class. In these cases, PT may also have been employed by the teachers because it makes it easier for them to

teach and communicate with students. Samar felt that there is an emphasis on teaching English at the expense of Arabic, but noted that even for English-medium subjects, while assessments and textbooks are in English, teachers mix English and Arabic in the classroom. They intersperse idioms, numbers, and other linguistic content from both languages, with a focus on teaching children specific English vocabulary related to their lessons. This, she noted, is not good for students' learning.

Yusra shared a complementary observation:

As a language, Arabic is very difficult for them. If we want to speak to them in Standard Arabic, they're not able to understand all the vocabulary or words we're saying. So they're leaning toward English more because they're finding it easier to memorize, and they're able to memorize it faster because of repetition... they're encountering it in math, science, and English [subjects], meaning that they're learning it in three places, whereas they're learning Arabic only once. And like I said, they're finding English easier, so I feel that they're liking the English class more than the Arabic one. It is possible that they will forget Arabic if things remain like this. That they don't master Standard Arabic.

كلغة، العربي كثير صعب عليهم. حتى إذا بدنا نحكي معهم بالفصحى، ما كل المصطلحات أو الكلمات اللي نقولها بيقدروا يفهموها. فصايرين عم بيميلوا للانكليزي أكثر. لأنه عم يلاقوها أسهل للحفظ و عم تتحفظ معهم أسرع كونه تكرار... عم تتكرر معهم مثلاً، بالرياضيات وبالعلوم والانكليزي، يعني عم ياخذوها بثلاث مطارح. العربي عم ياخذوه مرة وحدة. و عم يكون عم قللك أسهل عليهم الانكليزي، فعم حسهم ميالين لدرس الانكليزي أكثر من درس العربي. ممكن فيما بعد ينسوا اللغة العربية إذا بيضل هيك. اللغة العربية الفصحى ما يقدرنا يتمكنوا منها.

Yusra's comments provide valuable insight into the broader picture of students' learning in relation to both English and Arabic. She explained that children learn to read and write in Arabic only in the Arabic (language subject) classroom, where they focus on learning MSA, the linguistic variety of Arabic used for reading and writing. When considering the role of translanguaging in the English-medium classroom and whether it supports Arabic literacy development, it's important to note that the oral variety of Arabic used to explain things to children in these classes would be the Syrian dialect, and not MSA, exacerbating students' low exposure to MSA across the school day.

Yusra also shared her experience of teaching in Syria where, as an Arabic language teacher, she was required as the teacher to use MSA orally in her classroom, in contrast to other teachers of other subjects, who taught using textbooks written in MSA but could translanguate between the Syrian dialect and MSA when teaching. This use of MSA orally resembles how students might encounter Arabic while watching news anchors or some cartoons on television. Students' exposure to MSA is increased this way, even if they are not required to exclusively use it in class. In Lebanon, where oral use of MSA was not required, Yusra primarily used the Syrian dialect for

oral communication with her students. However, she noted that this approach contributed to students' limited exposure to MSA, which in turn caused difficulties in understanding their teachers when MSA was interspersed with the spoken dialect.

Yusra's observation that children found English easier to learn due to their frequent exposure to it at school is the flip side of the limited exposure to MSA across the curriculum. She noted that this repeated exposure facilitated their learning of English and led them to favor it. However, it is also possible that favoring English over Arabic in school is also a result of lower learning targets for and through English compared to what these may have been had the target language for learning and medium of instruction been Arabic, given that the student population collectively speaks Arabic as a mother tongue and is learning of and in English as a second language. It is reasonable that schools would adjust learning expectations to avoid overwhelming or discouraging students because learning abstract concepts and specialized vocabulary through a second language can be burdensome and frustrating for some students, diminishing their motivation to read (Benson, 2008). Additionally, the use of PT practices in the English-medium classroom to make content more accessible to students—as illustrated in Samar's example about science instruction—may seem like a reasonable strategy to support comprehension and engagement at the classroom level. However, such practices may also reflect or contribute to reduced learning expectations for students. Advocating PT as a universal solution without considering this risk could reinforce lower expectations, and, in turn, reduce students' achievement relative to what might have been possible through alternative approaches that support more ambitious learning goals.

Another teacher, Rana, spoke directly to students' learning outcomes, noting that their achievement in reading and writing is low. She emphasized that this is the case regardless of the challenging circumstances they face as refugees:

When we were in Syria, I used to feel that the outcomes of education... [like] reading and writing were more visible among children. It was possible to encounter a child in 1st grade [emphasized] who writes poetry, or a reflection... To be honest, here I never once saw or heard about someone being creative that way. You feel that students are no longer capable of expressing what's inside them, of writing anything—not even a reflection, let alone poetry.

لما كنا بسورية كنت حس إنه نتائج التعليم... [مثل] القراءة والكتابة. تظهر أكثر ع الطفل. كان الطفل ممكن يكتب شعر من وهو صف أول.. أو يكتب خاطرة... فالصراحة أنا هون ولا مرة شفت أو سمعت حدا عم بيدع بهذا المجال... ما عاد بنحسي إنه حدا عاد يحسن يطلع اللي جواته. إنه يكتب شي. يكتب حتى خاطرة. مو ضروري شعر.

For Rana, this learning loss concerned students' ability to express themselves generally, and through writing in particular. She saw this loss as not merely academic,

but also related to creativity and talent, contrasting it to an image of what students would have developed had they grown up in pre-2010 Syria.

Samar agreed, broadening the scope to learning loss across both Arabic and English language proficiency. She shared that:

[the child] would lose having a linguistic repository... Meaning that they don't have a linguistic repository in English language nor a linguistic repository in Arabic language. Then if they have ideas, they might not be able to express them.

[الطفل] بيكون خسر يصير عنده مخزون لغوي... يعني لا عنده مخزون لغوي اللغة الانكليزية ولا عنده مخزون لغوي اللغة العربية. يعني ف طلع عنده أفكار بس يمكن ما يقدر يعبر عنها.

For Samar, there was minimal emphasis on literacy development in either language: in English, the focus was primarily on oral expression; while in Arabic, areas like composition and grammar were largely deemphasized.

Finally, as my conversation with Issam, the former school administrator, continued, it became clearer to him that I was interested in learning about education in both English and Arabic, rather than focusing primarily on English, echoing what he might have encountered in the context of language policy for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon, as the findings show in the next section. He noted that if students learned more Arabic at school, it would not only enable parents to better support their children's education but also increase the students' confidence, adding that learning in Arabic would boost students' understanding of the curriculum, grades, and motivation to put more effort into learning, implying that all of these aspects are connected.

Assumed Language Learning Needs and Assets

The analyzed government policy documents—various editions and updates of the "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan" (LCRP) (LEB & UN, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020) and the second edition of "Reaching All Children with Education" (RACE) (MEHE, 2016)—were published in response to the influx of 1.5 million Syrian refugees into Lebanon. These documents stress the country's limited resources and challenges faced in hosting such a high number of refugees, while also highlighting its generous efforts to address the refugee influx. They underscore a commitment to aligning with human rights standards in these efforts and ensuring quality educational opportunities for both non-Lebanese and Lebanese children, and emphasize regulating non-formal education (NFE) as a key policy target for integrating refugee children into the formal education system.

"Foreign language" education emerges as a

significant theme within these policies, particularly in relation to school enrollment and attendance barriers, as well as laid-out support strategies for both students and teachers. Regarding enrollment challenges, the RACE II (2017-2021) policy identifies poverty, along with its other faces of child labor and early marriage, as major barriers to accessing education. Foreign language requirements within the Lebanese education system are given comparable emphasis to these barriers to student access to education, with the policy presenting the claim that refugees lack proficiency in the target languages. For example, the policy outlines that “Refugee communities’ lack of functional literacy, numeracy, and comprehension in French or English weighs significantly against them,” adding that “French-language schools have been reported especially problematic because parents do not speak, understand, or use the language in their communities and therefore cannot offer their children support” (MEHE, 2016, p. 7).

Similarly, the LORP (2017-2020) identifies the use of English and French as languages of instruction as a major barrier to Syrian children’s access to education, among challenges like missed schooling years, child labor, and early marriage (LEB & UN, 2017, p. 48). The 2021 update of the policy addresses language-in-education in the context of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting concerns about students’ access to education and teachers’ preparedness. The policy update attributes these concerns to parents’ limited literacy, foreign language skills, and ability to support their children’s education in foreign languages, though without providing supporting evidence for these claim (LEB & UN, 2021, pp. 72, 75). To complement these emphases, foreign language education is presented as a key strategy to reduce school attrition (LEB & UN, 2015, p. 64, 2020, p. 65), and facilitating foreign language instruction is identified as a primary focus for teacher training (LEB & UN, 2015, p. 64).

The government’s emphasis on foreign language skill limitations and related interventions is mirrored in the language-in-education policies of the two schools where the educators I interviewed worked. Although the requirement to teach math and science in English (or French) officially starts in 7th grade only, these schools began using English as the medium of instruction of these subjects much earlier and in a way that arguably made it the de facto medium of instruction across the curriculum. This practice aligns with what has been called a “washback effect,” where the language of anticipated key academic tests influences the language of instruction in earlier educational stages (Benson, 2013).

Overall, the policies emphasize foreign language proficiency as a barrier to educational access

without substantiating claims about refugees’ actual proficiency levels in English or French, nor differentiating offered reasoning per education level (primary or secondary), even though Lebanon’s education policies mandate the use of these languages for certain subjects only starting in grade 7, making it a less relevant concern for younger children. Furthermore, the policies frame literacy in foreign languages as the main access barrier, and neglect children’s Arabic literacy levels, despite noting that a large percentage of out-of-school children “have never accessed any form of certified education” (MEHE, 2016, p. 7), which means that they likely have functional literacy in neither of Arabic, English, or French.

In parallel, while interviewed teachers firmly agreed that English should be taught alongside Arabic rather than replacing it, few expressed concern about children’s literacy in Arabic. When asked about the perceived threat to the Arabic language within the population of Syrian refugees, Hiba responded:

No no, it's the opposite, because the child doesn't speak in English language at home. They use Arabic language with their parents, siblings, and [social] environment—but the good and nice thing is that they're getting a good foundation in English.

لا. لا بالعكس. ما هو بالبيت الطفل ما بيحكي باللغة الانكليزية. يعني هلق بالبيت عم يستخدم اللغة العربية مع أهله مع إخوانه مع المحيط الحوالية—بس الشي المنيح والحلو إنه عم يتأسس منيح بالانكليزي.

Issam also explained that many parents assume that the earlier a child learns English the better, believing that children will naturally acquire Arabic:

No [there is no threat to Arabic], because the parents consider it[s learning] by default. That it is certain that the child will learn Arabic. Especially because there is an Arabic subject at school.

لا [لا يوجد خطر على العربية]، لأنه بياخذوها [الأهالي] by default. إنه أكيد رح يتعلم عربي. خصوصاً إنه في subject عم تكون عربي بالمدرسة.

Both responses suggest a sense of security regarding Arabic, with the belief that its presence in the home and role as a subject in school will ensure that children will learn it. This assumption positions home orality as sufficient for developing proficiency in Arabic, without addressing the need for systematic study. Furthermore, neither the quantity nor quality of Arabic instruction in schools was brought into question.

Surprisingly, Samar expressed no concern about children’s ability to speak and communicate in Arabic, despite her earlier criticism of PT in the English-medium classroom and expressed concerns about children lacking a “linguistic repository” in both Arabic and English. She justified this by emphasizing that children naturally learn to communicate in Arabic through interactions with their family and friends. However, her focus on oral communication suggests she was likely referring to the spoken Arabic dialect rather than

the development of MSA and of Arabic literacy skills necessary for continued learning, including through the Arabic-medium subjects in middle and high school in Lebanon.

Yusra was the only educator among the five interviewees who, without prompting, expressed concern that students might forget Arabic if the current situation persisted. Overall, the analysis of interviews and policy documents suggests that both community and government perspectives recognize the importance of children learning multiple languages. However, Arabic language and literacy development appears to be largely taken for granted, with English learning being perceived as a key area for intervention.

Discussion

Before advancing and when evaluating PT practices, I propose that five contextual questions be considered at a minimum. These questions were shaped by key patterns in the data and are grounded in existing theory and research emphasizing that language and literacy development occur in context (Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Rowe & Weisleder, 2020). They are:

1. What are the immediate and long-term literacy development targets (e.g. in which language(s), in connection to which skills or content areas, and at what levels)?
2. What are students' existing language and literacy skills in relation to these targets?
3. What is/are the language(s) of instruction across school subjects?
4. What language ideologies prevail in relation to the languages involved in PT?
5. What are the linguistic distances between the languages or language varieties used in PT and those targeted for literacy development?

Each of these considerations is explored and illustrated below and is proposed for use across PT implementation contexts, including the one examined in this article, where the collected data are neither intended nor suitable for generalizing findings across the refugee education sector in Lebanon—or to refugee education more broadly. These questions can also help identify which existing studies on PT are most relevant to a given research or implementation context.

Literacy Development Targets

Both Fortune and Tedick (2019) and Ballinger et al. (2017) caution against promoting the use of PT in language immersion programs—such as French immersion programs in the U.S. and Canada—where

the explicit goal is for students to become strongly bilingual and biliterate. In parallel, recent literature reviews of empirical studies on PT highlight the need for further research into its impact on language and literacy development outcomes (Kim & Weng, 2022; Prilutskaya, 2021). Identifying the target languages for literacy development is a crucial step before evaluating PT's usefulness or efficacy. For instance, assessing PT's impact on literacy outcomes in English while disregarding German in a program intended to graduate students literate in both is not only incomplete, but also potentially harmful—since PT practices may inadvertently hinder literacy development in the language not included in the assessment. Moreover, the identification of literacy targets should not be limited to individual classrooms or short-term goals, but should rather reflect broader and longer-term literacy development aims for students. A narrow focus on immediate and micro-level considerations risks overlooking more consequential educational needs. Finally, identifying literacy development goals should go beyond naming the target language(s) to include consideration of the literacy skills to be attained.

Findings from the present study suggest that the development of literacy in both Arabic and English is likely a shared goal among the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon and the Lebanese government, and that both languages should be taken into account when evaluating the effectiveness of PT practices. In the studied context, teachers appear to use PT in an ad hoc manner—either intentionally, to support students' understanding of instructional content, or more intuitively, without prior deliberation. However, when given the opportunity to reflect on language learning beyond the classroom walls and on long-term literacy development in both Arabic and English, some teachers expressed concerns about the appropriateness and limitations of PT in children's schooling. These concerns included noting that students were not building a solid linguistic foundation in either English or Arabic to support self-expression, and that learning both languages was compromised due to switching between them in class. Such concerns can be further linked to language of instruction decisions, particularly teaching curricula in a language that children do not speak at home, and are compounded by the limited availability of resources, manifest in having a shorter school day.

Students' Current Language and Literacy Skills

In addition to literacy development targets, students themselves must be taken into account as developing individuals shaped by and actively shaping their environments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Afitska (2020, p. 176) observes that translanguaging practices in the U.K. and similar contexts are more commonly implemented in

secondary rather than primary schools, as teachers recognize that “for translanguaging to thrive, learners need to have... good, or at least adequate, literacy skills in their home language(s).” However, not all proponents or researchers of PT begin by assessing or acknowledging what students know and do not know. Critically, when proficiency in the home language—especially in minoritized languages—is assumed rather than evaluated, this can lead to inaccurate understandings of students’ learning needs and the adoption of pedagogic approaches that may be ill-suited or ineffective.

The Lebanese refugee education policies consistently emphasized a weakness of refugee students and communities in “foreign languages” as a barrier to accessing education and as an area requiring intervention. However, children who are just beginning school in Lebanon may also have limited proficiency in their mother tongue—a condition that is developmentally appropriate given their age and stage of schooling. It is as if these policies operate with an assumed Syrian refugee student: for example, a 12-year-old displaced into Lebanon after receiving some schooling in Syria and who is already literate in Arabic—rather than accounting for a broader and more representative range of learners, including a typical 6-year-old who has not yet learned to read in any language but is developmentally ready to do so. In reality, given the protracted displacement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the majority of students in the classrooms of the teachers I interviewed were born in Lebanon and lacked access to literacy instruction outside that which they received at school—including literacy in Arabic. A more accurate and nuanced understanding of students’ current language and literacy skills should therefore be considered, alongside short- and long-term literacy development goals, to better identify and respond to students’ learning needs.

Language of Instruction

Literacy development is a cross-curricular matter. The notion of Matthew effects in reading (Stanovich, 2009) captures how stronger readers are better able to comprehend texts, expand their vocabulary, and read more complex material, which in turn boosts their reading skills, allowing them to read more, and so on. Conversely, weaker readers face challenges in making similar progress. This notion emphasizes that both the quality and quantity of text engagement are vital for literacy growth. Additionally, in contexts in which students’ reading and literacy development primarily take place during school time and via reading textbooks and other classroom materials—such as in the case of the present study—the responsibility falls more clearly on the school to build what Rana referred to as a student’s “linguistic repository.”

Cross-curricular literacy development is particularly important to consider when multiple languages are targeted for literacy development, as seen in the studied case. Yusra’s observation that students find English easier to learn than Arabic “because of repetition” highlights this point. She explained that students are exposed to English in math, science, and English language classes, learning it “in three places,” while Arabic is taught only in one. Research on language of instruction policies and practices supports this perspective, showing that fostering literacy in students’ home language across various subject areas not only strengthens their proficiency in the home language but also facilitates the development of literacy in a second language (Mohohlwane et al., 2023; Nakamura et al., 2023; Steele et al., 2017).

In the studied case, despite the shared goal among the community and government authorities of building proficiency in both English and Arabic, literacy development in Arabic does not receive sufficient curricular time. This imbalance is further exacerbated by the use of the two-shift system, which shortens the school day; making English the *de facto* language of instruction. The use of PT also compounds the issue by limiting students’ exposure to MSA, the variety of Arabic used for literacy. The paradox is that, while teachers may aim to help students access content at the classroom level through the use of PT practices, such use may inadvertently undermine students’ long-term biliteracy development when not adjusted to take the school’s language of instruction into consideration.

Prevailing Language Ideologies

Language ideologies refer to attitudes, beliefs, and/or feelings about language—whether about language in general or specific languages—with regard to elements such as language use, structure, and nature (Cavanaugh, 2020; Woolard, 2020). Ballinger et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of considering the social status of the languages involved in PT—particularly whether they are majority or minority languages—before recommending PT’s use in the classroom. Discussing the case of French immersion programs in Canada, they caution against the PT-mediated promotion of English, the majority language there, during instructional time designated for teaching French. This caution is grounded in empirical evidence, which the researchers review in relation to three established rationales that inform the design of immersion programs aimed at graduating strongly bilingual and biliterate students in both French and English.

This study’s findings support and extend those of Ballinger et al. (2017), for language status in the examined context does not align with the number of people who speak it. Specifically, English is a minority language in both Lebanon and Syria. Nevertheless,

interviewees emphasized its perceived necessity for education and employment. Only one of the five interviewees noted that most job opportunities available to Syrian refugees in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley are in agriculture or sales; and while English may improve employment prospects in Beirut, it is not essential there.

Additionally, language ideologies can also encompass beliefs about language learning and bilingual development, including what have been referred to as common “myths” in these areas (Espinosa, 2013; McCabe et al., 2013). In the studied context, the myth that ‘earlier exposure to a second language leads to better proficiency in it’ appears to likely mediate school and government policies, as well as parent and teacher attitudes, in ways that supported, or at least failed to challenge, the early and expansive incorporation of English across the curriculum. In contrast, I did not encounter beliefs aligned with the growing body of evidence showing that building literacy in the mother tongue supports overall literacy development, including literacy in a second language (Alkateb-Chami, 2024; Mohohlwane et al., 2023; Nakamura et al., 2023; Steele et al., 2017). Moreover, an assumption that children will naturally acquire language and literacy skills in their mother tongue seems to be present at both community and governmental levels. This was reflected in several interview responses, and in the absence of any discussion of challenges related to students’ Arabic literacy development across all examined policy documents.

As such, if the goal is to graduate students who are biliterate, then schools and teachers should consider prevailing language ideologies in their communities—both those related to the languages involved in PT and to language learning more broadly—when planning and implementing language-in-education policies and shaping classroom instruction, including decisions about the potential use of PT.

Linguistic Distances

This study highlights the importance of taking into account the distances between the languages or language varieties used in PT and those targeted for literacy development when recommending or implementing PT. While findings are grounded in the specific case of PT involving Arabic—where notable variation exists between spoken varieties and the standardized form used in writing—they raise similar questions about other contexts where linguistic distances exist, regardless of their degree.

In the studied context, two types of PT occur: one in the Arabic-medium class, where MSA is used alongside one or more spoken varieties from Syria (generalized here as “the Syrian dialect”); and one in the English-medium class, where English is used alongside

Arabic—predominantly the Syrian dialect—to make the English-medium curriculum more accessible to students. When considering the development of literacy in Arabic as the educational target, findings suggest that the curricular space dedicated to teaching Arabic is limited compared to that for English and, concerning, that this already constrained space is further reduced due to PT. Specifically, PT reduces the space dedicated to advancing students’ knowledge of MSA in the Arabic-medium classroom. It also fails to support the advancement of this knowledge in the English-medium classroom, where PT naturally draws predominantly on the local spoken dialect rather than MSA. This arrangement stands in contrast to the possibly more effective approach of purposefully using MSA to communicate in the Arabic-medium classroom, which one teacher noted was the pedagogic standard she was expected to follow in Syria but not after her displacement to Lebanon; and of using MSA as the language of instruction across the curriculum, while teaching English as a language subject and utilizing PT (involving the Syrian dialect) to facilitate learning in both settings.

The distance between language varieties used for literacy and those used in everyday oral communication is not unique to Arabic, and can also be observed in languages such as Greek and German. More broadly, this distance arguably applies to all languages, as some degree of difference nearly always exists between the language spoken at home and the one used in print-mediated texts and formal education (see van Pinxteren’s (2022, pp. 40–48) distinction between discerned and designed languages). Whether described as languages, dialects, or language varieties, attending to the distance between those employed in PT and those tied to literacy development targets is essential when considering whether and how PT may support language and literacy outcomes.

As an extension of this point, if we refer to the distance between language varieties within the same language as intra-linguistic, another avenue for research would be to consider the mediating role of inter-linguistic distance—that is, the similarities and differences between varieties considered to be distinct languages—in learning outcomes tied to PT interventions. For example, when PT involves linguistic resources from closer languages, such as Spanish and French, or those from more distant languages, such as German and Hindi.

I have refrained from using the term “diglossic” to describe Arabic and other languages with multiple language varieties, as the concept presupposes a hierarchy between the involved varieties (Ferguson, 1959); whereas such hierarchies are not always clear-cut in the case of Arabic. The contextual question in

focus here centers on the linguistic distance between the language varieties and/or languages involved in PT and those targeted for literacy development, regardless of the social status associated with each—a matter addressed by the preceding contextual question on language ideologies. However, the answers to these questions, and to the others I have proposed, may not only overlap but also influence one another and interact in shaping language and literacy development when PT is used. For example, in the studied case, the following contextual factors come together to form a mutually reinforcing environment that is not conducive to Arabic language and literacy development, and which must be taken into account when considering or implementing PT: the distance between spoken and standardized Arabic varieties; prevailing language ideologies that take children's Arabic language development for granted while promoting early and expansive English instruction; and language-in-education policies that encourage English-medium instruction.

Finally, that teachers and students in the studied site are linguistically homogenous is a possible limitation of this study, as it did not invite observation of contextual factors that might require particular attention had these linguistic backgrounds differed. However, since PT can involve teachers facilitating translanguaging among students even when the teachers do not know all the languages or varieties in use—and given the importance of examining PT practices in specific interventions in any case—such contextual factors may be more appropriately explored within detailed investigations of PT, as relevant, and not necessarily advanced as a strategic priority across the board.

Conclusions

This article argues that attention to context is essential for understanding the effects of PT practices on language and literacy development. However, it also emphasizes that the goal is not to account for more contextual variables per se, but for those most relevant to the question at hand—an approach that supports both deeper understanding and practical resource constraints. To this end, I proposed a framework of five key contextual considerations to prioritize in the evaluation and recommendation of PT, and which can be used to judge the relevance of prior research as well: (1) the language and literacy development targets in the educational setting in question, while specifying the target language(s) for development; (2) students' existing language and literacy skills; (3) the language(s) of instruction in the program where PT is or will be used; (4) salient language ideologies pertaining to the language varieties involved in PT; and (5) the distances between these varieties and those targeted for literacy development.

These priorities are informed by a unique case of using PT to support literacy development in both English and Arabic for Syrian refugee students in Lebanon, with the nuances of this case providing a productive context for the article's empirically engaged theoretical investigation. The framework is relevant for researchers, policymakers, and teachers alike, with the following sets of implications tailored to the perspectives and responsibilities of each group.

Implications for Researchers

Future research on PT should prioritize the systematic consideration of contextual variables when evaluating PT practices, and before making claims about PT's efficacy or recommending its adoption. At a minimum, studies should investigate and account for the five proposed sets of variables, which should be considered holistically and in relation to one another, rather than treated as separate checklist items. These variables should also be viewed as dynamic, evolving in response to schooling and the influence of educators, policymakers, researchers, and students.

In reviewing prior literature, attention should be given to research that is comparable to the context being studied along these five factors, with explicit recognition of contextual differences to avoid misguided generalization. This is not to suggest that comparative research is not helpful, but to rather invite engagement in such research with rigor. Additionally, organizing literature reviews around these factors can provide the field with a clearer mapping of existing empirical evidence, facilitating meaningful cross-study comparisons, helping identify gaps, and sharpening analyses of PT's relationship to social justice by limiting over-generalization of theoretical advances across contexts.

Implications for Policymakers

There is not necessarily a need to regulate classroom language use, nor to enforce such regulation. However, for policymakers who choose to do so, it is essential to explicitly examine the five contextual factors outlined above before advancing or adopting PT in language-in-education policies. Policymakers should rely on research stemming from similar contexts to their own across the proposed dimensions, and should exercise caution regarding the generalizability of findings across contexts. Additionally, they should integrate feedback from teachers, and, where possible, support locally grounded longitudinal research to inform policy decisions.

Implications for Teachers

When considering the use of PT or evaluating its implementation, educators are encouraged to consider the five key contextual factors noted

above. Comprehensive consideration of each of these variables is not the target here, but rather a focused approach with the purpose of gauging PT's suitability and informing thoughtful planning for its (potential) use. Several teachers interviewed in this study expressed that certain aspects of language-in-education were not working well in their schools. Teachers should trust their expertise and feel encouraged to voice concerns about language-in-education policies and practices, including PT, when needed. However, responsibility should not rest solely with teachers, who are often positioned as recipients of training rather than recognized as experts when many of them indeed are. This mindset is also evident in some research on PT, where the focus is changing teachers' perceptions of PT (Prilutskaya, 2021), rather than listening to teachers and considering PT's impact on social justice—including in relation to learning outcomes—as an open question.

In conclusion, while PT may appear beneficial for achieving language learning goals when implemented in isolated classrooms, it can undermine language learning targets if not integrated into a deliberate, curriculum-wide effort for literacy development in one or more languages. Understanding the context in which PT is recommended or employed is therefore essential. This is particularly important because all learning, including language and literacy development, takes place in context, and such learning contexts are highly diverse, inviting caution when generalizing across them. These considerations are especially urgent in refugee and immigrant education settings, which vary widely and cannot be assumed to be similar. Ultimately, without purposeful planning for literacy development across languages and careful attention to the language(s) of instruction, PT practices implemented in individual classrooms risk contributing to "subtractive schooling" (Valenzuela, 1999), depleting rather than enriching students' linguistic and cultural resources—challenging the notion that PT is inherently empowering or decolonial.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Apoorv Avram and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback during the development of this article, and to the study participants for their time and generosity. I am also grateful to Catherine Snow and colleagues in her lab, as well as to Cindy Percak, Jeannette Garcia Coppersmith, Paola Uccelli, Catherine Elgin, Hicham Chami, and Irene Liefshitz for their feedback and support. Any errors or omissions are my own.

Footnotes

¹Recent scholarship on PT for learning Arabic has introduced the term *transdialecting* to refer to

"[translanguaging] within Arabic dialects in the classroom" (Deiri, 2024, p. 94). Deiri (2024) differentiates between interlanguage translanguaging practices and intra-language (transdialecting) practices, whereas Abourehab (2024) and Oraby & Azaz (2023) treat transdialecting and translanguaging as interchangeable. Similarly, the purposeful use of the Cypriot Greek dialect in the classroom to facilitate the learning of Standard Modern Greek has been examined as translanguaging (Stavrou, 2020).

²Lin (2020) uses the terms "spontaneous translanguaging pedagogies" and "planned translanguaging pedagogies." However, she employs the terms "translanguaging pedagogies" in the same sense in which PT is used in this article. I therefore relabeled her distinction as spontaneous and planned PT for consistency. Both fall under "translanguaging design" (García et al., 2017, pp. xii–xiii), as opposed to a "translanguaging stance," which refers to underlying beliefs only.

³I have intentionally avoided using terms like "conflict," "war," and "civil war" in my descriptions. For a discussion on how the language we use impacts justice, see (Ghaddar, 2016).

⁴This estimate is based on the average primary school completion rates from 1994 to 2007 in Syria (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021), selected to reflect the period when the parents of children aged 5–18 would have completed primary school, and assuming parents in this population group are, on average, 22 years older than their children.

⁵This generalization is informed by language-mapping research related to Syrian refugees (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014) and input from my interviewees, indicating that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are Arabic speakers and suggesting that Syria's linguistic minorities, when displaced, generally sought refuge in countries with aligned linguistic environments, such as Syrian Kurds moving to the Kurdistan region of Iraq and Syrian Armenians to Armenia. Additionally, it is important to note that this study's data do not cover the use of sign language in the Syrian refugee education context in Lebanon.

⁶All names are pseudonyms.

⁷Interviews were conducted over the phone in Arabic (Syrian dialect and some MSA). My transcription retains the original exchange rather than formalizing it into MSA, allowing Arabic language readers to observe the within-language translanguaging. A few words or phrases were shared by interviewees in English, which are presented as originally spoken in the non-translated transcripts and italicized in the translated versions. Additionally, since the masculine

form in Arabic is commonly used to generalize across genders, I used “they/their” instead of “he/his” in my translations to preserve the intended meaning.

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Navigating Tensions: The Dynamic Growth of Preservice Teachers' Critical Translingual Stance in Partnership with Refugee Children

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Received : 18 March 2025
 Revised : 13 October 2025
 Accepted : 7 March 2026
 DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2026.434

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Abstract

This comparative case study explores how two preservice teachers (PTs), working with recently arrived Afghan refugee students in a reading methods course, navigated and enacted critical translingual stances, despite the course's absence of explicit translanguaging pedagogy. Framed by Critical Translingual Approach and Culturally Disruptive Pedagogy, this study analyzes the non-linear, situated development of two racially, ethnically, and linguistically different PTs' ideological stances and pedagogical choices. Findings illustrate the tensions PTs experienced as they sought to recognize and affirm their students' full linguistic and cultural repertoires while contending with normative language ideologies, conflicting expectations, and narrow views of literacy. The study highlights the importance of critical joy, relationship building, and oral storytelling as literacy practices, while also pointing to the need for deeper theoretical and experiential preparation in teacher education. We end with a call for teacher educators to embed justice-oriented approaches across the curriculum and to create and sustain ruptures that invite the confrontation of whiteness.

Keywords:

Emergent Bilinguals, Literacy, English Language Learners, Teacher Education, Language, Reading Instruction, Refugees, Science Of Teaching Reading

Introduction

Partnership with Refugee Children

By the end of June 2024, 122.6 million people throughout the globe were forcibly displaced "as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order" (UNHCR, 2024). As the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide grows, an increasing number of migrant and refugee children enter U.S. schools. One-fifth of the world's international migrants have relocated to the United States, according to the Pew Research Center (Moslimani & Passel, 2024) and in 2024 alone, 100,034 refugees were admitted to the United States (Refugee Processing Center, 2024). Texas, the state in which this research takes place, is currently third among U.S. states for resettling refugees (Covington, 2023). Additionally, as migration has increased, so too has the overall linguistic



www.iejee.com
 ISSN: 1307-9298

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diversity of schools. In 2021, over 10% of students in the U.S were considered English Learners (ELs) and in Texas, ELs comprised more than 20% of the student population with over 1.1 million students receiving language support services (NCES, 2022).

Many teacher education programs attempt to equip future teachers with the knowledge and resources to meet the needs and draw on the strengths of linguistically and culturally diverse students through multicultural education (Wiseman & Galegher, 2019). However, these efforts often fall short, as treating culturally and linguistically diverse students as a homogenous group fails to recognize the rich diversity in backgrounds and experiences (Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023). This is especially true when considering refugee students who bring unique strengths such as resilience, multilingual repertoires, and deep cultural knowledge, as well as challenges that may include interrupted formal education, experiences of trauma, and systematic barriers in schools (Block et al., 2014; McBrien, 2005; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). Limited research exists on how and if education regarding refugee children is incorporated into teacher education programs (Kovinthan Levi, 2019; Wiseman & Galegher, 2019), despite studies demonstrating that teachers are the primary supports for refugee children and that educators often feel underprepared for this task (e.g., Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023; Kovinthan Levi, 2019).

This is particularly urgent in the region in which this study takes place. At least 17,000 Afghan refugees have resettled in Texas since 2020 (Covington, 2023). Recent funding issues have led to the closure of private organizations that provide refugee families with resettlement services such as Refugee Services of Texas which abruptly closed in 2023 due to a severe budget deficit (Moreno-Lozano, 2023). Families also face the impending end of federal funds for nonprofit organizations serving refugees, a consequence of Executive Order 14163, "Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program" (90 FR 8459), issued in January 2025 and suspending the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) until further guidance. At the same time, the Office of Management and Budget's Memo M-25-13 briefly paused disbursements across roughly 2,600 federal grant and loan programs (McAfee, 2025). Although the memo was rescinded within days after court challenges, the delay created chaos and disruption in nonprofit services, including those serving refugees. Nonprofits like Catholic Charities of Central Texas and the Global Impact Initiative dissolved their refugee resettlement programs as their budgets were slashed and the future of government funding was uncertain (McAfee, 2025). In addition, Catholic Charities Fort Worth (CCFW), the state's lead refugee resettlement agency, sued the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on March 3, 2025, for unlawfully withholding more than \$36 million

in refugee resettlement grants, eventually prompting partial restoration of funds. The situation was further destabilized when CCFW announced plans to withdraw from its leadership role, jeopardizing \$200 million in funding through 2026, though that decision was later reversed following statewide provider outcry (McAfee, 2025; Remadna, 2025). At the same time, CCFW was targeted for a federal "program integrity review," a move widely viewed by state providers as politically motivated. While framed as oversight, the review added additional pressure and uncertainty for agencies already struggling to maintain essential services, underscoring how federal policy decisions can destabilize local infrastructures of refugee support (Fort Worth Report, 2025).

The federal funding freeze also directly disrupted school-based supports for refugee and multilingual students in Texas. In the focal school district, the freeze resulted in the suspension of federal grant funds for the district's International Welcome Center, which had served as a crucial liaison for newly arrived families (Remadna, 2025). The district also reported millions of dollars in federal grant losses tied to Title III and related programs, leading to staffing cuts affecting multilingual education, newcomer supports, and AVID college readiness initiatives (Bell, 2025). A subsequent hold on federal grants placed more than 100 district jobs at risk, jeopardizing positions in "deeply valued" programs that families and educators relied upon (Wiley, 2025). District administrators also warned the funding cuts were dismantling critical programs and services, particularly those supporting the district's more than 22,000 emergent bilingual students, including recently arrived refugee youth who depend on these resources to navigate schooling in a new language and context (Fogel, 2025). The ripple effects underscore how federal-level decisions reverberate in districts, shaping not only the resources available in schools but also the everyday educational experiences of newly arrived families.

With the elimination of these specialized supports that uniquely meet the needs of refugee children and their families, it is even more imperative that classroom teachers become equipped with the stances and pedagogy to respond equitably to their students. A small but growing area of research explores how integrating translanguaging theory and pedagogy across teacher education courses as a political stance (Flores, 2014) may create a more equitable and just education for language minoritized students (e.g., Herrera, 2022; Varghese et al., 2023). However, less is known regarding how preservice teachers (PTs) embody and continue to develop this stance in subsequent contexts such as field placements and other courses that implicitly or explicitly reinforce White Mainstream English (Baker-Bell, 2020) language norms through unquestioned practices U.S. schools (Zapata & Laman, 2023).

This study explores how two PTs working alongside two elementary refugee students negotiated their emerging critical translingual approaches within the context of a literacy methods course that did not explicitly engage translingual ways of thinking and being.

We seek to understand what occurred in the messy, nonlinear development of translingual dispositions (Ponzio, 2020) when constricted by real and perceived contextual barriers and expectations. In what follows, we provide a brief review of existing research that has investigated the development and enactment of PTs' translingual dispositions, as well as scholarship that explores growing teachers' capacity for teaching and learning with refugee students. Next we introduce Seltzer's (2017, 2022) Critical Translingual Approach and San Pedro's (2018) Culturally Disruptive Pedagogy as the theoretical frameworks for this study. Employing a comparative case study, we explore the narratives of two racially, ethnically, and linguistically different PTs as they navigated their emerging critical translingual stances to answer the following question: How did preservice teachers, if at all, draw on their emerging critical translingual approaches within their planning and implementation of reading-focused tutoring sessions for newcomer refugee students within a methods course that did not explicitly engage translanguaging theory and pedagogy? We analyze how their unique positionings shaped the divergent ways they (dis)engaged their critical translingual stances and conclude with implications for teacher education and research.

Translanguaging Stances in Teacher Education

Over the past decade, teacher educators have employed a range of strategies to develop PTs' knowledge of translanguaging, including coursework infused with translanguaging theory, programmatic redesigns, and structured field experiences. These efforts often involve dual goals: building ideological clarity around language, power, and identity; and fostering pedagogical capacity to recognize and leverage students' full linguistic repertoires. Some programs have taken systemic approaches, weaving translanguaging, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and raciolinguistic ideologies throughout courses (e.g., Herrera, 2022; Varghese et al., 2023). Others have emphasized critical reflective practice, identity work, and direct fieldwork with linguistically diverse students to help PTs recognize and interrogate their existing language ideologies (España et al., 2019; Ponzio, 2020). Results show promise as PTs begin to shift from monolingual, deficit-oriented perspectives to more dynamic, asset-based views of languaging. However, this transformation is rarely linear. PTs' stances slowly evolve through ongoing reflection, developing pedagogical knowledge, and teaching experience

as they confront firmly cemented ideologies (Ponzio, 2020; Deroo & Ponzio, 2019).

In developing critical translingual approaches (Seltzer, 2017; 2022), teacher educators have more recently begun to emphasize that beliefs and practices not only engage students' dynamic linguistic repertoires but also critically interrogate systems of linguistic oppression. This includes engaging teachers in developing raciolinguistic literacies, deep listening to students' lived experiences, and using multimodal texts to spark inquiry into language, identity, and power (Seltzer, 2020; Zapata & Laman, 2023). For example, read-aloud protocols and multimodal composition tasks have been used to position students as meaning-makers while helping teachers confront deficit ideologies embedded in curricula (Stewart et al., 2024; Zapata et al., 2024). The developmental path toward a critical translingual stance, like translanguaging more broadly, is complex and emergent and requires sustained reflection and a commitment to justice.

Partnerships with Migrant and Refugee Children in Teacher Education

Refugee students bring important cultural and linguistic resources to classrooms. Research highlights their resilience, adaptability, and strong educational aspirations, often grounded in family and community values (McBrien, 2005). They contribute multilingual repertoires, bicultural knowledge, and the ability to navigate across cultural and linguistic worlds, which can enrich learning environments for all students (Block et al., 2014; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Shapiro and MacDonald (2017) argue that curricula and pedagogy should create opportunities for refugee youth to mobilize their agency, resourcefulness, and resilience, assets they already possess but that schools often overlook. In this way, the responsibility lies with institutions to recognize and sustain these strengths while also addressing structural barriers and systemic inequities that shape refugee students' schooling experiences.

At the same time, refugee students may face challenges shaped by histories of forced displacement, trauma, interrupted or limited formal education, linguistic differences, and cultural dislocation (Kovinthan Levi, 2019; Naidoo, 2012; Miller et al., 2014). These challenges necessitate teachers go beyond simply teaching content, but also respond as trauma-sensitive and culturally responsive practitioners (Okilwa et al., 2025; Block et al., 2014). Despite limited training and support, teachers often act as emotional supports and advocates for refugee students, providing care and creating inclusive environments that foster safety and belonging (Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023; Ficarra, 2017). While some educators rely on differentiated instruction, relationship-building, and language scaffolds, these efforts often fall short

when not grounded in sustained, justice-oriented pedagogical frameworks (Weisman & Galegher, 2007; Naidoo, 2012).

Existing scholarship demonstrates that many teachers, including PTs, report feeling underprepared to support refugee students in meaningful ways (Kovinthan Levi, 2019; Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023). Teacher education programs often address cultural diversity through broad multicultural coursework but rarely engage with the specific historical and sociopolitical aspects of refugee experiences (Hanna, 2023; Ficarra, 2017). While PTs frequently enter classrooms with good intentions and a desire to learn, exposure to refugee students alone does not guarantee critical engagement without guided reflection and mentorship (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009; Theilheimer, 2001). Scholars advocate for deeper integration of trauma-informed practices, refugee-specific community partnerships, and sustained opportunities for preservice teachers to explore issues of identity, race, language, and power through experiential and critically reflective pedagogies (Okilwa et al., 2025; Kirisci-Sarikaya, 2024; Dogutas, 2023). Moving forward, teacher education must go beyond “tapping into backgrounds” for engagement and instead work toward cultivating critically conscious, relationally grounded approaches that affirm and empower refugee learners.

Yet, despite these important calls, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing research centers either on refugee students’ adaptation or on teachers’ general preparedness, with fewer studies examining the specific tensions PTs navigate in their pedagogical development when working in refugee-serving contexts (Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023; Kirisci-Sarikaya, 2024; Dogutas, 2023). Comparative case study research with in-service teachers has demonstrated the value of analyzing both shared patterns and context-specific enactments in translanguaging pedagogy (Hamman-Ortiz & Romero, 2025; Sah & Uysal, 2022; Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018), but no such work has been conducted with PTs in refugee-serving settings. This study addresses these gaps by examining PTs’ stance development across two distinct tutoring contexts, illuminating the tensions that arise in practice. In doing so, it contributes theoretically, by applying a critical translingual stance and culturally disruptive pedagogy to refugee education research, and methodologically, by extending comparative case study approaches into preservice teacher education.

Critical Translingual Approach to Literacy and Language

A critical translingual approach, as conceptualized by Seltzer (2017, 2020, 2022), serves as a foundational theoretical framework for this study. Rooted in critical

literacy and the multilingual turn (May, 2013), this approach views language through interconnected lenses: as ideological, invented and heteroglossic, socially and ideologically constructed, and as a social and local literacy practice (Seltzer, 2017). Drawing from theories of translanguaging, raciolinguistics, and critical language awareness, Seltzer (2017) builds upon García, Johnson, and Seltzer’s (2017) conceptualization of a translanguaging stance to address all language-minoritized students, both multilingual learners and those marginalized for their language varieties, such as African American students (Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018). In doing so, Seltzer extends García’s (2015) theory of critical multilingual language awareness by moving beyond cultivating awareness of the sociopolitical dimensions of multilingualism to emphasize how teachers adopt agentive stances that disrupt raciolinguistic hierarchies in practice. This framing not only highlights language as socially constructed and ideologically maintained but also positions teachers as active participants in transforming those conditions. This approach emphasizes close listening to students’ perspectives and recognizing their linguistic expertise, while challenging monoglossic ideologies in favor of heteroglossic understandings through “poststructural linguistic thinking” (Seltzer, 2019, p. 991). It also encourages researchers and educators to develop a critical awareness of how languages are socially constructed and maintained through ideological practices, prompting them to question why certain language practices are deemed appropriate while others are stigmatized (Seltzer, 2017, 2020).

Within educational settings, a critical translingual approach has been employed to examine how educators navigate raciolinguistics and translanguaging with linguistically minoritized students, engaging in reflective practices alongside peers and students (de los Ríos & Seltzer, 2017; Seltzer, 2019). This approach challenges educators to transform pedagogy by integrating multilingual, multidialectal, and multimodal texts, validating students’ linguistic practices while critiquing exclusionary systems like standardized testing (Seltzer, 2019). “A critical translingual lens... welcomes students as their full selves with their full cultural and linguistic repertoires” (Zapata & Laman, 2023, p. 247) allowing their unique ways of knowing and being to be recognized as brilliance within school spaces. In teacher preparation, Seltzer (2022) emphasizes engaging preservice teachers (PTs) with theory, critical literacies, and multimodal texts, encouraging them to reflect on their own positionalities and ideological stances. This process helps PTs recognize the sociopolitical dimensions of language education, enabling them to unpack deficit ideologies and appreciate students’ diverse language practices. In this study, a critical translingual approach will be used to analyze how PTs develop and maintain their beliefs about language and power across contexts, considering

how these ideologies influence their pedagogical practices.

Culturally Disruptive Pedagogy

Additionally, we draw on San Pedro's (2018) concept of Culturally Disruptive Pedagogy (CDP) to understand how, if, and when the PTs respond to conflicting ideologies and practices within the methods course, particularly those that serve to maintain White Mainstream English (Baker-Bell, 2020) and English hegemony. CDP as conceptualized by San Pedro (2018), builds upon culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), and culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogies (McCarty & Lee, 2014). While these frameworks emphasize the importance of sustaining and revitalizing the cultural and linguistic practices of historically marginalized groups, CDP takes this further by actively disrupting dominant cultural norms that render whiteness invisible and unquestioned. San Pedro (2018) argues that educational spaces often reproduce whiteness through curricula, language norms, and pedagogical practices, making it essential to expose and disrupt these hegemonic structures. This includes challenging the construction of White Mainstream English (Baker-Bell, 2020) as the normative linguistic standard and recognizing how language has historically functioned as a system of control and containment (García, 2007). CDP promotes critical interrogation of what is considered "normal" in schools and encourages both educators and students to recognize how their own identities have been shaped by racialized and colonial histories.

San Pedro (2018) originally conceptualized CDP through the experience of a white student in a Native American ethnic studies course, illustrating the need to disrupt hegemonic ideologies that position whiteness as normative and privileged. However, CDP applies to all individuals socialized through schooling, as educational structures play a crucial role in reproducing whiteness through Eurocentric curricula and pedagogies (San Pedro, 2018). CDP fosters "sacred truth spaces" (San Pedro, 2017), where individuals engage in dialogue, embrace tensions, and wrestle with their evolving understandings of identity and power. Within this study, CDP will guide an examination of how pre-service teachers (PTs) encounter and respond to these moments of rupture, as they navigate interactions with instructors, mentors, peers, and students. This framework calls for resistance to tidy conclusions and instead embracing the iterative, sometimes uncomfortable, work of transformation.

Methods

We employ a comparative case study design to investigate two preservice teachers' journeys in

negotiating their critical translingual stances within a course that did not explicitly address translanguage theory and pedagogy within its curricular design. A comparative approach to case study moves beyond the description of individual cases to explore the differences between the cases and the environments and cultures that shape these differences (Thomas, 2021). This design reenvision case study by centering "culture, context, comparison, and a critical understanding of power" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016, p. 8) and integrates horizontal, vertical, and temporal comparisons to provide a richer, more dynamic understanding of social phenomena across contexts. We consider how the PTs engaged in similar social activities and interactions within the coursework and integrated field component to explore how their stances, identities and prior experiences led to divergent shifts and responses to ruptures.

Our focus on two preservice teachers with distinct racial, cultural, and linguistic identities affords an opportunity to explore how these identities and experiences shape their engagement with and embodiment of a critical translingual approach. Comparing their journeys allows us to consider how PTs negotiated their stance development in a space where translanguage theory and pedagogy were not explicitly addressed and critical self-reflection was not integrated. Thus, we trace the nonlinear, situated, and often messy process of stance development within an ideologically complex educational landscape.

Context and Participants

This study took place within a teacher preparation program at a large research university in the Southwest U.S. The focal course, focused on elementary reading methods, was part of a professional development sequence that spanned the final three semesters of the PTs' undergraduate experience. This course focused on reading theory, assessment, methods and instruction with the goal of preparing the PTs to meet the instructional needs of all future students. The course curriculum was recently revamped to prepare PTs for a new Science of Teaching Reading (STR) Certification Exam required of all new teachers in the state, in addition to the existing English Language Arts and Reading Certification Exam. This exam addresses STR educator standards related to the five pillars of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) such as how to provide explicit, systematic instruction and how to assess reading progress. The course was field-based, located on a local elementary school campus allowing for an integrated practicum in which the PTs planned and implemented eight weeks of 30 minute reading tutoring lessons in one-on-one settings with second grade students. The PTs planned using a lesson plan template that included opening engagement,

word work focused on skill building, shared reading focused on comprehension and decoding, and a PT-selected activity tailored to the student.

The focal PTs were members of an undergraduate cohort of 15 students pursuing their Early Childhood - 6th ESL Generalist certification, preparing them for English-medium mainstream classrooms in the state. Prior to this reading methods course, the PTs had taken courses that centered language acquisition and critical approaches to language with topics including language policy, family and community language practices, and an anti-racist approach to writer's workshop as well as course readings that included *Rooted in Strength* (Espinosa & Ascenzi-Moreno, 2021) and *The Translanguaging Classroom* (García et al., 2017). The PTs also engaged in fieldwork within local elementary classrooms in which at least 20% of the students were identified as Emergent Bilinguals and tutored children in a bilingual classroom during a writing methods course with a specific focus on translingual writing practices. It was during this semester that Katie and Kelsie met Olivia and Diya as field supervisors for their practicum experiences. While Katie was the field supervisor for both focal PTs, Kelsie also supervised within the same elementary schools and came to know the PTs through cohort-wide professional development. Katie continued working with the cohort as a teaching assistant during the focal course, a course that Kelsie had previously taught. As an instructor of record, Kelsie had revised the course to include literature circles around children's books about language and identity (Lee & Corriston, 2024).

We selected Diya and Olivia as focal cases because they were the only two preservice teachers in the course who tutored recently arrived refugee students, making them information-rich cases (Patton, 2002) for exploring our research questions. In addition, their distinct racial, linguistic, and cultural identities, along with their disparate prior schooling experiences, offered a productive basis for comparison within a comparative case study design. To situate these cases, it is important to note how the tutoring partnerships were formed. Classroom teachers first identified students from their 2nd grade ESL classes who could benefit from additional support but were not receiving supplemental instruction (such as reading intervention, SPED, etc). Within this list of students, two were identified as beginning emergent bilingual students and newcomers from Afghanistan. Based on her knowledge of the PTs as a previous instructor and field supervisor, Author 1 recommended Olivia and Diya to work with these two children because of Olivia's emerging advocacy and openness to centering the linguistic and cultural resources of Pashto-speaking students in her previous field placement and Diya's emerging stance, creative lesson planning within her field placement, and openness to drawing on

possible shared identities. Unintentionally, Diya and Olivia's side-by-side tutoring experiences provide us with a compelling case study through which we may compare their experiences in the course and tutoring alongside their differing identities.

Positionalities

In the writing that follows, we share the positionalities of Diya, Olivia and the researchers as related to language identity.

Diya's Stance. Having immigrated as a child from India, Diya considered herself bilingual in Hindi and English and a practicing Muslim, all identities that remain underrepresented among teacher candidates in U.S. teacher preparation programs. Having grown up in predominantly white schools where she often felt invisible, Diya carried with her a deep commitment to creating a classroom culture that would feel different for her future students. She reflected, "When I was in school the curriculum was not molded for people like me." Diya repeatedly emphasized her desire to cultivate a space where students could express their cultures, languages, values, and community lives. She posited, "People are made of other people and it's very important that we see who has shaped our students." Her first field placement, a Spanish-English dual language classroom with a Cuban American teacher, showed her what it meant to teach toward the translanguaging corriente, the fluid and authentic language practices of students flowing across languages and modalities (García et al., 2017). She embraced this approach through efforts to invite students' whole selves into the classroom, linguistically, culturally, and socioemotionally. For example, in her field placement she embraced the corriente of the classroom by teaching students words in Hindi in reciprocity for their teaching her words in Spanish, while also encouraging students to translate with one another across Spanish dialects to capture shared meaning. She created lessons that highlighted celebrations from her Indian culture and invited students to share their own, positioning cultural knowledge as a shared resource. Even in smaller moments, such as when teaching earth's rotations, she connected the concept to her family's location and current time in India and encouraged students to think about their own families across time zones, often moving fluidly across languages to make sense together. These practices reflected her emerging stance as a teacher who sought to center students' full repertoires and identities. In this way, she demonstrated an emerging stance rooted in humanizing pedagogy and a desire to dismantle the invisibility she had once experienced herself.

Olivia's Stance. As a white woman raised in an upper middle class, English-speaking household, Olivia shared identities with the majority of teachers and preservice

teachers in the U.S. She also identified as Jewish and had knowledge of the Hebrew language. Through high school and college, Olivia learned Spanish, which motivated her to pursue her teaching certification in bilingual education; however, she did not meet the language proficiency standards for the program. As a white woman, the courses and field experiences often served to mediate her ongoing journey to become aware of and negotiate her own linguistic and cultural identities, identities often rendered invisible through hegemonic normalization (Marx, 2006). During her first semester in the program, Olivia was placed in a 3rd grade ESL classroom with students whose linguistic repertoires included Arabic, English, Farsi, Haitian Creole, Pashto, and Spanish. There, Olivia wrestled with pedagogical choices related to language policing, behavior management, and centering of English that she viewed as dehumanizing and unjust, especially toward students of color. For instance, she sought to counter deficit narratives of refugee youth and the centering of English by selecting read-aloud texts that portrayed Afghani children as strong protagonists and inviting students to compose translingual writing. At the same time, Olivia's view of identity and language was sometimes framed through instructional utility, drawing on language to "tap into" engagement or comprehension, rather than as a right or as a wholly valid way of knowing and being. Through layered reflection and practice, Olivia began to enact a critical translingual stance that both disrupted English hegemony and positioned students as knowledge-holders.

The Researchers' Stance. We identify as white, upper middle-class women schooled in predominantly white, suburban communities. Like Olivia, many of our identities reflect those of the majority of teachers; through this work, we seek to learn alongside these PTs to continue in our own growth. Our evolving critical translingual approaches grew as teachers in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms within the United States. Author 1 taught for 8 years in California, South Dakota, New Mexico and Texas. She identifies as an English-dominant speaker and emergent Spanish bilingual through teaching and learning alongside immigrant and migrant communities. Author 2 taught third grade for 6 years in Los Angeles. She identifies as an English-dominant speaker. Translanguaging theory has helped her claim a linguistic repertoire that includes formal schooling in French and Italian along with lived knowledge of Spanish. As current doctoral candidates, we strive to center and hold ourselves accountable to the children our PTs teach. That includes engaging critical literacies to read how power operates in schools (Janks, 2010). We recognize that our positionalities can constrain our capacity to critically examine raciolinguistic and hegemonic language ideologies; we work to confront our own limitations through collaborative critical reflection and

praxis. Additionally, we also recognize the ways our positionalities carried both influence and constraint. On one hand, our training and commitments to critical and justice-oriented pedagogies shaped the stances we brought into this work; on the other hand, we held limited authority within the contexts of state and district mandates. In Texas, for example, the legislated Science of Teaching Reading (STR) exam and corresponding coursework have institutionalized narrow, skills-based orientations to literacy (Mosley Wetzel et al., 2020), shaping the policies and instructional messages circulating in schools. We acknowledge these tensions as part of the research ecology in which this study unfolded.

Data Collection

This study draws on data from a larger ethnographic research project that followed the undergraduate cohort across the final three semesters (eighteen months) of their teacher preparation program. The focus of this paper is on two PTs, Diya and Olivia, during the second semester of that project, situated within a reading methods course that included a field-based tutoring practicum. Data from the first semester are also integrated to offer contextual grounding and trace early shifts in their pedagogical stance development.

Multiple forms of qualitative data were collected to construct each case, with an emphasis on triangulation, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing to enhance trustworthiness. Collected data included course artifacts such as written responses (e.g., reading responses, scenario-based questions, self-portraits), tutoring lesson plans and reflections, case reports of tutored students, and reflections on critical literature circles using *When Stars Are Scattered* (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020) and *Front Desk* (Yang, 2018). Instructor feedback on weekly lesson plans – written comments that PTs were expected to read and respond to before teaching – were also included as a data source, providing a window into how the PTs engaged with guidance and revision during their instruction design process. Additional data sources included field notes from classroom observations, informal conversations before and after class, and each PT's final oral examination. These interactions provided insight into moments of ideological questioning, rupture, and maintenance that were not always visible in written work.

Our data analysis emerged from shared questions stemming from our own experiences in teacher education programs and classrooms, as well as our desire to better understand how preservice teachers develop critical stances, particularly around language and literacy. Author 1 captured reflective memos with emergent analysis concurrently with the coursework, documenting insights as preservice

teachers engaged in tutoring and course activities. More focused collaborative analysis began after the conclusion of the authors' work alongside the PTs.

We began our analysis by approaching each PT as an individual data set. Drawing on our theoretical frameworks, we engaged in iterative reading and initial/open coding of the artifacts (Saldaña, 2021). Instructor feedback on weekly lesson plans was coded alongside lesson plans, reflections, and anecdotal notes to examine how preservice teachers engaged with guidance and revision in their instructional design process. During our initial coding, we documented not only examples of critical translingual pedagogies and stances but also instances of tension, rupture, and normative reproduction. We paid particular attention to the discourses PTs took up, the ways they positioned their students and themselves, and

how they responded to ideological and instructional expectations within the reading methods course.

As we moved from open to axial coding (Saldaña, 2021), we collapsed codes into broader thematic categories and reread the data to refine our analytic claims (for an excerpt of our coding scheme, see Table 2). We also positioned tutoring plans, PTs' anecdotal notes, and reflections side by side, aligning their shared work to examine how they reflected similarly and differently on parallel teaching and learning moments and to look for similarities and differences in how each PT (dis)engaged with potential ruptures (San Pedro, 2018) in the dominant language ideologies they encountered. This allowed us to identify both patterns and discrepancies across cases, highlighting points of convergence as well as divergences in stance development.

Table 1

Data Collection Count

Written Responses	5
Lesson Plans (inclusive of reflections, anecdotal notes, and instructor comments)	16
Case Reports	2
Literature Circle Reflections	10
Field Notes and Reflective Memoing	13

Data Analysis

Table 2

Excerpt of Coding for Data Analysis

Theme	Sample Codes	Representative Examples from Data	
		Diya	Olivia
Leveraging multimodalities	Oral language use	They both had a lot of fun. They were speaking about the story in Pashto and Zikriya was able to tell me what they were talking about. They were making predictions, recognizing characters and setting, and creating dialogue. They also connected it to their own world by talking about getting ingredients from Walmart and saying how they like eating bananas for breakfast (Lesson Plan).	I really liked that he was able to tell me a sentence and I could write down his thinking so that he could have ownership of his ideas and see them on paper. I think that the two really like to work together and I enjoy watching them interact with one another and talk in their native language (Lesson Plan).
	Tools/ manipulatives	[Tools used for] Emergent reader assessments: white boards, magnetic letters, word tiles (Lesson Plan).	I began with using Elkonin boxes with chips and three-syllable words so we were only focusing on sounds. He did well with separating the sounds with the chips and also could use his arm to kinesthetically segment and then blend words (Case Report).
Literacy as expanding fluid linguistic repertoires	Shared repertoire	I learned he is from Afghanistan, he speaks Pashto and Hindi (I translated everything I said to him in Hindi after I said it in English to promote understanding (Lesson Plan).	As we went through the story I used this information to ask him questions and used his language to say 'who is that?' or 'what is the brother doing now?' (Lesson Plan).
	Student's words as text	This lesson included a lot of agency for my student and for Olivia's student. We recognized how they found immense joy in the lessons because they were able to collaborate to come up with the story from the picture book (Lesson Plan).	I loved how both of them pointed to the pictures and engaged in creating a story from pictures. They really seemed to be talking and working together well in this portion. When they encountered a word they didn't know in English they would ask us which was helpful to connect vocabulary to pictures (Lesson Plan).
Literacy as the acquisition of bounded language systems	Language difference as barrier	I believe this was because he was not able to connect his prior language knowledge to the books since they were in English (Case Report).	Due to our language barriers, Diya and I decided to work together for half of the sessions to encourage our students to speak and bridge learning in their home language (Case Report).
	Centering English	[We will read] Pancakes for Breakfast – this book has no words, only pictures. ... We chose to do this because both of our readers struggle with English and also aren't ready for read alouds since they are not understanding and comprehending (Lesson Plan).	An overarching goal I had for all of our sessions together was to increase his English vocabulary which I did in a variety of ways. As our sessions went on, I learned the strategies that worked and the ones that didn't to inform the instruction I planned each week (Case Report).

Findings

Our findings section is organized as short narratives of Diya and Olivia's emergent stances toward translingual teaching as evidenced within the reading methods course. Each narrative is structured to zoom in on a particular moment of rupture – moments that open possibilities for unsettling or countering whiteness (San Pedro, 2018). San Pedro conceptualizes such disruption through the metaphor of muscle growth: “In order for muscles to grow stronger, they must undergo small ruptures and tears in the fibers in order for new tissue to form as it heals” (San Pedro, 2018, p. 1221). We draw on this metaphor to recognize the tiny tears that manifested within the teaching and learning and to examine how and if the PTs responded. While these tears provided the potential for growth and disruption, the PTs did not always recognize and respond to them, leading to nonlinear development of critical translingual stances.

Diya

Diya entered the reading methods course with a clear commitment to centering her students' identities, cultures, and lived experiences in her teaching. Shaped by her own schooling experiences in predominantly white educational spaces where she often felt invisible, Diya articulated early on that she did not want her future classroom to replicate the oppression she had experienced. She reflected, “Growing up... in a very white space, I didn't have other people of color around me and when society tells you who you are is wrong, that's what continues as you grow up.” These values of affirmation and belonging were embedded in her coursework and vision for her future classroom, where she hoped students would feel empowered to draw from and share their existing cultural and linguistic resources. In envisioning her future classroom, she wrote,

I want them to learn how to access their strengths. I want them to see themselves and others as learners that all contribute to one community. I want them to be able to appreciate the values that other people live by and start forming their own values and identities... My hope for the community is that we are able to hold space for each other and respect our individualities.

Diya's observations of her mentor teacher in a Spanish-English dual-language placement classroom reinforced and concretized these commitments. She noted how the classroom was structured around collaboration and student voice: “Students partner up or do group work so that they could bounce their ideas off of each other... [The teacher] gives an assignment for students to tap into their personal lives and their own experiences.” Diya saw her mentor's use of language partners, circle activities, and student-centered writing as examples of how

pedagogy could affirm identity while cultivating critical thinking and connection as well as expanding students' communicative repertoires through creating zones of contact within the classroom. In her own literature unit assignment for the course, she planned around the theme of exploring personal and cultural values, integrating drawing, oral storytelling, sharing family stories and traditions, and scaffolded language partner work to support students in recognizing the values they hold as well as learning about and showing respect for the values of others.

Diya's participation in class and her coursework often shifted back and forth between identity and culture appreciation and more critical stances. However her participation in the literature circle centered on the graphic novel *When Stars Are Scattered* (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020), which follows the life of a boy growing up in a refugee camp, surfaced her emerging criticality. Drawing from her own experiences and struggles as an immigrant, Diya complicated and nuanced group conversations through her layered multimodal texts including YouTube videos, humanitarian websites, and news sources that expanded the group's understanding of the book's context and revealed the systemic issues facing refugee communities. She connected scenes from the book to experiences, including the dehumanizing and biased processes involved in immigration and asylum systems, drawing on her own family's encounters with these structures. She noted how the UNICEF interviews in the book reminded her of how seemingly neutral bureaucratic processes often carry subjective and racialized assumptions. When the group completed assignments focused on using the novel to teach reading strategies aligned with the five pillars of literacy instruction, Diya extended the discussion to include cultural and religious knowledge not explicitly included in the text such as Eid and Ramadan, highlighting how teachers can use the novel to teach into learning and sharing about cultures and identities. Her reflections and participation within the literature circle became one of the few spaces in this course where the PTs openly considered how systemic oppression functions in education and society, and how texts and pedagogy might either reify or challenge those forces.

The Potential Ruptures. This centering of students' experiences laid the groundwork for Diya's tutoring work with a newcomer student, Ikram. While the tutoring lesson plan template was organized around the five pillars of reading instruction, including discrete skills like phonics and comprehension, Diya began to bend these expectations in response to what she noticed about her student. In her very first session, Diya planned a structured icebreaker game but quickly pivoted as she realized Ikram would rather organically talk about himself and his love of cricket, as well as

learn about their shared cultural experiences such as foods they both enjoy at home. Despite being from different countries, through their shared cultural and linguistic repertoires, her student seemed to feel that this was a safe space to make his identities visible and excitedly did so. Creating space for these conversations within the limited 30-minute window of tutoring meant that other teaching objectives were pushed aside or constricted, but Diya notes that hearing about him helped her create more responsive instruction.

She continued to work agentially within the constraints of the lesson template's skills-based expectations, by layering in storytelling, identity, and joy. She selected *Bilal Cooks Daal* (Saeed, 2019) as her next read aloud text, explaining, "I chose this book because it reflects Ikram's own culture and identity. Daal is a cultural food that he would be able to relate to and it would connect his personal life to his school life." Here Diya seeks to bridge the often-bifurcated lives of the student, perceiving a line between his school life and home life that echoes her feelings of her identities being silenced growing up. When her student lights up and excitedly responds to her saying, "Yes, I eat daal at home! The ones with the channa (chickpeas)," her use of the book is validated and it demonstrates that he is feeling seen in the curriculum.

The following week, Diya and Olivia decided to partner for their tutoring sessions to provide their students with a language partner for meaning making. In this shift, they move away from texts that serve as mirrors like *Bilal Cooks Daal* to wordless books, hoping to elevate students' voices as the text itself and to decenter English print. Diya reflected,

"This lesson included a lot of agency for my student and Olivia's student. We recognized how they found immense joy in the lessons because they were able to collaborate...They were speaking about the story in Pashto and Ikram was able to tell me what they were talking about. They were making predictions, recognizing characters and setting, and creating dialogue. They also connected it to their own world by talking about getting ingredients from Walmart and saying how they like eating bananas for breakfast."

Here we see Diya separating comprehension abilities from named languages, resisting the conflation of reading abilities with reading abilities in English. Recognizing that while he is continuing to grow in his abilities to comprehend texts in English only, he possesses the ability to comprehend texts through other resources in his communicative repertoire. The wordless books also opened up a space for collaborative meaning-making rooted in students' linguistic knowledge, further affirming Diya's growing stance toward a literacy practice that valued oral storytelling and translingual communication.

Each of these instances demonstrates where Diya found glimpses of her student through a holistic lens, instead of a lens that privileged English meaning-making and discrete reading skills in English. When the student's authentic literacy and languaging practices were invited through oral storytelling, language partners, and connections with identities, Diya noticed the creativity and abilities that already existed. Each of these noticings acted as tiny "tears" (San Pedro, 2018) working to grow her stance, leading Diya to shift her design and in-the-moment implementation to respond to him as a learner and person. While she continued to retain a portion of their time for work on short vowel sound-letter correspondence, she reimagined the prescribed read-aloud time to respond to her student and elicit his joy and comprehension skills. As she listened to his engagement with the texts and activities in more expansive ways rather than limiting her noticings to English skills based abilities, her view of literacy was complicated.

Response to the Potential Ruptures. The tableau lesson marked a pivotal moment in Diya's pedagogical trajectory. The PTs selected a tableau picture for the students to decipher, discuss related vocabulary, and create a related story. Tableaus, still life images, were an idea they borrowed from a prior course and can be used to explore body language, emotion, relationships between people. While the image they selected depicted five white children in rain jackets holding umbrellas and jumping in the rain, the boys' responses demonstrated that the depicted children's identities did not hinder Ikram and Sifat from connecting with the depicted experience. As they introduced the picture and asked the boys what they noticed, Diya spoke in Hindi inviting the students to share about the picture with each other in the languaging of their choosing. The boys leaned their heads together and began pointing, laughing, and talking excitedly in Pashto together. Olivia and Diya sat back, observing their conversation and their boy's language, creating space for the boys to make sense of the picture together without interruption or the need to translate into English. As their conversation slowed, Olivia and Diya added sticky notes with English labels for actions and objects in the picture, first saying the word aloud and then inviting the boys to repeat the words. With each addition, they also asked the boys what the words were in Pashto and then recorded the transliterated word on the corresponding sticky note. For example, where they labeled "sky", the PTs added the word "aasman," using English script to write a Pashto and Hindi word (while written differently, the word for "sky" in Hindi (आसमान) and Pashto (نښان) is pronounced similarly). As they labeled, Diya noted, "Ikram started getting really animated and telling us stories about what he used to do when it rained in Afghanistan and how he liked playing in the rain with his friends." Building on his oral storytelling, Diya

shifted her original plan of creating a picture of a prediction to inviting him to illustrate and caption the experiences he was remembering. She then worked with him to transliterate Pashto using English script and write sentences in English. Although English remained dominant in the final product, this moment marked a turning point as Diya made space for her student's oral language to take up visible space on the page, not as a bridge to English but as meaning in itself.

In her reflective memoing, Diya recounted a moment during this lesson that she labeled as *"TEACHING MOMENT!"* As they were drawing their pictures, Diya's student paused and asked her if she was Muslim. When she replied that she was, the students were surprised and followed up questioning why she didn't wear a hijab. Diya explained that they were Sunni Muslims and she was Shia, and "we practiced our faith in different ways, but we all say the same Dua and practice the Quran." In this spontaneous exchange we see Diya highlighting their shared cultural repertoires as well as expanding the students' cultural understandings, surfacing the kind of shared, nuanced understanding she hoped to cultivate in her classroom, where identity and inquiry were welcomed rather than silenced.

These shifts were not without regression however. During the prescribed "word work" sections of her lessons, Diya returned to English phonics instruction, working on CVC words and short vowel sounds, despite knowing her student did not know how to spell his name in English script and was working on letter-sound correspondence. Diya seemed to view the teaching of this phonics component in White Mainstream English (Baker-Bell, 2020) as non-negotiable. In this space, we did not witness her letting go of strict English outcomes, which may reflect the perceived expectations of the tutoring and the ways that "English" and "phonics" are often fused within Science of Teaching Reading focused teacher education courses, making it difficult for PTs to imagine alternatives. Yet in other parts of her teaching she began to let go of strict English outcomes. In later lessons, she allowed transliterated Pashto to stand alone on the page, without English translation, elevating her student's oral language as valid text.

In her final reflections, Diya wrote, "Teaching most likely will not adhere to the lesson plans. In fact, it is a good thing to let the lesson flow, because that will provide more insight on how your student prefers to learn". Here we see her recognizing the need to tap into what García et al. (2017) call the *corriente* of the students' dynamic languaging practices, a flow of languaging unrestricted by perceived home and school barriers that "generates the creative energy and produces the speakers way of interacting with others and other texts" (p. 23). For Diya, this *corriente* is reflective of her and Ikram's identities and cultures;

by surfacing it, she invites authentic meaning making to become visible in the classroom that can then be utilized to inform her design and shifts within instruction. She recognized that joy, storytelling, and multimodality were not tangents from instruction but critical forms of meaning-making. She began to listen not for what could be heard as Ikram's lack in English abilities and skills, but for the complexity of his comprehension across languages, images, and experiences.

Diya's State of Fluid Ideologies in Relation to Language and Identity. Across her tutoring and coursework, Diya demonstrated a developing critical translingual approach that was both ideologically grounded and pedagogically emergent. Her teaching revealed movement toward a stance that valued the full linguistic and cultural repertoires of her students, even as her implementation remained constrained by institutional structures and perceived expectations of what reading instruction should look like.

One key marker of this developing stance was Diya's effort to build on shared cultural and linguistic repertoires with Ikram, using her own identity as an entry point to affirm his. This was evident in both her literature circle discussions, where she connected refugee experiences in the text to her own family's experiences with immigration systems, and in her tutoring, where she intentionally designed for joy, storytelling, and affirmation. Her commitment to "critical joy," which Muhammad (2023) describes as not merely as an engagement tool but as a form of fulfillment, resistance, and connection, surfaced early in her sessions and became a guiding force in her instructional choices. She listened differently (Seltzer, 2020) to Ikram's stories not for correctness or as evidence of decontextualized skills but instead to learn about him and the ways he drew on his unitary communicative repertoire to make meaning with others. Through this, Diya began to decenter herself as the expert and shifted the literacy space toward collaborative learning.

Diya resisted mainstream perspectives that position language minoritized students as lacking; instead, she viewed her student's multilingual practices as assets, though this resistance was more often enacted than explicitly named. In her planning and instruction, she consistently documented what he could do across and beyond bounded language systems, yet her reflections rarely made visible the ideological commitments behind these moves. This was especially apparent in the tableau lesson, when she described the tableau activity as inviting students to "decipher" the image. Her word choice subtly but meaningfully reframed comprehension as a culturally and experientially grounded act, something to be interpreted through lived experience

rather than assessed against a singular, normative answer. In doing so, Diya constructed a literacy event that validated multiple ways of knowing, resisting the narrow definitions of comprehension that often dominate early reading instruction within the U.S.

Throughout her tutoring, Diya gradually shifted the linguistic and modal landscape (Zapata, 2020), planning lessons that incorporated multimodality, oral storytelling, transliteration, and collaborative meaning-making. She began to invite transliterated Pashto words and sentences to stand alone, without English translation, affirming that meaning-making did not need to be validated through English to be valid. These shifts aligned with what García et al. (2017) describe as the translanguaging corriente. And yet, Diya did not always document these practices in her formal lesson plans or reflections. Her use of transliteration during the tableau lesson, for example, was only captured through [Author 1]'s observational field notes. This omission raises important questions: Did she view these moves as unremarkable or less legitimate within the expectations of the course? Was she hesitant to foreground non-English literacies in a space structured around English reading development?

Diya's approach reveals both the promise and tensions of enacting critical translingual pedagogy within contexts that include real and perceived constraints. While she retained structured English phonics work in her "word work" blocks, perhaps out of a sense that this was less flexible and attached to her grade in the course, she reimagined shared reading and engagement time to be more student-driven and culturally sustaining. She followed her student's linguistic and narrative leads, used transliteration to give visibility to oral language, and cultivated space for joy and identity expression. Her pedagogy was not one of complete rupture, but of small, persistent shifts – glimpses of resistance that invited her student's full identity to surface. Importantly, Diya's developing critical translingual stance was not characterized by a full critique of English hegemony or explicit naming of racialized language ideologies. She did not outwardly interrogate how her student's Pashto was heard and valued in school spaces, nor did she take up issues of power, race, and language explicitly in her reflections. However, within just seven tutoring sessions, Diya's work signaled ideological growth and pedagogical responsiveness. She did not remain within the scaffolds of translanguaging as a tool to reach English goals, but began to position her student's language and experiences as central to the literacy curriculum itself. While her shifts were not always documented or named, they mattered. They expanded what literacy could look and sound like and offered a vision of what is possible when teachers listen differently and teach toward joy.

Olivia

Olivia began the reading methods course committed to centering joyful teaching so children might "want to engage in a literate life." She envisioned using "[a]ctivities like shared readings, individual reading time, guest readers, book studies, and more" within a text-rich environment to highlight "diverse perspectives and characters" in "books that students really want to read." Instructionally, Olivia envisioned challenging students while also supporting them "to have confidence in themselves as learners and readers." She believed in "encouraging reading and writing no matter the level of your students."

Still, language linked to ability and intervention permeated Olivia's work. She described wanting to "base my instruction on what my students need to work on" and "pull those students who are struggling so that grouping is beneficial to them, and once they have a good grasp on the topic they can move on to work on another skill." This approach to teaching skills "based on reading level/ability" was a practice she had experienced as a student and a teacher "for as long as [she could] remember." Encouraged by her work with language minoritized students, however, she began to consider alternatives. Reflected Olivia,

I like the idea of having students of different levels in groups so students can learn from each other. I think this would have been particularly beneficial in my placement last year where many of our students were at many different levels and were English Learners. I think my students could have benefitted from having a mix because they all had different linguistic abilities, so the ability to translate and work with one another could have helped them a ton.

Similar experiences with language minoritized students surfaced occasionally in her coursework. These connections were largely practical—for example, reading a specific book that her students "who also were ELLs and spoke Pashto loved" to her tutoring student, Sifat.

Moments of critique emerged in her coursework. Leveraging her knowledge of Hebrew, Olivia challenged English-centric definitions of reading in a class discussion, highlighting that directionality and decoding vary across language systems. In a later activity, Olivia critiqued Instagram posts that positioned readers as being "behind." Remarked Olivia, "This is the same mentality as many of the teachers in our placements, but I don't agree. It's overwhelming [to teach in this context] but we can incorporate what the research says plus what you know about your kids and bringing their identities together." In literature circles, she connected these critiques to structural racism, linking Front Desk narrator Mia's experience of being racially profiled as a Chinese immigrant to the Model Minority Myth, and later designed a unit

featuring diverse texts and cooperative language-based grouping.

Olivia consistently envisioned teaching in responsive, translingual ways while simultaneously positioning language differences as barriers. Such positioning recentered whiteness (San Pedro, 2018). For example, Olivia described striving to "bridge the language gap" between herself and her mentoring student by "allow[ing] him to use as much of his home language as he wants." When tensions between that effort and course concepts about reading ability emerged, however, she seemed to integrate rather than interrogate them. While Olivia does not explicitly name this tension, her tutoring lesson plans indicate a substantial push-and-pull. In the writing that follows, we highlight small ruptures that emerged.

The Potential Ruptures. Given her experience supporting refugee and migrant students in placement and voiced interest in a pedagogy of translanguaging, Olivia was invited to tutor Sifat, an 8-year-old refugee student from Afghanistan. After meeting Sifat and conducting some introductory assessments (for alphabetic knowledge, letter/sound knowledge, and word recognition in English), she collected observations of her new mentee, adopting an appreciative stance to name several of Sifat's assets include a linguistic repertoire of Pashto and English, camaraderie with friends, interests in Math and Reading, and knowledge of the Latin Alphabet (which he sings aloud to identify letters). Simultaneously, however, she makes a claim about his reading ability—namely, that he "cannot execute on" reading.

This is a strong statement, one perpetuated by ideologies that position reading as decoding print in English and language as a bounded system (García & Wei, 2014). Indeed, similar languaging surfaces throughout Olivia's first lesson, evidenced by observations that tug between appreciating Sifat's dexterous literacy repertoire and positioning linguistic differences as a knowledge "gap". To prepare for their first lesson, Olivia curated a collection of picture books from which her student might select a read-aloud. Sifat "used a thumbs up and a thumbs down to indicate interest in books" and "whether he liked a picture or particular page." Olivia both named the strength of Sifat's reading strategy, noting, "he understood concepts of print" and positioned his repertoire as disadvantageous, commenting, "Unfortunately because of our language barrier, I wasn't able to really get a lot of information on his interests because he couldn't articulate why he said no to certain books."

After teaching, Olivia considered how to use what she learned to design a lesson for the next week. She reflected that her teaching "went okay" but was "a bit too much above his level." She described, too, a pivot she made using a translation app:

I tried to use an English to Pashto translation but he was unable to read Pashto even though it is the language he speaks at home and with his friends. I think moving forward I will need to focus on letter-sound correspondence and foundational elements of literacy.

Again, we see Olivia step towards leveraging translanguaging (using tools to invite Sifat's home language into the tutoring space) before stepping back to make claims about his reading ability. Pashto is an alphabetic language, denoted by symbols or letters connected to individual sounds or phonemes, just like English; the alphabets, however, differ. English relies on the Latin alphabet, while Pashto includes Arabic/Persian letters as well as some all its own. In the U.S., Internet searches or apps often translate languages like Pashto into the Latin alphabet. We do not know what Olivia generated nor the nuances of Sifat's response. We do see, however, a rather quick shift from her effort to explore Sifat's linguistic repertoire back to monolingual, word-knowledge-focused instruction. As Olivia's plans for the next week show, "foundational elements of literacy" refers to literacy learning in English.

This might have been an opportunity to use her knowledge of literacy learning to design activities to better understand Sifat's existing literacy repertoire, connecting his knowledge in both languages. Indeed, Olivia's instructors responded to this reflection, digitally commenting support ("Do you need access to more bilingual resources?") and questions ("Do you have any thoughts on his reading abilities in his home language?") to encourage Olivia to dig into more fluid possibilities. Based on the expectations for the reading methods course and a report from Sifat's teacher that he "need[ed] support with letter recognition and basic English phrases," she turned to teaching letter-sound correspondence in English instead.

Still, Olivia consistently wrestled with ways to infuse joy into her teaching. Using her knowledge of name studies (McNair, 2007; Nash et al., 2018) from a prior writing methods course that centered culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogies, she decided to deliver explicit instruction about the letters in his name during her second lesson, as "these are letters that have a personal connection to him." As Olivia read aloud to Sifat, she noted his strengths in ways she had not the prior lesson. Observed Olivia,

He really engaged in this book which made me really happy. He pointed to images on the page and said the parts of repetition with me. About halfway through the book he was making predictions of what it was going to say since the words repeat every time, and although they weren't exactly right they were really close. He got a lot of joy from seeing the images and words that went along with them. He was really excited to see the dog and identified the characters as dad, mom, sister, and brother. As we went through the story I used this information to ask him questions and used his language [Pashto] to say 'Who is that?' or 'What is the brother doing now?'

Here, Olivia noticed how shifting from print-centered learning to oral language use opened up the experience for both of them to engage the text. In decentering print, she shifted to using a translation tool to ask Sifat questions—and translate his responses. Despite her earlier assessments telling her that Sifat could not read in Pashto or English, in this lesson space was created for him to demonstrate his abilities to make predictions, share connections, and answer comprehension questions.

Olivia then pivoted to using a worksheet to teach the letter S. Drawing on her early assessments and the course instruction, she decided to “focus on individual common letters,” such as those in his name as written in the Latin alphabet. Thus, her lessons become two-fold: first, a read aloud where translanguaging practices, multimodal meaning-making, and oral language use were encouraged; then a lesson on a singular letter. By the end of her third lesson, she decided she needed to make a change. “Overall I think the direct teaching of letter sounds is a bit too challenging for him,” observed Olivia. While Sifat “went through the [letter recognition] activities” she had planned and “did pretty well...it took a lot of repetition.” Most importantly, his enjoyment seemed to have waned. But there was another reason to shift strategies, too, one tied to cultural knowledge. While Olivia had selected T from Sifat’s name for letter study, Sifat had voiced discontent. Noted Olivia, “He was telling me that [T] is not the last sound in his name because of the way that he pronounces it.”

Each of these instances shows how Olivia’s teaching lived between a desire to privilege her refugee students’ full linguistic repertoire and the expectation that she assess his capabilities through tools that position reading as the sequential acquisition of particular decoding skills. When Olivia opened up her teaching to a more translanguinal approach to literacy, she noted the joy and accomplishment that came from inviting oral, home language use into their shared reading; before shifting to the decontextualized, monolingual, print-based letter-sound practice that her assessments told her Sifat needed. Thus, the tiny tears (San Pedro, 2018) in Olivia’s stance were accompanied by repair toward the literacy learning she believed was expected of the course.

The Response to Ruptures. Between Lessons 4 and 5, Olivia’s teaching shifted. When she and Diya began to collaborate on lessons, Olivia noticed the refugee children’s learning burst open with possibilities. She described the joy of Sifat, Ikram, Diya, and herself translating between three languages to practice “really advanced [comprehension] skills” with wordless picture books. By the end of their time “deriving meaning from images, predicting, drawing conclusions, and telling a story,” the group “only had a few minutes” left for word study, so Olivia scrapped

her planned Elkonin box activity and to practice “blending and segmenting” by “mov[ing] around and kinesthetically show[ing] the sounds on their arm.” Suddenly, her student who did not “know letters in isolation” was identifying full words. “Engaged, happy, and learning together,” the children opened up Olivia’s teaching plans to more fluid, cooperative learning.

This learning included an increase in oral, translanguinal, and kinesthetic activities. In lieu of isolating letters on a worksheet, she leveraged letter tiles and chips for Sifat to move as he segmented words. Olivia translanguaged and transliterated within the language within the tutoring group, inviting the children to read wordless picture books and tell stories which she and Diya scribed. Her reflections focused less on ability or intervention, and more on supporting Sifat to “have ownership of his ideas” by “interact[ing] with” his language partners to “connect words to images.” Reflected Olivia, “Sifat and Ikram gained a sense of pride in telling us stories and grew in their abilities to interpret meaning from images as well as comprehend a story.” These reflections show Olivia embracing a more dynamic view of languaging—and seeing a Sifat soar.

Still, some ruptures remained unexplored.

As she planned for increasingly multimodal activities, Olivia noticed differences in Sifat’s work within their tutoring group and other learning tasks. Reflected Olivia after a co-taught lesson using the wordless picture book *Good Dog, Carl* (Day, 1997),

It was really interesting to see how well he was able to segment words but the second I put the book in front of him and asked him to read the word dog (a word we segmented minutes before) he was completely unable to read the word or identify the sounds.

In the next breath, Olivia returned to reflecting on their shared read-aloud: “There was a lot of joy in this lesson, they were laughing at the images in the book and having so much fun together.” Later, she struggled to reconcile Sifat’s skillful reading by blending of words using alphabet tiles with her perception of inability “to pick out the letter S from a group of letters that [she] gave him.” Thus, while Olivia responded to some ruptures by reflecting and shifting her teaching, others remained unnoticed.

In her final lesson plan reflection, Olivia praised Sifat’s growth across the tutoring practicum. She wrote,

I loved how he identified words we have worked on before in the book and participated on every page. I feel like he was able to answer the questions that I asked really well and pointed to things and used Pashto when he wasn’t sure how to express himself in English. I asked more questions like “Why do you think that?” and he pointed to the images in the book which told me a lot about how he was understanding the images deeply and able to explain his reasoning.

Here, Olivia applied asset-based wording to appreciate the fluidity of Sifat's interaction with a text. She noted, too, his acquisition of "a lot more conversational vocabulary" and how he "asked to keep the stories and sentences that we wrote together." Throughout the practicum, she tried on instructional strategies, gauging their effectiveness by Sifat's response. She followed his joy, and let that be her guiding light.

Olivia's State of Fluid Ideologies in Relation to Language and Identity. Across her tutoring and coursework, Olivia's teaching both stepped toward and away from a critical translingual stance. While work in prior semesters spotlighted her commitment to justice and her capacity to engage critical reflection on race and language, the expectations of this practicum shifted her to more technical musings. Olivia did not explicitly name the tension between her desire to embrace her students' linguistic strengths and the reading instruction this particular course prepared her to teach; still, her reflections show she felt it, deeply enough to observe inconsistencies between Sifat's work in the tutoring group and more de-contextualized word study. Her ideological commitment to joy guided her to embrace Sifat's perspective and linguistic expertise (Seltzer, 2019), moving toward translingual praxis. As Sifat disrupted stances that reading development is sequential and fixed (for example, by blending sounds or reading words while struggling to identify letters), Olivia wondered how this could be. Her reflections did not yet reach for why—why did she at first feel that she needed to teach in a decontextualized, way, why did Sifat show decoding capabilities that transcended her original assessment, why did she have to use monolingual inventories or worksheets, why couldn't she design her own just as the tutoring group composed their own texts?

The answers are less about Olivia and more about the language ideologies she had been immersed in, ones she critiqued in other spaces when invited to do so. Olivia believed in the value of diversity, of embracing a reader's full linguistic and cultural repertoire, of strengthening literacies by teaching into who children are. During tutoring, she reflected that she wanted "to keep bringing in books for us to read together so he can see his culture represented in literature." Her shift to using wordless picture-books that were culturally familiar to her instead represented both an opening of the tutoring up to translingual oral storytelling and a small tear she ultimately did not engage.

We position these subtle inconsistencies in Olivia's praxis as generative spaces for rupture. Collectively, her instructors and peers might have engaged them with her, identifying and confronting firm ideologies (Ponzio, 2020; Deroo & Ponzio, 2019) connected to white-centered teaching practices in the United States. While Olivia did not appear to contend with

ruptures through a culturally disruptive political stance (San Pedro, 2018), she did disrupt the norms of the practicum space to make reading more enjoyable, multimodal, and translingual.

During her final reflections, Olivia described how she would build on future language minoritized students' existing literacy practices by "connecting to their home language." She noted, too, the deeper listening (Seltzer, 2020) to Sifat that occurred within their last session, when the lesson became less about targeted intervention and more about celebration: "he told me more about the food he likes to eat and how he likes to play with his brother which is something we didn't get the opportunity to really do before." Her noticing suggests a tension between building space to bond with her student and the tutoring tasks she was expected to complete.

This tension surfaced again at the end of the course. Olivia's case report of Sifat was a largely technical commentary on decoding instruction. She summarized his strengths as "Blending, Segmenting, Deriving meaning from images, Recognizing vocabulary, and Cultural wealth and joy for learning." His needs were "Letter recognition and Letter sound correspondence." Issues of justice, linguistic racism, and children's rights did not surface. Her final exam response, however, indicated the emergency of a politicalized translanguaging stance: "the worst thing to do" would be to "shut down" a child's "language experiences" or your "own," Olivia argued. It "can be scary to open that up, but it's so valuable."

Discussion

Diya and Olivia's narratives highlight the possibilities and tensions in growing translanguaging stances, particularly when languages and literacies are engaged as separate. Both PTs stepped toward critical translanguaging stances prior to tutoring; each engaged and struggled differently to enact those stances in partnership with refugee children. We follow the PTs' journeys not to critique them as individual teachers, but to explore the nuances of untidy transformation.

Diya and Olivia represent compelling examples of what can happen in these spaces for refugee students and their teachers. Each brought her own stance into tutoring children who in turn carried their own perspectives, too. Sometimes, PTs' stances contested finite views of language and literacy; other times, PTs grew their fluid stances alongside those more fixed approaches. We wonder if PTs were creating little pockets of critical translanguaging within a white-normed space, and whether those pockets might eventually stretch to be transformative. We remind ourselves that translanguaging corriente is winding, and that the flow across languages and modalities

that the linguistically diverse tutoring group fostered disrupted the normative silencing within English-dominant spaces (García et al, 2017).

The PTs' narratives show the importance of attending to the inherent politics of translanguaging. As Zapata and Laman (2023) have argued, translanguaging spaces that do not interrogate deficit ideologies fall short; "just cultivating spaces for students' fluid language use is insufficient as it fails to acknowledge the institutional bias that limits linguistically minoritized speakers and learners" (p. 251). Having grown up interrogating racial ideologies due to her own positionality, Diya was aware of the impact systemic and social beliefs had on her family and community. Having grown up being schooled through lenses that matched her own, Olivia seemingly did not question how aspects of her instruction might reinscribe whiteness; nor did she explore tensions as they emerged. Both PTs seemed to engage translanguaging and monomodal, English-centric teaching as separate halves of their lessons, the first as joyful and the second as necessary. We wonder what might have surfaced had the PTs been better positioned to interrogate the ideologies underlying their instructional decisions, from read-aloud text selections to opportunities for translanguaging word study.

Although both PTs engaged in moments of rupture that opened possibilities for more expansive views of literacy, their trajectories diverged in ways that were closely connected to their identities, prior experiences, and the students they were tutoring. Diya, as a multilingual immigrant and practicing Muslim, drew on her own experiences of invisibility in predominantly white schools to design lessons that foregrounded affirmation, storytelling, and shared cultural knowledge. These commitments resonated with her newcomer student, who eagerly shared stories in Pashto and connected school texts to his home and faith practices. Olivia, in contrast, as a white, English-dominant speaker who was still grappling with her own linguistic and cultural positionality, often oscillated between moments of translanguaging openness and returns to skill-based reading instruction. Her work with Sifat, a child navigating early literacy in a new alphabetic system, pushed her to wrestle with competing ideologies: the technical expectations of the reading methods course and her desire to create joyful, student-centered experiences. These differences underscore how comparative case study illuminates the ways PTs' emerging stances are shaped not only by programmatic and course structures but also by the interplay of their own identities and histories with the linguistic repertoires and lived experiences of the children they teach.

Reading Diya and Olivia's narratives, it's clear that they approached joy as a pursuit that would

inform the instructional design of their lessons. We trace this to their work in a prior literacy class with Muhammad's (2023) framework for culturally and historically responsive education (CHRE). Critiquing the focus on discrete skill acquisition in American schools, Muhammad argues for explicitly centering joy in learning as "the practice of loving self and humanity; caring for and helping humanity and earth; recognizing truth, beauty, aesthetics, art, and wonder; and working to solve social problems of the world" (p. 77). Diya and Olivia's emphasis on joy, which guided them away from narrow views of literacy toward translanguaging teaching, surfaced as tapping into everyday shared experiences, such as splashing in the rain. Their unconscious hesitancy to extend into learning more about their refugee students' unique experiences suggests space for them to be better supported in contextualizing the children's learning through deeper understandings of and care for forced displacement, children's home countries, and the specifics of each child's story. We wonder about continuing to explore notions of joy alongside care for trauma within both translanguaging and refugee work, while recognizing that a first step is for PTs to layer their tutoring with understandings of power.

Finally, PTs narratives raise questions about practicum experiences, about who tutoring serves and how. Our data did not create space for Ikram and Sifat to speak back to the experience; while we endeavored to understand the PTs stance growth, we found ourselves reaching for the children's voices. Through Diya and Olivia's recollections, we do see the refugee children claiming a space to use their language freely. We wonder how the sharp shift between the translanguaging welcomed in the comprehension lessons and more discrete skill-focused activities felt for the Ikram and Sifat, and how better understandings of the literacies they already carried might have extended their learning. We wonder, too, about the literacy learning they experienced within their classrooms, which neither we nor the PTs observed. We critique many of the assumptions that the tutors made—that a Pashto-speaking child's name spelled and pronounced using the Latin alphabet be personally relevant, that learning about American culture through stories would be of interest, and that assumptions could be made about their literacy capacities based on brief monolingual and -modal assessments.

In reflecting on how PTs drew on their critical translanguaging approaches (fostered and sustained in other spaces) to respond to the students in the field, we conclude that stances are dynamically evolving in community with others (Canagarajah, 2013) and must continuously be re-explored through politicized lenses to center the broader fight for linguistic self-determination (Flores, 2014). A critical translanguaging

approach to teaching and learning is not something a teacher acquires, but a way of being that we must all continuously grow and critically reflect upon.

Implications

Our findings suggest several implications for teacher education programs, teacher educators, and researchers who aim to more effectively prepare educators to support refugee students and cultivate critical translingual stances. The tensions and discontinuities evident in Olivia and Diya's experience of their methods course point to the necessity of aligned, integrated programs that support critical dialogue around language, race, and power across time and context. Drawing on Seltzer's (2022) framework, teacher education programs must embed translanguaging theory, raciolinguistic ideologies, and multimodal, multilingual practices not as isolated content but as foundational, political commitments. Embedding this work across coursework and field experiences allows preservice teachers to sit with moments of rupture, moments that don't offer clear answers but open possibilities for transformation. This complexity cannot be compartmentalized or addressed through surface-level engagements. Instead, teacher education must engage PTs in sustained, scaffolded exploration of language and identity, cultivating the kind of ideological clarity that can withstand high-stakes, skills-focused policy mandates.

Teacher educators play a crucial role in this process. They must be willing to interrogate their own positionalities and ideologies, doing the work of disrupting hegemonic norms and deficit-based assumptions alongside their students. As San Pedro (2018) calls for, educators must create sacred truth spaces where PTs can engage with contradictions, name institutional biases, and imagine more expansive literacies. The tutoring context, while rich in one-on-one interaction, can unintentionally narrow focus to individual learning and can ignore or silence individual's membership in a greater social fabric. This contributes to teaching becoming apolitical or decontextualized, coming to know children as separate from the groups and histories to which they belong. This separation may explain the disconnect we observed between literature circle engagement and tutoring praxis, particularly when reading and literacy are framed narrowly. Educators must help preservice teachers consider how literacy skills can be contextualized across languages, how assessments might be designed to capture what students know beyond English, and how critical joy can be cultivated.

These implications also point to key directions for future research. There is a critical need for studies that explore how preservice teachers are prepared to work with refugee students, particularly through longitudinal

designs that trace ideological development across varied settings. Research must also center the perspectives of refugee students themselves, offering insight into how they experience these tutoring partnerships and classroom interactions. This study highlights the use of comparative case study design as a compelling methodology for this work. By exploring within and across two PTs' journeys in negotiating their critical translingual stances within a reading methods course, we illuminate how the PTs' disparate linguistic, racial, and cultural identities and lived experiences shaped the ways they engaged with refugee students and their nonlinear approaches to enacting their emergent translingual stances. As Flores et al. (2019) argue, teacher education has the potential to either reinforce dominant structures or contribute to transformative, justice-oriented instruction. We believe this transformative work is often quiet and cumulative, unfolding through moments of disruption, reflection, and joy. These are the spaces where change begins.

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Blending Art and Translanguaging Pedagogies: Supporting Refugee Children in Elementary Schools to Forge a Path in Education

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Received : 19 April 2025
Revised : 21 November 2025
Accepted : 7 March 2026
DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2026.435

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Abstract

Educators in elementary schools around the world that host and receive refugee children often find themselves not only teaching the local language but also smoothing their path into an unfamiliar culture, reducing mental health distress and advocating for social justice among diverse pupils. While these students may be perceived as “silent,” many possess unused multilingual skills and knowledge due to their varied backgrounds. However, the psychological impact of war and displacement may impede their educational and social integration, particularly in the crucial early months following resettlement. This paper examines research on the benefits of blending arts and translanguaging pedagogies to support refugee children in the first year of school as newcomers. The arts are a universal language, comprised of a unique set of symbols and non-verbal expression often rooted in emotion, which offers a therapeutic medium for students to process their traumatic experiences. Self-portraits are particularly helpful in generating a positive “hybrid identity”, or retaining their culture of origin while forging ahead into their new local lives. Teachers, meanwhile, can encourage students to participate in learning vocabulary through images and to practice translanguaging with similar speakers in class. This practice acknowledges and validates students’ “collective heteroglossia”, inviting them to view their multilingualism as an asset, especially within superdiverse educational settings. Through translanguaging, students are supported in developing translingual selves where their language skills serve as bridges between cultures and advance a sense of belonging. By embracing this dual approach, educators can create classroom “spaces” that honor each child’s linguistic and cultural strengths, ultimately promoting self-efficacy, greater confidence, and an expanded identity.

Keywords:

Refugee Children, Arts Education, Translanguaging



www.iejee.com
ISSN: 1307-9298

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Introduction

In elementary schools that welcome refugee children from around the world, educators often search with them to locate a path through an unfamiliar culture, mitigate their

mental health distress and advocate for social justice for disadvantaged and diverse pupils. Teachers cite the main barriers for refugee students with disabilities (abbreviated to RCDs) as trauma, loss of a familiar way of life, overwhelming feelings due to different cultural values and an inability to concentrate due to intrusive memories, which is a signature of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While it may appear at first that trauma has left a student mute, in reality, many possess unused multilingual skills and knowledge due to their experiences. However, the psychological impact of war and displacement may very well hinder their educational and social integration, motivation and self-confidence, particularly in the crucial early months following resettlement.

On arrival in Canada, families spend months getting settled and learning about services, including education. Children five years and older begin school at a Welcome Centre with translators and gradually begin to attend daily where they are taught basic English. Their teachers assess their familiarity with formal education as well as their readiness to join an elementary school near their housing, and their overall mental health. This is a very challenging time for young children and adjustment takes several months, less if they have attended school in their country of origin. Most often, children enter their permanent classrooms after four to six months, and with their parents, meet Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) who act as go-betweens for families, teachers and school staff. Elementary school teachers, mostly in urban areas, have extensive professional development and mostly understand this is a difficult time for the family. In the early months, few academic expectations are put on the children and they are permitted to explore the classroom and take in the array of books, toys, electronics and learning areas in the room. If the teacher is able to pair the newcomer with another child from a similar language and culture, the child may adapt more quickly. As the months pass, the refugee student begins to develop a basic vocabulary, understands prompts to move to new activities and follows the class routine. RCDs continue to acquire the local language, use their own language to learn from their friends, and eventually become “emergent” bilinguals (Li, 2023) where they slowly catch on to academic learning. This is considered the ideal outcome.

However, placement in schools is fairly random and many staff are astonished by the number of resources necessary to support RCDs. Approximately 25% of all children in the USA, not just refugees, have experienced trauma, which affects brain development, causes cognitive problems, lowers ability to self-regulate and reduces interest in forming relationships (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). As more refugees arrive, educators attempt to “spread them

around” to reduce the extra work that accompanies them in the early stages. As the years pass, elementary school educators understand that they have limited time in which to ensure all students feel capable of success. This is especially important in terms of developing self-efficacy and resilience, before they advance to more difficult academic subjects and possibly negative political environments in secondary school. The main psycho-social development goals of teachers are to facilitate their students’ experiences of achievement and integrate them into the social fabric of school which allows them to persevere and develop a sense of belonging. In terms of trauma, children will continue to question what has happened to them, and gradually change some of the details so they remember these experiences in more profound and meaningful ways. Through creating a “healing narrative”, students are able to move forward in their lives, and no longer see migration as the end of their journey, but instead, as one more stage of their remarkable lives (Adnams Jones, 2018; St. Thomas & Johnson, 2007)). In the meantime, professional development programs for teachers, such as trauma-informed pedagogy, culturally-sensitive schools, and inclusive theories, offer support but there must be “buy-in”. School-wide trauma-informed practices are difficult. They require focusing on why children misbehave and why establishing stability, safety, self-regulation awareness and relationships skills are essential, but some teachers feel it is asking too much (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). All the same, most educators are aware of how the environment helps or hinders learning; compassionate and caring staff who make the effort to form authentic and trusting relationships with students can make a significant difference (Barber, 2022, 2025). Clearly, for the reasons above, elementary education has a significant role to play for RCDs.

In recent years, the concept of translanguaging has emerged as a powerful framework for understanding and supporting multilingual learners. Coined by Ofelia García, translanguaging recognizes that multilingual individuals do not simply use separate languages in distinct contexts; instead, they draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire, that is, all languages, dialects, and modes of communication, to create meaning and navigate the world (García, 2009). This perspective challenges the traditional view of language as compartmentalized, and advocates for embracing and leveraging the full linguistic resources of each student. By valuing and incorporating students’ full linguistic repertoire, educators can create more equitable and inclusive learning environments that foster both academic success and a strong sense of belonging.

This qualitative research project thus examines the benefits of blending arts with translanguaging

pedagogies to support refugee children in the first year of school as newcomers. This study is based on previous arts-based research by Author 1 that shows promising results for RCDs. Art is not new in schools, nor is it ignored as a way of encouraging students to creatively explore their identities and place in the world. In terms of adapting to “superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2023) in schools and developing respect for all cultures and religions, art plays a part in helping children better understand themselves and others (Barone & Eisner, 2012). In the original study, in-class art workshops offered deep insights to teachers and advancing their understanding about how to better support RCDs. The current research project, on which Author 2 collaborated, aimed to expand findings, and explore how translanguaging might “create a space” (García & Johnson, 2017) during art-making that could further energize other complex areas in a child’s integration and growth, such as in their well-being and sense of belonging, all the while advancing their languages that contribute to their identity, maintaining their standing within their communities and enhancing their academic skills.

Literature Review

Art and trauma

The arts are another form of communication that is comprised of a set of symbols and non-verbal expression that relies strongly on emotion, which provides a therapeutic medium for students to process their traumatic experiences. This internal exploration of personal memories during art-making may afford more distance from disturbing events, and move bad memories where they are “stuck” in the amygdala and hippocampus (Kolk, 2003) to the prefrontal cortex where they can be examined more rationally. This results in greater control over meaning-making which the child can shape into a healthier and more resilient self-image.

Over one third of people with PTSD do not improve with evidence-based treatments, such as Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy (TF-CBT) or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) (Schouten et al., 2019); in addition, the longer a patient goes without treatment, the less chance of a full recovery. We are not suggesting that teachers become art therapists, but much of what they already do in their art classes can be considered therapeutic. All the same, making art can be a suitable approach for children with trauma due to the non-verbal and experimental aspects of art as well as the wordless and visual nature of intrusive memories that feel as though they are happening in the moment (Schouten et al., 2019).

Educational Benefits of Making Art

WHO (n.d.) describes how art can steer children towards seeing things differently:

Artistic expression grew lockstep with human cultural development and has long played an integral part in how we teach, learn, communicate and heal. Since our earliest ancestors began telling stories to make sense of the world, we have evolved to learn from narrative, be it through visual media, song or performance. The arts are uniquely suited to help us understand and communicate concepts and emotions by drawing on all our senses and a capacity for empathy... Art can help us to...process difficult emotions in times of emergency and challenging events. The creation and enjoyment of the arts help promote holistic wellness and can be a motivating factor in recovery.

Furthermore, Jindal-Snape et al. (2018) define the ‘impact’ of the arts in terms of academic achievement, through “having contributed to some discernible change in an aspect of students’ cognitive or emotional processes” (p. 60). Moreover, the arts may have two different types of impact: first, as creative processes within the student, and second, as creative thinking skills that are easily employed outside of making art. Both impacts are considered difficult to measure due to their subjective nature, but engaging in the arts may facilitate intrinsic, and highly desirable, personal development in children, namely their improved self-confidence, self-awareness, positive emotions and greater attention to meaning-making, all in addition to creativity and imagination (Hallam et al, 2014).

Translanguaging

Originally, translanguaging was described as a pedagogical approach in which students who were learning the local or dominant language could use alternate languages to clarify meaning in the new language (Williams, 1994). This seemed to be a more equitable way of stating that students might be at many different levels of learning a language; they would eventually achieve fluency and no longer need to ask for translations into their stronger language. García and Kleifgen (2018) advanced the idea that “emergent bilingualism” might offer a more positive way to label a language learner, namely as someone who has more options for learning, including continuing to use their home language as a way of grasping the nuances of meaning in a new language.

Recently, language has been recognized more clearly to be a carrier of certain politics, history, economics and ideologies that continue to prioritize the status quo (Otheguy et al., 2015). Seen through this lens, educators began to notice that bilingual/multilingual students whose first languages were unnamed (minoritized) languages put them in danger of falling behind, either because there was no one in the school to support their learning through their original languages, or, the

policy of the school was “English Only”. Gradually, the discovery that students who relied more on social uses of language rather than academic rules for language practices put these students on a very different, and more equitable, footing. Educators who accepted this greater complexity within translanguaging moved away from focusing on named languages and took up the linguistic system of words, sounds and constructions that make up speakers’ energetic and more colorful means of expression that today suggests a different way of teaching.

Some examples of how these concepts are put into action are:

1. Using instructional strategies that bridge everyday language practices with the formal language that is usually required in educational settings (Flores & Schissel, 2014),
2. Encouraging students to deploy their entire linguistic repertoire, rather than being restricted to the language(s) officially designated for instruction (García et al., 2017),
3. Offering students opportunities to make space for students’ bilingualism and ways of knowing as they move into more complex academic content and texts (García & Kleifgen, 2018),
4. Supporting students’ socio-emotional development and bilingual identities (García et al., 2017).

This approach is applicable across a range of educational contexts, including English-medium classrooms (e.g., ESL programs), bilingual or dual-language classrooms, and heritage or world language classrooms (García et al., 2017). These classrooms offer openings for students to move more fluidly between languages, transcending monolingual norms to affirm their multilingual identities.

Educational Benefits of Translanguaging

Extensive research has amassed a body of evidence that highlights the advantages for children who are bilingual. García and Kleifgen (2020) affirm how ten-year olds excel at concept formation and mental flexibility. According to Bialystok’s (2004, 2007, 2017; Bialystok et al., 2009; Bialystok, & Barac, 2012), myriad research projects, we know that children who speak one or more languages are able to select features from their linguistic repertoire while inhibiting others, via the executive function in the prefrontal cortex. This results in more plasticity of the brain, developing a more efficient network that coordinates with auditory abilities and managing control over the two languages. In general, bilingual children have an understanding of language itself, referred to as “metalinguistic awareness” (Axelrod & Cole, 2018). Not least, bilingualism is found to have

links to creativity due to overall increased cognitive activity and thereby potential. Five aspects found in bilingual creative minds are: flexible thinking, problem-solving, a metalinguistic mind, learning abilities and interpersonal skills (Baetens Beardsmore, 2008). Furthermore, there are many advantages for students who continue to learn vocabulary in their home language. For instance, Cummins (2000) cites how knowing the meaning of a word in their home language makes learning the word in English much easier. On the other hand, lacking an understanding of the concept and the word puts the child at a much greater disadvantage. As a result, school programs can be most effective for bilingual children if home language practices are accompanied by English in the learning process (García & Kleifgen, 2020).

Translanguaging also redefines notions of language proficiency and communicative competence. Rather than measuring proficiency in terms of mastery of a single language, translanguaging recognizes the ability to navigate and collaborate across multiple languages as a marker of linguistic competence. Traditional terms such as “non-native,” “interference,” and “negative transfer” reflect a monolingual bias (Miao & Yang, 2022). Canagarajah (2011) argues that, “the tendency to adopt binary and hierarchical orientations to language has distorted the integrated nature of multilingual competence and communication” (p. 3). Translanguaging, by contrast, celebrates the creativity and functionality of multilingual practices, offering a more inclusive and accurate understanding of language use. This provides valuable insights to the complex, multidimensional trajectories of identity construction among multilingual individuals. In an increasingly globalized world, multilinguals often navigate transnational settings that transcend traditional linguistic, ethnic, and national boundaries (Miao & Yang, 2022). The concept of translanguing identity describes this phenomenon, emphasizing the hybrid linguistic repertoires and socio-cultural backgrounds that shape a sense of self. Translingual identities are inherently translocal and cosmopolitan, reflecting the interconnectedness of homeland and host land experiences. By embracing this perspective, educators and researchers can better understand and support the diverse identities of multilingual learners, fostering a sense of belonging and agency in an ever-changing world.

The Study

Previous research through arts-based methods resulted in promising directions for further study, especially in the area of joining art with literacy and learning in English as RCDs absorbed concepts from other subject areas (Barber, 2025). Our current research questions were mostly aimed at the relationship between art and translanguaging, through the following:

--Does making art naturally stimulate translanguaging between students who share similar (non-English) languages?

--In what ways might translanguaging boost a newcomer's ability to learn English?

--Do refugees with disabilities who combine art and translanguaging show signs of increased cognitive development and well-being over time?

This qualitative approach (led by Author 1) used arts-based research (ABR) methods to direct the students' attention toward their art-making with little-to-no instructions to allow for maximum creativity and personal expression. As one theoretical framework, we prioritized arts education and its core theories. Barone and Eisner (2012), esteem ABR as a valuable epistemology for learning about self and others. The arts operate both on the inside and outside of persons. For instance, through art-making, we awaken to different aspects of ourselves that seem fresh and we imagine ourselves differently, amenable to change if we wish. In particular, the arts provide a window into children's feelings that are not always forthcoming if, for example, a researcher wanted to interview them. It may also be impossible to encourage children to speak about events in their lives, mainly because they do not yet have the cognitive development to make sense of their experiences. However, children are sensitive to what they see in art, and they can identify what is evoked there. They know more than they can say, yet they understand art because they can feel it (Barber, 2025). Ultimately, the artistic expression that holds emotions and their responses to others' art may enable RCDs to experience improved mental health and well-being, thereby freeing more of their mental energy and concentration towards learning English and taking greater interest in the academic tasks before them.

A second framework that anchors this project is Wei's (2018) translanguaging theory of language that proposes how students and teachers engage in a "translanguaging instinct" and seek to create "translanguaging spaces" in their classrooms in order to support student learning (Viegen, 2020). Teachers may be able to plan, act, observe and reflect on how best to support their students' learning needs (Flores & Schissel, 2014), and employ efforts as simple as creating a corner of the classroom with a comfy couch, pillows and blankets, arranging moveable dividers that afford some privacy for those who choose to go there.

Ethics, Context, Setting and Participants

The first step was to secure consent and approval from our university's office of ethics in research. Every person in the school, including all minors, had to be guaranteed anonymity, as well as the site. Author 1 agreed never to photograph a child's face, nor give

any identifying information. The goal was mainly to photograph their art, observe, listen and record in field notes. Author 1 also interviewed both teachers about the students to elicit what the teachers noticed. Prior to the art workshops, the school had prepared consent forms in various languages for the parents of each child, and told them the research would involve "only doing things that the students would normally do in an art class" (in conversation with the school principal, 2023, October). Based on these guarantees, all parents agreed for their child to participate, and the office of ethics at the university deemed the study as "low risk".

The research took place in a highly diverse elementary school in a city on Canada's West Coast. The principal estimated that there were over 50 different languages spoken within the student body of 450, but it was possible that over 80 languages were present if all the minority languages were tallied. SWIS workers who spoke major languages remained at the school to work with families and staff, but the school district could also request SWIS from other nearby schools who were adequate speakers of lesser-known languages and could spend time with new arrivals. Major groups had come to this elementary school from the Middle East, East Africa, Afghanistan, Central and South America, and most recently, Ukraine. Author 1 was given permission to enter the classrooms of two teachers who allowed 10 one-hour art workshops. In the older group, only four students were considered L1 English speakers. The younger class had 20 students aged 7-8 years old; the older class was aged 8-9 with 29 students ($n = 49$). Both teachers had received professional development in trauma-informed teaching, English language teaching methods and cultural-sensitivity training. All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

Methods

The first author led art workshops, showing a model or two of what students would do, while allowing great latitude for individual creativity. How to use the materials were discussed and then students began working on their own. Students were closely observed, especially their behavior and interest levels. The teachers were interviewed after the workshops and these were further developed in field notes. When the workshops ended, both authors met and familiarized themselves with all data. Our main focus was to notice what kind of role translanguaging played during art-making.

Data Sources and Data Analysis

The three main data sources were: the art the children made over the ten weeks, Author 1's field notes written after the workshops and feedback from the teachers, especially the more in-depth recorded interviews that

took place after they had done report cards. During the workshops, the children engaged in different types of art-making. The first hurdle was to observe how they would find a way to get started without too much direction. A majority of students who had some schooling came from highly structured educational systems, with little to no choice or personal expression. Also, those students with little or no time in classrooms often waited until the others began their work, and then began exploring the materials. The second unknown factor was, if, over time, they would become more comfortable and manage their starting points on their own, or remain with others, work in groups, preferring more independent work as they adjusted to having choices. Workshops were intentionally scaffolded so each one led from a simple activity to more complex tasks that were more dependent on language. For example,

--To bring them into the concept of "identity" in the first workshop, I read a story, handed out a sheet with dozens of emojis with different facial expressions from which they might choose to reflect their current mood, and then they worked up to their self-portrait.

*--In the next workshop, I read, *The very hungry caterpillar* (Carle, 1965/1981), stopping often to discuss the illustrations; afterwards, students made caterpillars with strips of paper, pipe cleaners for antennae and googly eyes. We discussed physicality, mobility and concepts related to the life cycle of the caterpillar before constructing them with braided strips of paper that would allow them to move.*

--The next few workshops involved creating paper bag puppets that would be their characters in the short stories that we would film as "digital stories". They needed to learn their lines, time their actions and work together.

--Finally, the last workshop revisited the self-portrait to determine if there were any substantial differences between the first and last ones.

Both authors collaborated on locating themes (Braun & Clark, 2019; Creswell & Pugh, 2007) from the data. After identifying key words and categorizing which seemed strongly in line with the field notes and teachers' interviews in light of the three research questions, we then independently cross-listed words that most strongly described the thoughts and/or emotions in the children's art. Noting patterns, we then narrowed the words to the major themes. We then compared our lists and adjusted them to reduce as much bias as possible.

The following section presents the themes that most strongly illuminated the interconnectedness of the RCDs, their art, translanguaging and any changes in the children themselves, supported by examples.

Findings

Theme One: Participating in art stimulates making art and translanguaging

From the first art workshop to the last, translanguaging was occurring, mainly for the purposes of finding out what the students with less English needed to know, ideally to connect with someone from their home language whom they could trust. For example, in the first case, Author 1 did not know what an Afghan student was saying, but could tell by his tone of voice, gestures, body language and pointing at the other boy's paper that he was asking for help. Another strategy by students who were more bilingual and understood the goal, but did not know how to draw a self-portrait, instead of asking another person, they procrastinated until the other students had started their work, then got up and walked around, taking in all the different ways everyone was sketching themselves and then started to draw.

These are two examples of how students overcame the first hurdle: how to get started on a new and unfamiliar task, in this case, when a student had never made a self-portrait. There are overlaps here with Cummins (2000), who believes there can be bilingual students who after learning the meaning of the word in their first language can then understand what it is and proceed; this can be compared to the student who knows what "self-portrait" means, but is unsure because they have never drawn their self-portrait before. Exploring this situation more deeply, more English-fluent students who had exactly the same difficulties but for different reasons, pointed at cultural beliefs at the heart of the difficulty. In their country of origin, or in some refugee camps, many of these students were fearful of making mistakes, which could possibly lead to physical punishment or humiliation. Without knowing this prior to introducing this activity, Author 1 quickly grasped that a child being able to fall back on translanguaging was extremely important to the person with less fluency. Clearly, this was a trusted person who understood the necessity of avoiding punishment, even though none of these students had been physically or emotionally punished by Canadian teachers. Yet, the first thought in the student's mind was that this was a situation that could escalate. The conversation in their home language was, thus, a consultation; both students came to an agreement that there would be no punishment. Translanguaging, therefore, plays an important role in deciphering potentially negative outcomes, calms any triggers to mental health and dispels other fears carried over from their home country.

Fast forward ten weeks, and the students were asked to repeat their self-portraits. Partly because they knew Author 1 much better at that point, and that their creativity had been steadily encouraged, all students drew themselves in radically different presentations (See Appendix 1). Translanguaging in this case had not been about the correct way to do self-portraits. It was much more deeply reflected upon, making decisions about how they wanted to present themselves as how

they saw themselves now. Children who are moving quickly through developmental stages bring a keen awareness of what values and personal characteristics they should keep in their minds when being constantly challenged to adapt to the mainstream culture. They are questioning who they are and what direction they want to go, all the while wondering how to maintain a balance between who they were and who they want to be. Therefore, self-portraits are particularly helpful in generating a positive “hybrid identity”, and successfully maintaining their cultural roots while forging ahead into their new local lives. This snapshot of the interactions between the self-portrait workshops and students translanguaging accurately represents the themes of knowledge of self and others (Barone & Eisner, 2012), cultural identities, pushing back at trauma and staying in reality.

Theme Two: Art and translanguaging contribute to an RCD’s efforts at meaning-making

Both art and translanguaging helped to support a child’s understanding their experiences and discovering the new world and culture in which they now live. Through art, the child may push around a few ideas, letting their feelings arise and take over. What is expressed in the end may be quite different compared to how the art began. Translanguaging can also be a group effort, where several students with the same home language will join forces and discuss choices (Cano & Ruiz, 2020). Often the receiver of information may attempt to return the favor later, and want to share their knowledge with their same-language peers.

One example occurred in the art workshop where a table of boys had just settled into their self-portraits. Two new non-English speaking students, one from Ukraine and the other from Japan, both attempted to do the work. The teachers understood that the Ukrainian boy, Peter, was not adapting well; his father had stayed behind to fight and the boy did not want to go to Canada. No doubt drawing pictures seemed fairly trivial to him compared to the place where he had just come, but he suddenly sat down and drew a picture. Not three minutes later, he showed us his “self-portrait”: an image of a striking match. The meaning could not have been clearer. Peter went to the window, obviously frustrated, and the other boys, in Arabic, called him to come over, come back and sit with them. They understood how difficult it was for him; they had all been through it. Five minutes later, Peter was uncovering a small electric organ at the back of the room, and began to play. This was his “translanguaging space” (Wei, 2010). What was interesting, on a cultural level, the other boys at the table got up, and formed a circle, urging the Japanese boy to join them. The Arab boys slowly started dancing to the music in their style which even surprised Peter. It

was an exceptional multicultural moment with much translanguaging through the art of dance. Peter, in his own way, was repaying the kindness and compassion of the other boys at his table through their love of music. It had an obvious power for all of them that words could not really capture, but the feeling was there with much meaning on an existential level.

Theme Three: There are many ways translanguaging boosts English Language Learning

When preparing for the caterpillar literacy and art workshop, visuals would be essential. Some students had seen the book before but were not able to explain complex science vocabulary like “cocoon”, “metamorphosis”, and “pupa”. Some students were not familiar with caterpillars due to the region they came from, and others could not identify which images matched the vocabulary. Students were encouraged to talk to anyone about what they were learning and decide what meanings of the words and pictures they could find. Author 1 was experimenting with “intentional” translanguaging and learning through understanding conceptual knowledge, especially those with languages that shared root words close to English (Henderson & Ingram, 2018). Several speakers imitated a caterpillar inching across a desk, and others hooking their thumbs together to resemble a butterfly. That did the trick. Creating a game using visual representations and manually mimicking new vocabulary guided students to the right answer that is also easier to remember. Having visual support, introducing the vocabulary, matching the visual aids with the images in the book, and finally, making caterpillars that they could manipulate, was a very strong combination and allowed them lots of practice with peers who spoke their language.

Theme Four: Both art and translanguaging are extremely inclusive, transformational and useful in engaging all students creatively in learning.

Art is often framed as capable of transforming the artist as well as the viewer, to the extent that the audience may be overwhelmed by an aesthetic experience (Collingwood, 1938/1958). Think of having read a novel, seen a performance or viewed a film that had a life-changing impact – one feels as though they will never return to the way they previously understood something. An aesthetic experience also has the power to silence the search for meaning when it is clear that there is no way to capture the full meaning of this experience, or to do so, would diminish the complexity of it.

Theme Five: Finding a Place to Belong

After the caterpillars were completed, the teacher lined them all up on the window sill, arranged in rows, like the children sitting at their desks. The students

came over to appreciate them, and we talked about how caterpillars change as they grow, and metamorphosis is a transformation, just like caterpillars turning into butterflies. Author 1 added that people have changes inside themselves too; just like children, who are becoming amazing people. The girl standing next near to the caterpillars remarked that each caterpillar is the same, with accordion bodies, antennae and googly eyes, but they are also each unique. “They are just like us!” she said. This sense of belonging seemed to wash over the students and they looked around at each other and smiled, thinking about this wisdom delivered by an eight-year-old.

The people who knew these students best had just finished their report cards, including comments on the specific ways that students had made progress this first term. As a baseline in September, the higher-grade teacher said that two RCDs were described as “not yet literate”, but now in December were assessed as “comprehending oral texts at grade level”. Another child who the teacher was concerned about in September as “having difficulties interacting with peers”, was now in December considered as “demonstrating leadership during group work” (Teacher report cards in field notes, 2023, December).

Discussion

The Intersection of Arts and Translanguaging in the Classroom

This study has endeavored to confirm that RCDs who show a willingness to make art and engage in translanguaging, often together, have a stronger chance of benefiting from the strengths of each, and make strides in cognitive development and increased well-being over time.

Untreated trauma is considered to be the greatest barrier to a student’s success in school, and shortly behind that, is a lack of the local language where they settle, which may be enough to derail a child’s education, depending on other disadvantages. Moreover, trauma interferes with concentration in language learning, reading and writing, and often intrusive memories can impact a child’s behavior, which many teachers can interpret incorrectly. Art creates a space where children can enter themselves, become calm, choose what to focus on and notice what is meaningful for them. They also have greater space to think about other people, and carefully consider their bad experiences by moving memories from the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex where they have more distance from the sudden and unwanted memories. Here, they can be better be controlled and rationalized, and possibly altered to a more preferable “healing narrative” that better suits their understanding of traumatic events (Adnams Jones, 2018; St. Thomas & Johnson, 2007).

What is happening socially for the children as they absorb meaning is that art and translanguaging reflect a world view and culture of each viewer or participant. Translanguaging, importantly, is a tool for teachers to encourage inclusion, no matter their skill level with any languages spoken in the classroom (Paré, 2015). Creativity flows through both art and translanguaging (García & Kleifgen, 2018; Kharkhurin, 2015).

This paper has focused exclusively on children in elementary school where teachers have the best chance at changing the course many RCDs are on. However, as they move into adolescence, students will discover that translanguaging classrooms are not merely spaces where students’ linguistic repertoires are used as scaffolds to acquire a dominant language. Rather, they are transformative environments that empower students to become agents of their semiotic repertoires, enabling them to create, communicate, and exist freely within and beyond linguistic boundaries. By leveraging students’ translanguaging practices, educators can unlock the creative potential of young people, particularly those who have been marginalized racially and linguistically. Translanguaging challenges the ways in which language has historically been used to restrict imagination and creativity, offering instead a framework that celebrates linguistic diversity and fosters critical engagement with the world (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Translanguaging is not only a political act but also enables students to reclaim their voices and identities in educational spaces (Wright, 2014).

Wei (2010) further elaborates on the transformative potential of translanguaging by using the concept of translanguaging space, a dynamic and fluid environment where linguistic structures and systems intersect. This space serves as a bridge between cultural traditions, fostering a sense of connectedness and enabling multilingual individuals to engage in creative and critical practices. This approach not only validates students’ existing knowledge and experiences but also cultivates a deeper understanding of language as a lived, evolving practice.

Limitations

As with most qualitative research, due to its subjective nature, the context, participants, teachers, schools and even researchers, results will not be identical, and therefore, unable to be replicated. Each class in the school where the research occurred was unique. Even in the class next door, the demographics were very different. In the particular setting where the workshops were completed, there were eight students who were from Afghanistan, titling the class heavily in their direction; on the other hand, these students revealed how natural it is to slip into translanguaging when needed. For other students, there were six

Spanish speakers, but from different Spanish-speaking countries. There were also several pairs for different countries, and the rest were singles who were unable to engage in translanguaging. A possible remedy would be for scholars to take on larger studies.

Conclusion

These translanguaging practices acknowledge and validate students' "collective heteroglossia", inviting them to view their multilingualism as an asset, especially within superdiverse educational settings (Vertovec, 2023). Ideally, students will be free to blend translanguaging with art, encouraging creativity from within language and other activities. Thus, these students are supported in developing translingual selves where their language skills serve as bridges between cultures, establish caring multicultural relationships and advance a sense of belonging. By embracing this approach, educators can design classroom spaces that honor each child's linguistic and cultural strengths, ultimately promoting self-efficacy, greater confidence, and an expanded identity.

Disclaimer

General ideas from this research were presented on April 9, 2025 at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan's conference, entitled, "Inclusive Education and Society: Methodology, Research and Practice" at the University of Atyrau. A five-page summary of this study will be published as conference proceedings on the University's website.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the participants, their teachers, other staff at the school and the feedback we received from other researchers and reviewers. In addition, we would also like to give our sincere thanks to a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC Partnership Development Grant), our co-researchers, research assistants, and also our external consultant, Fred Bemak, and PI, Robert Williamson.

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