

Multilingual Educators: Identity and Literacy

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Abstract: This paper examines the ways in which multilingual educators view the development of their own professional identity as teachers of reading and literacy. Teachers who themselves possess biliteracy knowledge and skills are well-positioned to leverage their own understandings of language and literacy to engage their students' development in making meaning and effective expression. This study explored the extent to which teacher development of their identity as literacy educators incorporates their own linguistic diversity. The study focused on the ways practicing and preservice multilingual teachers view the influence of their biliteracy knowledge and skills on their role as teachers of English literacy, for all students both monolingual & multilingual. The study found that despite their potential advantage, multilingual educators frequently experience barriers that hinder them from recognizing the value of their biliteracy knowledge and skills to their role teaching English reading. This study found that development of the multilingual teacher's identity includes addressing these challenges. In addition, it found that embracing one's own linguistic diversity promotes educators' ability to leverage it as a professional, particularly within the context of literacy education.

Keywords: Education, Multilingual teachers, Literacy, Teacher professional development

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Introduction

Education departments at both national and state levels in the USA look to increase the numbers of teachers of color and multilingual educators, by recruiting and retaining more multilingual educators (Carver-Thomas, 2018, Narrajo, 2023, Ceja-Williams & Nungaray, 2024,). "The U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) has invested in recruiting, training, and retaining more educators to meet the needs of our nation's increasingly multilingual students (Ceja-Williams, B. & Nungaray, D. 2024). Among these efforts, one area of emphasis is on teacher training, specifically the professional development of bilingual educators (OELA, 2022) to meet the needs of English learners in America's schools. Professional development can "create opportunities" for bilingual individuals "to build successful professional careers as teachers"

(Narrajo, 2023). These efforts should adapt to address the assets and challenges of multilingual educators. A recent report by The Century Foundation explains that teacher education programs “are largely designed to prepare monolingual, English-dominant educators...” and they argue for the need “to amend systems so that talented, trained, motivated young bilingual adults can find their way to programs that better support the emerging bilingualism of young ELs” (Williams & Zabala, 2023). Central to this transformation is programs that value, acknowledge, and build upon the linguistic & cultural funds of knowledge and skills (Moll, et al., 1992) that multilingual educators bring with them to their professional development be that at the pre-service level or in-service level. While a great deal of research has been done around the benefits of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy for children in today’s diverse classrooms (CDE, 2014), there is a lack of literature on how the professional development of multilingual educators use these same additive approaches.

Bilingual educators have an inherent wealth of knowledge and skills at their disposal for teaching literacy, including English literacy, to all students, including students for whom English is not their first language and bilingual students. Bilingual educators have biliteracy capacities that they use their daily lives as part of their lived experience that are also useful for literacy instruction. These include metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic knowledge and skills. For example, bilingual educators can use their capacities for translanguaging to support literacy learning in the classroom (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Similarly, they can use their biliteracy for contrastive analysis, highlighting similarities and differences between languages and teaching for transfer of literacy skills across languages (CDE, 2020).

The biliteracy of multilingual teachers (MLTs) is a valuable resource and a well-spring of potential advantages for the multilingual teacher’s identity as a literacy educator. This initial study was part of a larger multi-year project exploring the professional development of MLTs. It focused on what MLTs think & understand about how their own experiences with linguistic diversity relate to their professional identity in their role as literacy educators.

Methods

This qualitative study used a Grounded Theory approach to analyzing the written texts for themes. The participants wrote responses to prompts on the topic of their multilingual and literacy teacher identity. These written responses were gathered and examined, including several close readings by both researchers. An inductive approach was used to identify & code the data for salient repeated words and repeating ideas. Key themes based on these were identified. Generalization of themes informed the development of the main conclusions used to answer the research questions.

Participants

Participants in the study (N=75) were all multilingual teachers (MLTs) who were bilingual and biliterate

individuals teaching in K-12 public school settings. These MLTs taught students in their classes who were bilingual and monolingual, as well as students who were classified as English learners. The participants in this study were enrolled in literacy professional development classes.

Data Collection

All participants in this study were enrolled in literacy professional development classes in which they engaged in readings and were given opportunities to write reflections based on prompts. Prompt choices included reflecting on their identity as multilingual, bilingual individuals and literacy educators. This included opportunities to reflect on their own linguistic and literacy experiences as well as their experiences with teaching literacy. The participants' responses to these prompts generated anonymous texts. These texts were gathered to be examined in this study.

Results

MLT experiences as English learners generated three key themes. Here is each theme and a representative quote. First, as English learners they experienced a deep desire for reading and a love for reading but found reading very difficult. Reading did not seem attainable due to language barriers reading experiences in English as a second language (L2). *"I have loved to read since I was a kid. English is my second language. Although I love to read, it was something I had difficulty with growing up. Even when I couldn't read the printed text, I would pretend to read."*

Second, as English learners they experienced feelings of antipathy toward reading due to the struggles with language. The language barriers associated with reading in English (L2) produced anxiety, pressure, feelings of failure, lack of confidence. *"As an EL, I always struggled with my reading. In general, I felt pressure from everyone around me because I wasn't proficient. I hated reading and the anxiety that would come with it because I knew I was going to botch my words. I knew that I wasn't proficient enough to read the sentences clearly."* *"Growing up I always disliked reading. I only read books when it was obligated in school. Since Spanish was my first language, it was very difficult for me to comprehend the text. Most importantly I couldn't enjoy the content I read."*

Third, as English learners they experienced lack of positive, fun experiences with reading and being read to. Reading was sometimes not accessible in their first language (L1) nor in English (L2). *"I was never read to growing up from anyone in my family. My parents didn't read to me not even in Spanish because they were also learning how to speak and write in another language. They only knew how to speak their native language, Zapotec, and only got to attend school up to second grade."*

MLT experiences as bilinguals/biliterate individuals generated three key themes. Here is each theme and a

representative quote. First, as bilinguals they experienced reading in their first language (L1) that modeled literacy. They had L1 literacy opportunities with their family as a child. These L1 reading models provided meaningful examples of literacy. *“I grew up hearing stories from my dad. My dad would deliver his stories so descriptively that I could vividly picture them. For this reason, I had very high standards for delivering stories to students.” “My mother always made sure I had access to many books, and she was always playing music in our home. I feel that the experiences with my mom as a child instilled a love of reading and helping other people.”*

Second, they had a deep understand their students’ struggles with reading. They could recognize that their students struggles were similar to what their own had been. *“As a former EL student, I recognize in my own students their struggle of learning a new language and learning how to read it.” “The adversity I have had to face has made me the person I am today. When I was a student, I always yearned to see someone who looked like me as the teacher. I know how important representation is to students whose shoes I was once in.”*

Third, they were profoundly aware of how their first language to second language experiences shaped their teacher identity. They were convinced that these experiences with their linguistic diversity was a core factor in their teacher identity. *“My teacher identity is also influenced by my own educational journey and being a former emergent bilingual is a big part of that identity. This EB background has also helped me cultivate a unique perspective and relationship with reading.”*

Discussion

The main question for this study asked if & how MLTs’ own experiences with linguistic diversity influence their perceptions of their identity & role as teachers of reading/literacy. By generalizing the themes, the results of this study show that MLTs’ own experiences of being an “English learner” and a bilingual/bicultural individual can shape MLT perception of identity as a literacy educator in both negative & positive ways. Despite the potential advantage of their biliteracy knowledge & skills to their role as literacy educators MLTs’ experiences with their own linguistic diversity may complicate their ability to recognize its value. First, MLT identity as a literacy educator is profoundly informed by their own experiences with their linguistic diversity, (i.e., English Learner, bilingual, bicultural). Second, MLT literacy teacher identify incorporates their experiential knowledge in ways that both help them tap their biliteracy knowledge (i.e., understanding their students’ struggles) and in ways that hinder them from tapping their biliteracy knowledge (i.e., low confidence). Third, MLT identity may vaguely but not clearly incorporate a working understanding of the potential advantages of their biliteracy knowledge & skills for teaching reading/literacy.

Conclusions and Implications

Given the results of this study, the authors have concluded that professional development for MLTs needs to

embrace a culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy that values, acknowledges and builds upon the funds of knowledge that multilingual educators bring with them. Specifically, MLTs would benefit from professional development that engages with them in the follow four ways. 1) Acknowledges MLTs' personal experiences with their linguistic diversity & the insights gained from them; 2) Focuses on identifying the potential advantages of MLTs' biliteracy knowledge & skills for teaching literacy; 3) Teaches them to use literacy instruction strategies that draw from their biliteracy knowledge & skills as well as highlights their insights drawn from experience; 4) Focuses on increasing MLT competence & confidence. This study is the initial phase of the research and informs the next phase which will pursue researching the kind of professional development for MLTs described above.

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