

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

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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

## 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 &



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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 translanguaging 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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