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Research Article

Multilingual Educators in Superdiverse Rural Schools: Placing Administrators and Teachers' Cultural and Linguistic Wealth at the Center of Rural Education

**Carla Paciotto
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Centered on reconceptualizations of “rural” and “rurality” that reimagine and transcend the “traditional imaginaries” of rural educational settings as places of disadvantage and isolation, this article presents the partial results of a mixed methods study funded by the Spencer Foundation about expanded and pivotal roles played by rural multilingual (ML) teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators in two rural school districts located in U.S. Midwest COVID-19 hotspots. The pandemic made the historical struggles and inequities that ML students face in U.S. schools glaringly evident, as ML families experienced a disproportionately negative impact of the virus on their health and financial stability and showed a disparity of resources from their urban/suburban counterparts. In these contexts, this study focused on how two superdiverse rural school districts with unique histories of place-based language education policies, encompassing a range of multilingual programs and a high number of multilingual educators, mobilized unique linguistic and cultural capital to ensure that rural low-income ML students and families received equitable access to education during unprecedented times. Drawing from ML educators' interviews and surveys, the findings unveil how rural ML educational settings can be reimaged as places of opportunity for multilingual/multiethnic students and families, when equitable ML education policies and ML educators are made a centerpiece of localized language education policies.

Rural districts historically have been at a disadvantage when compared to their urban and suburban counterparts in their effort to provide equitable services to their multilingual (ML) students (Coady et al., 2019). While the growing population of rural MLs is estimated at about 600,000 (Hussar et al., 2020), there is still limited educational research on the intersection between ML education and rurality (Coady, 2020). Existing literature shows that rural schools shortchange MLs in unique ways due to geographic isolation, insufficient financial resources available or invested in recruiting and retaining qualified ML teachers, and generally noncompetitive teacher salaries due to property tax-based funding models that leave rural schools perpetually underfunded (J. D. Johnson & Zoelner, 2016). Rural teachers generally hold deficit perspectives toward MLs (Marichal, 2021) and reported a lack of specific training for addressing MLs' linguistic needs and the needs of their ML families (Coady, Harper, & DeJong, 2011), while showing resistance toward participating in such professional development (PD; Coady, Lopez, et al., 2019).

MLs also suffer low access to evidence-based programs that effectively provide comprehensible content-based instruction. Research in English as a

second language acquisition spanning more than 40 years (Cummins, 1979; Thomas & Collier, 1997) has identified the cognitive, academic, linguistic, and sociocultural foundations for effective ML education: specific language education policies, specialized teacher knowledge, and targeted educational resources for the development of both MLs' second and first languages. While model programs such as dual language immersion have been adopted in some urban and suburban areas, most MLs are still placed in remedial ML services (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2022). These instructional challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for rural ML families working in meatpacking plants affected by dramatic COVID-19 surges during the 2020–2021 school year (Rathman, 2020).

In this context, this study reports the partial results of a larger mixed methods multiple case study focused on how two superdiverse (King & Bigelow, 2018) rural school districts with unique histories of place-based language education policies mobilized unique linguistic and sociocultural capital to ensure ML students and families received equitable access to education during unprecedented times. The study investigated old and new areas of educational

inequity that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis unveiled related to immigrant and refugee MLs in two rural school districts that also were pandemic hotspots; the expanded and unexpected roles of rural teachers of immigrant/refugee MLs; how rural educators addressed ML students' first and second language and social-emotional needs; the resources that rural educators mobilized to communicate and engage with ML immigrant/refugee families/parents, almost half of whom in May 2020 were working in meat processing plants.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 Pandemic in Rural America

In spring 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading rapidly, U.S. school districts responded quickly to meet the multifaceted needs of their communities. Despite their efforts, school closings greatly impacted low-income children's food security, access to affordable childcare for families with working parents, children's social-emotional health, and equitable access to education for vulnerable student populations (Abuhammad, 2020). Exposure to the virus, unemployment, and financial hardships impacted rural immigrant and refugee families (Vargas & Sanchez, 2020). By the end of spring 2020, half the pandemic hotspots were associated with rural Midwestern meatpacking plants (Lakhani, 2020), and across 494 plants, over 200 workers died and over 42,534 tested positive for the virus (Kindy, 2020). The virus spread in plants was 110%–150% higher than in other workplaces, greatly impacting People of Color, who made up 80% of confirmed cases (Carrillo & Ipsen, 2021).

The intermittent school closures and reopenings and the shift to remote learning, paired with unreliable and unequal access to technology, were projected to play a detrimental role in rural MLs' learning outcomes (Delany-Barmann et al., 2021), meaning that learning losses would be larger for low-income MLs than for higher income students (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2020).

Research on Rural ML Education Settings

Research on long-standing rural ML programs shows that rural districts can foster equitable access to education for ML students through bottom-up local policy reforms (Paciotto & Delany-Barmann, 2011), along with creating innovative and successful strategies serving ML families (Coady, Lopez, et al.,

2019). However, more research focused on the educational experiences of ML communities (Ruecker, 2016) in new rural destinations is necessary to inform effective educational policies and practices. Various scholars are calling for a reimagining of the dominant concepts and definitions of "rural" and "rurality" (Coady, 2020; Corbett, 2015; Cuervo, 2016; Reynolds, 2017), typically conceptualized along a rural-disadvantage and urban-advantage framework and outdated U.S. Census categories. This traditional rural-urban juxtaposition ignores deep demographic shifts that rural settings have experienced due to changes in global migration patterns and the recent establishment of large rural agroindustrial complexes, which have increased interdependence between urban and rural sites (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). Most of the rural research on ML learners also ignores how rural communities are also sites of cultural wealth (Crumb, Chambers, et al., 2023). Such deep transformations of many rural settings require new research paradigms and renewed attention to rural contexts and cultures through interdisciplinary research projects that can increase dissemination of new rural education research results (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017).

Multilingual Learners and Their Families During COVID-19

As instruction in the US abruptly went online in spring 2020, Sawchuk and Samuels (2020) found that teachers across the country had difficulty communicating with their ML, immigrant, and low-income students. These students experienced technology and language obstacles, along with an increase in family economic and food insecurity (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020) and digital access was particularly challenging for parents of young children who were low income, ML, and had limited formal education (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2021). In addition, a federal report (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020) on 15 school districts found that they were not able to provide adequate first and second language support to their ML students while schools were in remote instructional mode. Another study (Aguilera & Nightingale-Lee, 2020) reported that students in marginalized school districts might experience less access to education due to emergency instructional modes that did not consider ML families' life situations. For example, mixed-status and undocumented families might be concerned that instruction via videoconferencing might jeopardize

their privacy and safety, which in turn might impact their children's participation in remote learning (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2020).

Rural Cultural Wealth and MLs

Based on theories of funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) and ways of being in diverse rural communities (Sherfinski et al., 2020), the rural cultural wealth framework (Crumb, Chambers, et al., 2023) offers an asset-based perspective on rural communities that builds on an ecologically situated community cultural wealth construct and acknowledges the strength and resilience of rural communities (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) identified five types of cultural capital on which Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) students could draw: aspirational, familial, linguistic, resistant, and navigational. This conceptualization highlights assets that minoritized communities and persons utilize to advance themselves, their families, and their communities. Crumb, Chambers, et al. (2023) proposed the adoption of this framework for advancing rural educational research by adding the constructs of rural resourcefulness, rural ingenuity, rural familism, and rural community unity (p. 129).

Rural resourcefulness refers to the capacity of rural students and communities to overcome the socio-contextual hardships that jeopardize their well-being through actions that mitigate adversities. Examples of rural resourcefulness in action include how rural ML communities address teacher preparation (Coady, Marichal, et al., 2023); the experiences of counselors in rural, economically marginalized communities (Crumb, Haskins, & Brown, 2019); and rural ML teachers' creation of innovative ways to communicate with ML families during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Delany-Barmann et al., 2021).

Rural ingenuity describes the creativity of rural communities as a collective attribute rooted in the community ecology and human and social capital networks (Gutiérrez et al., 2017). For example, economically disadvantaged rural regions are usually not associated with social ingenuity or innovation. However, Copus et al. (2013) noted, "In reality many rural areas, even remote ones, show evidence of dynamism, innovation and growth, even without policy support" (p. 122). Evidence of rural ingenuity is demonstrated when rural districts include wrap-around services to support their students and families (Miller et al., 2021) and in how families create

innovative ways to support each other during emergency times (Delany-Barmann et al., 2021).

Rural familism is a rural community cultural capital asset derived from familial relationships and is characterized by a feeling of belonging among family members. It is strongly associated with kin networks, obligations, roles, and behaviors that are play out in high-poverty and inequitably served rural communities (Crumb, Chambers, et al., 2023, p. 130). These networks are critical for rural first-generation college students, as they have the potential to provide important encouragement and support (McCulloh, 2020).

Rural community unity refers to the interconnections that foster civic engagement and other unifying and organizational behaviors. These types of behaviors are easily identifiable during a crisis such as a natural disaster or a pandemic. After Hurricane María, for example, community and school gardens in rural communities in Puerto Rico played an important role in creating a sense of community unity and vital self-sustaining behaviors (McIlvaine-Newsad et al., 2019).

The Study

Research Contexts

This research project was conducted in two West Central Illinois rural towns (identified by pseudonyms) that long have been a destination for immigrants. While most of the population still traces its roots to Germany, a profound demographic shift started in the early 1990s, as meat processing plants relocated to rural areas and started recruiting Latin American workers. In the last 25 years, Rivertown, a town of almost 6,000 people located along one of the main Illinois rivers, has transformed from a sleepy rural town to an immigration hub due to a meat processing plant that in 2022 employed 1,900 workers. Since 1993, when the first Spanish-speaking families and children arrived (Brunn & Delany-Barmann, 2001), local schools have seen a steady increase of MLs, and since the late 1990s, its faculty has been engaged in developing ML programming, including dual language education (K–5), French transitional bilingual education, ESL push-in/pull-out, and ESL self-contained programs. In 2022, the district served 740 MLs who spoke 15 languages, with Spanish and French being the most widely spoken. In 2022, 60% of the students the elementary school served were MLs and 72% were low-income.

The second site, Prairie City, is a town of almost 9,000. It also has a large meatpacking plant, which employs about 1,500 people and has attracted many immigrant and refugee workers. In 2008, the school district served 132 MLs and had three ESL teachers. A decade later, the district had 350 MLs, speaking a total of 15 languages; 17 bilingual/ESL teachers; and a family coordinator—a 260% increase in ML students and a 630% increase in ML staffing. MLs were the fastest-growing student population in the Prairie City school district. Similar to Rivertown, in the last decade, the linguistic and cultural diversity has increased, with ML students coming from various Latin American, African, and Asian countries. The Prairie City student population also is characterized by persistently high low-income levels (96%).

The researchers selected the sites based on their continuous two-decade collaboration with the schools, conducting research, PD, and participating in a variety of community activities. The demographic changes and trends of both communities reflect regional and national patterns as large immigration gateways due to the relocation of multinational agroindustry complexes that have drawn a diverse transnational labor force over 25 years. The schools in both sites have implemented similar language educational policies, such as dual language immersion programs and other ML services.

The ML policies currently present in these districts are the unique place-based manifestations of the State of Illinois's bilingual education rule, which has been mandated since 1973, an outcome of the Title VII Elementary and Secondary Education Act of the 1960s. Since 1973, Illinois has consistently mandated a transitional bilingual education (TBE) policy for schools with 20 or more students who speak a common minoritized language, in which the first language is mostly used to support English development (ISBE, 2022). When 19 or fewer speakers of same-language MLs attend one school, the school will “locally determine” whether to provide a TBE or a transitional program of instruction (TPI). This policy requires content instruction in the student's native language to the “extent necessary” along with ESL instruction and allows for locally developed programs that exceed the TBE first language requirements, such as DL programs. During 2021–2022, in Illinois TBE classrooms served 72% of the ML population; TPI/ESL served 21%; and other programs, mostly DL, served less than 1% (ISBE, 2023).

Research Method

This research project originated as a response to the Spencer Foundation's (Phillips, 2020) call for Rapid Response Research grants on the COVID-19 pandemic emergency in educational settings and included a section focused on parents. Here, we report findings based on ML teacher and administrator survey data collected during fall 2020. The surveys were adapted from an ISBE online survey that specifically gauged the experiences of all educators across the state during the pandemic. Participants in our survey volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews and were remunerated with a gift card. We conducted 25 interviews, 20 with ML teachers and paraeducators, and five with ML administrators. To maintain physical distance during the pandemic, most of the interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, in either English or Spanish.

Participants

The seventeen ML/ESL-certified teachers and the two ML administrators who participated in the part of the study reported here volunteered to be interviewed after completing a COVID-19 response survey we administered to a larger pool of educators (73 respondents, 33 from Rivertown and 40 from Prairie City). We analyzed the ML administrator and teacher interview data through the rural cultural wealth framework (Crumb, Chambers, et al., 2023) and took an asset-based stance (Flint & Jaggars, 2021) toward rural education research when specifically analyzing the work of ML teachers and administrators within their ML education programs during the COVID 19 pandemic. The framework is adapted to this rural educational and educators' microcontexts where, due to Illinois's language education mandates and the long history of rural/local bottom-up language education policies (Paciotto & Delany-Barmann, 2011), both districts had been striving to fill the historical equity gap between MLs and non-ML students for more than two decades. We were interested in how ML education programs that had been working toward equity for a long time mobilized rural cultural and linguistic wealth to support MLs in this unprecedented health crisis.

We employed a case study approach grounded in sociocultural theories of language-in-education policies (Hult & Johnson, 2015) conceptualized as cultural artifacts resulting from (power) negotiations among local stakeholders and federal and state top-

down policies. A social justice lens (Mehan, 2012) within the mixed methods approach with an emphasis on qualitative components permitted us to unveil the multilayered reality of (language) education policy making and implementation (Johnson, 2010) during the pandemic emergency.

Findings

From Multilingual Instructional Packets and Videos to Hybrid Instruction in Two Languages

The governor of Illinois's stay-at-home order took effect on Saturday, March 21, 2020, to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In this first phase of the pandemic, no real instruction was possible at any level for elementary school students, as there was no online teaching-learning infrastructure to connect teachers and students. In this total lockdown phase, as soon as Rivertown and Prairie City teachers were allowed to return to their school buildings, they worked intensely to prepare instructional packets for the elementary school students; the packets were delivered weekly. Teachers were eager to keep in contact with their young ML students, and they asked parents to send pictures of completed homework and showing them working with their children. Teachers also wanted to be "present" for the students, so they recorded bilingual videos in Spanish and English in which they read stories and showed calendar activities. These activities comprised the instructional interaction elementary MLs and all students could receive until the end of the school year.

During the summer, when it was clear that schools could not reopen regularly for the 2020–2021 year, districts rushed to develop remote instructional tools and approaches. In July 2020, ISBE (2020) published recommendations for fall 2020, stressing the autonomy each district had for determining the appropriate instructional mode for their community, as the pandemic unfolded in unpredictable patterns: "These recommendations honor local control and acknowledge that each school community is unique" (p. 5).

Administrators had to manage virus spikes that forced them to mandate shifts from hybrid to fully remote mode in a matter of a day. In both districts, when the pandemic was not virulent across the community, elementary schools mandated a hybrid mode so that all children would attend school in person and remotely for the same amount of time. Due to strict mandated distancing rules, on two A-

days half the class would attend remotely, and the other half would be present in the classroom, and on two B-days the groups would switch mode. On Fridays, all students would attend remotely. In both districts, however, the hybrid mode only lasted for the first six days of the school year before a virus spike made the administration move instruction to fully remote mode for an entire month. Then hybrid instruction was back for a few days before it switched again to all remote for another while, with most of October 2020 back to hybrid. This back and forth was head spinning for all teachers: They had to be ready in no time to change instructional plans to adapt to one or both modes.

Rivertown and Prairie City ML directors and teachers had to adapt not only the regular curriculum content to remote and hybrid teaching, but also ESL (L2) and native language (L1) instruction, in order to provide equitable education to the students receiving English learning services. ML students who needed ML services had a wide range of proficiency levels, with newcomer students and others close to being transitioned into the mainstream classrooms. ML directors and teachers had to modify programs that were already logistically complex and necessitated coordination of many instructional ML staff members while also considering that most ML parents and families were working in the local meat processing industry as essential workers and were experiencing particularly high health threats.

The "Technology Piece" for Rural Multilingual Teachers, Students, and Families

Remote instruction for elementary newcomers and low English proficiency MLs was particularly difficult to deliver during the pandemic because of the "technology piece," as one of the ML directors stated. As in many rural and non-rural low-income communities across the US, districts had to provide free devices and home Wi-Fi connection to students. When surveyed about how many ML students had reliable access to a tablet, laptop, desktop, or any other internet-connected devices that could be used for schoolwork at home, 56% of responding ML teachers in the Rivertown and Prairie Cities districts indicated that most of their students did not have such devices available at home, and 37% indicated that half their students did not have them. In addition, 26% of the ML teachers responded that most of their students had difficulty accessing reliable high-speed internet, while 42% indicated that half their students

did not have reliable internet. Asked about how their district ensured that all students had access to remote learning, 53% of the ML teachers indicated that the district provided devices, 42% indicated that their district provided free Wi-Fi to families in need, and 26.32% indicated that the district provided free technical support to families and students.

While Rivertown and Prairie City districts' efforts were considerable in terms of facilitating internet and computer access to ML families thanks to emergency state and federal funds, many obstacles and gaps emerged regarding technology support services for ML family home internet and computer access. One teacher summed up the situation of technology access for ML students and parents in this way, "In theory we are providing WIFI, but with the language barriers and working parents, many [ML] students still do not have WIFI at the end of 1st quarter." Equitable access to remote learning for ML students took longer than planned, and its ultimate success was due to the deep dedication of ML educators to their students and families.

Multilingual Teachers, Staff, and Directors: Becoming Rural Technology Trainers

During the pandemic, all teachers, staff, and administrators quickly had to adapt to the changing instructional and community landscape, and, in the case of the ML teachers and administrators, the pandemic created new roles for them. A dual language teacher (Spanish side) remembered how for ML students, remote instruction lagged for the first weeks due to lack of adequate devices and technological support to parents. She described the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year and the difficult implementation of remote instruction for the DL first graders:

We started the school year on hybrid mode and in truth we had not really understood how this was going to work.... We started, and we waited two weeks for [all] the tablets to arrive..., and [the ones who had arrived in time] were not installed. Teachers had to install all the applications..., experienced many technological difficulties.... The first two weeks we sent learning packets to the homes because we could not ... do any remote teaching activity.

During summer 2020, the districts provided a technology-focused PD week for teachers, as the ML director stated, in an attempt "to make it a one-size-fits-all" effort. The training sessions focused on

Google Classroom, which would be used by the students on school-issued Chromebooks. While grade 3–5 teachers used the platform the rest of the year, the PD was not useful for K–2 teachers because Google Classroom and Chromebooks were not practical for younger learners. As one ESL teacher explained, emphasizing team decision-making processes, "As a first grade team, we don't feel that Google Classroom is really developmentally appropriate for first graders. We would have liked more training on something that is more early childhood friendly." In the end, the lower elementary teachers decided to use Class Dojo, but this choice delayed adequate instruction for a while.

While age-appropriate applications were found, a Rivertown DL teacher stressed that the district and its schools were not prepared to support technological difficulties ML families encountered when trying to support their children at home. She explained, "The school never trained the parents.... Parents don't know how to use them, they don't know.... There are homes where parents had not touched a computer."

The Prairie City ML director used her own time after work to visit the students' homes to set up their Wi-Fi connection. She noted, "I can't tell you ... how many Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots and stuff I fixed on people's porches.... Even though I shouldn't have been, I was in more homes during the pandemic [than ever]." In Rivertown, the ML teachers spent time after work to ensure all ML families could operate the tablets, even though they had received no training. Regarding feeling supported by the district during this time, a first grade ESL teacher who had Lingala-speaking students in her classroom, stated,

I don't feel supported by the district as a whole.... They bought tablets for all of the kindergarten through second graders to use and then we had to set them all up. But ... they didn't give us any guidance on how to set them up.... I brought them home with me and my son helped me do a lot of the setting up, and we spent hours and hours doing that outside of work hours.... We're also supporting parents who don't know how to use them, and the parents are working all day and the only time they have to ask for help is when we're home at night. So for the first couple of months, we would work all day and then come home and work all night.

In other instances, some parents were able to go to the school during the day so teachers could train them on how to use devices. Some parents even went to teachers' homes, as one DL teacher recalled. In

addition, as they could not reach all the ML parents in person for all the technology needs, teachers made video tutorials for parents. In Prairie City, one grade 5 DL teacher lamented his sense of school and district administrators' deep lack of respect and consideration for the bilingual programs and teachers: He had to request support for new computers "forcefully."

A crucial role in ML parents tech support was also played by the "language facilitators" who in regular times were ML classroom teacher aides and supported teacher-parent communication in various languages. In Rivertown, the ML director praised how they worked with teachers to ensure equitable access to technology for ML families. Language facilitators supported ESL teachers in providing multilingual video tutorials. As one teacher explained,

It's teachers [and] language facilitators [who] have made tutorials for parents.... The ESL teacher, who is English-only speaking, will do her part. And, then we'll bring in a Spanish language facilitator, and she will do the same thing. And then the French [speaking facilitator] will do that.... Then ... we push [the video] out to parents.

ML teachers created their own YouTube channel to post multilingual instructional videos for their students and their families.

Ultimately, after four weeks of ML teachers, administrators, and language facilitators' volunteering technology support, most ML parents had been reached. A first grade DL teacher explained that at that point parents had enough knowledge and skills to be able to support their children at home: "The fourth week parents finally started to get used to responding daily.... Little by little, they are adjusting to the routine." This volunteering was greatly aided also by the adoption of ML teacher-parent communication smartphone applications such as TalkingPoints and Parent Square, which allowed simultaneous translation of teacher-parent/school-parent messages in multiple languages. Even in this case, though, ML staff had to help parents learn how to use these apps. In addition, ML teachers provided their private telephone numbers to all ML parents so that they could also communicate through WhatsApp since most ML parents already used it.

With all the different available communication options, parents were more accessible and could respond more readily to teachers and school. A DL teacher explained how communication with parents

changed for the better during the pandemic because of the need for parental support to make remote instruction feasible and successful: "We have to update the parents weekly and we even use Talking Point to send messages.... We have communicated regularly and frequently and it's different from how we used to communicate previously."

Even if parent-teacher communication became faster and more direct due to ML phone apps, the support of the language facilitators was still crucial, especially for English-only speaking teachers. One first grade ESL teacher stated that it was difficult to communicate with ML parents, but she said, "I had a great language facilitator aide who worked in my classroom.... She's from Congo and speaks Lingala and French.... Of I needed to talk to any of those families, she would call them for me." Describing other language facilitators, the ML director explained that their role in connecting school with parents was often the only available way. She confirmed that the French-speaking language facilitators were "in really close contact with families. Families call these three ladies through the week and on the weekends.... If they don't make the calls, the calls are probably not going to be made."

The Spanish-speaking parent liaison had also a central role in technology support for the ML parents, as the ML director explained,

[He's done] a little bit of everything. It has been going to houses and finding out why students aren't completing assignments and sometimes it's like, well, "We don't have internet." ... He has to go back to the house when the internet is being installed, because no one speaks English.... That's a lot of phone calls, a lot of visits.

To provide equitable educational access to ML students, ML educators in these two rural districts expanded and strengthened their skills and relationships. In the context of flexible state policy, Illinois districts and schools oversaw adaptation of guidelines according to their local needs and programs. In the case of the two districts in this study, the ML director and teachers created daily policies to address the needs of the ML parents.

ML Students and Remote Instruction: "They Knew the Alphabet, but They Didn't Know ... Technical Words"

One unexpected obstacle ML teachers in both districts encountered was teaching ML elementary

students how to use tablets and Chromebooks remotely. Many young ML students lacked the English vocabulary to understand the English teachers' instructions about how to operate the devices and the applications. One of the English-only speaking grade 5 teachers in Prairie City stressed how the remote use of technology was almost an insurmountable challenge for her and her ML students at the beginning of the new pandemic school year. The communication obstacle was deeply challenging when teaching newcomers and low English proficiency students remotely. A DL grade 3 teacher explained, "It wasn't just teaching the content, but it was also teaching ... about Google Classroom, how to use it.... We had to explain it and how to do everything with it.... It was a learning process for all of us." As another teacher put it,

One day I spent 10 minutes trying to teach them where the volume button was on their thing.... Someone had muted themselves on their computer, and they couldn't figure out how to undo it. Okay, "the top row, now, the top row, right above that." ... They knew the alphabet, but they didn't know any of those technical words.

The teachers sounded exasperated by this challenge, as it did not allow them to teach the mandated curriculum and represented an extra challenge for ML students' learning.

During this period, 60% of the ML teachers surveyed in the two districts found that "modifying curriculum for remote learning" was the greatest challenge for effectively teaching from home. One ML director noted that one of the great difficulties was for TBE and DL teachers to plan in two languages and promote bilingual literacy and bilingualism through remote instruction, as materials and platforms in Spanish and other L1 languages were not easily available.

One grade 1 ESL teacher in Prairie City said that comprehensible communication with MLs in remote mode was very complex. She recalled, "as an ESL teacher, you do so much hands-on or [use] pictures and a lot of explaining ... that you can do in person." ESL teachers found it frustrating to be unable to implement all the effective ESL approaches and comprehensible input through a computer screen. For children enrolled in the Spanish-English DL program, the bilingual grade 4 teacher expressed how children needed help at home, but they could receive that help only in L1 by their parents. Bilingual videos were a way to provide extra support in both languages. She explained, "I really try to do the Spanish and English

and reading. It's been hard because they don't have that help at home [for] the other language." A DL kindergarten classroom teacher was worried about ML students' decreased exposure and development of L1 via remote instruction: She could not provide reading interventions in Spanish due to the difficulty of setting up small-group interventions via computer. To maintain the DL equity promise and driven by concerns about their MLs' learning loss, the DL team searched for computer-based materials, programs, and platforms that also provided content in Spanish. It was not an easy task to find a complete Spanish curriculum online. As one ML director explained, "There's nothing available that has everything in Spanish.... Istation has ... English literacy, Spanish literacy and math ... only in English. But we need some platform, we want a platform that all of our students can use."

While searching for an online ML curriculum, teachers were bending over backward to create their own ML video materials for remote instruction to support L1 and L2. A DL grade 5 teacher explained, "When we were posting videos, it was both in Spanish and English. Or if I have a student that's in quarantine, they get [videos] in Spanish and English." The ML director highlighted the relentless work of the DL teachers and their intense cooperation toward creating ML instructional videos to add extra L1 time. The ML director stated that DL teachers always had to work twice as hard to create bilingual materials, and she was worried about how exhausted DL teachers were: "The challenge has been the massive number of videos that people feel that they need to make.... I was over at the elementary for their staff meeting, and teachers were saying, 'I'm up to 135 videos.' ... My goodness."

One grade 1 DL teacher explained how her team used Class Dojo in coordination with videos for the students on remote mode during hybrid days:

Class Dojo is almost like Facebook.... Every day we have to have a math lesson, so we take turns recording the math lesson in English and in Spanish. I mean every day. The lesson is recorded in English and in Spanish, and we put that on our class story and then we also do story time videos having to do with whatever theme we're in.

A sense of collaboration and sharing grew deeper during this time. Collaboration went beyond the DL and ESL teams, as the ML director stated: "Grade levels are doing a really, really good job of sharing. So, you know, if a third-grade teacher is making a

video related to the math lesson or the reading lesson, they're all using our dual teachers' [work/videos]."

ML teachers not only helped each other with planning instruction and sharing materials that they were creating for remote mode; they also helped each other with self-care. A grade 1 ESL teacher talked about her team and the culture of collaboration before the pandemic and how, during COVID-19, it went beyond professional collaboration and became crucial reciprocal emotional support.

There are five of us, and there are three in the dual program, and there are two of us ESL only. And we actually are an amazing team, and we plan together and work together really well.... I honestly don't know if my emotional state might have been so positive if I didn't have such a good team.... During our three-week shutdown we were very burnt out on making packets and planning and Zoom meetings.... So one day we declared a mental health day, and we decorated the hallway for fall in anticipation that the kids would come back and see it, and so that was good for all of us.

It was clear from their narrative that their decision-making processes were based on longstanding teamwork and reciprocal support. Such processes were not put in place at the time of the pandemic but were one of the pillars of their DL program implementation that required common planning time for teachers of the same grade.

Advocacy for MLs: Who's Coming to School?

The state of Illinois recommended that vulnerable learners attend school in person, declaring, "strongly encourage prioritizing in-person learning for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), MLs, and students under the age of 13" (ISBE, 2020 p. 6). Needing to comply with the physical distancing rules, the ML directors in both districts had to make hard decisions about which ML students were the neediest and should attend in person. In Prairie Town, as a systematic placement criterion, the ML director used students' ACCESS language proficiency scores to select MLs and was wary of using teachers' recommendation to avoid "parents' backlash." In Rivertown, teachers' recommendations were used to select students.

However, newcomers needed to be tested to establish their English proficiency levels. For some MLs, these tests had very high stakes. As one ML director explained, "because with our new students,

some of them we had placed in ESL 1 [without being screened], and they had no business in ESL 1, they needed to be in 3, or in one case..., didn't need to be in ESL at all." The testing difficulty was especially high for young learners, as unlike older students, they had to be screened in person. Because of the high number of MLs in the lower elementary grades and the strict distancing rules during the pandemic, however, an impossibly long time was required to test all elementary-aged children. ML directors had to come up with different strategies to test them and ensure that MLs were going to receive appropriate services. One of the ML directors asked for ML parents' support: "This year ... we have, I think, 120 first graders, which is massive.... I think either 65 or 75 of those students are MLs. So they all had to be screened.... During the remote time, we had called and asked parents to bring their kids in, and they did." They had to bend some rules to get this important testing accomplished.

When interviewed about equitable strategies for selecting students in need of in-person attendance, advocacy work emerged as a consistent and central theme for both ML directors. Both lamented that they had to be vigilant to ensure that district and school building administrators included MLs in their emergency plans in an equitable way. Prairie City's ML director recalled that some principals, especially in middle and high school, "brought back [to the classroom] every kid with an IEP but didn't have any conversations about English learners." One ML director felt that she had to be present in every district and school-level conversations to ensure MLs received equitable opportunities. The Prairie City ML director recalled, "All of a sudden it was like ... all the kids with IEP [were brought back]..., so I'm trying to like insert.... I'm always inserting myself in conversations [to include MLs].... You're like the annoying person that never goes away." Similarly, Rivertown's ML director had to "stand her ground" when asking the school board to include all MLs in in-person instruction during hybrid mode because the school board was disregarding MLs' needs:

There were kids that were in all-remote. And we were like..., "They really need to be in school." ... I was told to whittle the list down because that was too many kids. I was also told they didn't need to be here any extra time than anybody else. And I stood my ground.... I've never felt so attacked, but also so proud that I was able to stand up for students.... The priority is not the English learners, the priority are those

with IEPs, those that are in Tier Three, for intervention purposes, and for whatever reason, they have totally negated any English learners' needs.

She also underlined that even if in the elementary school more than 50% of the students were MLs, paradoxically, the policies and views of the school board and the administrators did not prioritize their needs and the needs of their families. She said, "To me, it should be more obvious that ... we might have to do something different to meet their needs. It should be more obvious, but it's not." She explained a specific instance of parent-teacher conference schedules during the pandemic:

Many of our families work the second shift.... We usually have parent teacher conferences from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. on a Thursday night. And then the following morning, students are not in session. And we have conferences from 8 a.m. to noon. Someone suggested, "Why don't we just do two afternoon evening sessions of conferences, and then you can have Friday off? We have no time scheduled for those families that work second shift." So in my last board record, I said..., "We can't do it this way."

The ML director had to defend and advocate for ML children and their families constantly, saying, "I always feel like my antennas are always up. I'm always like..., 'Is this right? Is this fair? Is this how it should be and all the time?'" She stated that the lack of representation of immigrant ML parents on the board made her the only person advocating for ML students' needs and rights.

There's no squeaky wheel for the English learner parents that complained to board members or complained to the superintendent. There's nobody.... But it's a constant.... It just seems like it's all the time.... I'm just doing my job. I'm just making sure that things are happening for our families, as they should be.

The typical board member did not think about the work schedule and the needs of ML parents, and representation was needed because, she said, "Our school board is 100% lily white.... We need someone, we need a Hispanic man or woman who is willing to bring up things that [the board members] don't even think about, like ... people working second shift." The two ML directors also lamented superintendents' and principals' lack of knowledge of ML education and contexts and the lack of in-depth content about ML education in the principalship and superintendent training/education programs. One of

the ML directors recalled taking an educational leadership class about special needs populations, and she was asked to present about ML students, as no specialized content was provided otherwise.

Commitment to their ML students and families during the pandemic was also expressed through tireless work to ensure that specific federal and state funds were procured specifically for MLs. In fall 2020, one of the ML directors was very close to having her second child, and she worked into the last hours before going into labor and right after delivering her baby, during her short maternity leave. She described her indefatigable commitment:

I completed our consolidated district plan one day before the baby was born. Oh, my goodness..., I knew I was gonna have the baby early. And I remember I was at my in-laws, because it was a holiday weekend, and I spent the whole weekend completing this because you have to complete a consolidated district plan before you could apply for all of the title grants ... [and] the emergency relief for elementary and secondary schools ... so that we got 380-some thousand dollars. And then I applied for a digital equity grant and a digital professional learning grants, and oh, FEMA, I applied for the FEMA grant.... But this was all happening, like with a newborn, and I wasn't even really back to work, but it all worked out.

One state ML education policy that one of the districts embraced and enhanced during the pandemic was the Seal of Biliteracy. Committed to harnessing students' cultural and linguistic strengths, Prairie City's ML director expanded the Seal of Biliteracy to include the Akha Chin language, spoken locally by Myanmar refugee families. Prairie City's school district was the first and only district in the state of Illinois to provide such an opportunity. The director made sure ML students could be evaluated in alternative ways, even against upper administrators' complaints that the assessment should not be changed. She explained,

We are doing the Seal of Biliteracy in Akha Chin ... [using] an online test and portfolio option. If they pass it, they'll be the first in the entire state to get the seal of Biliteracy in Chin. Like, it's so cool! ... One really great thing that I didn't even mention is that we still had 10 students graduate with a Seal by Biliteracy, because we did remote testing with them in April. It was kind of a fight with the high school administrator because he didn't think that it was fair. Like, we're doing it.

The ML director was adamant about celebrating and validating native cultural and linguistic wealth of all ML students and was committed to finding alternative and creative ways to ensure this recognition happened, even during the unprecedented pandemic crisis. Again, even in this case, the ML directors' attention and work ensured that ML students were provided with resources and support to meet their needs in pandemic times. While specific state and federal grants were available, and multilingual education policies such as the Seal of Biliteracy were preexistent, the role of dedicated ML directors was pivotal for maintaining a focus on ML students and families within the district and obtaining equitable services and funds.

Discussion and Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that marginalization of rural MLs' needs within general district policies required constant vigilance and redirection by ML administrators on many fronts, especially in relation to addressing ML families' preexisting technology and digital literacy gaps and language barriers that put them at a disadvantage and in need of targeted support. For ML educators, ensuring equitable educational opportunities during the pandemic also meant a commitment to maintaining the promise of ML instructional support and biliteracy development across shifting instructional modes. This study shows that the longstanding presence of multilingual and multipronged rural programs staffed with qualified rural ML directors, teachers, and paraprofessionals allowed for synergistic teamwork in mobilizing a wide support system for rural MLs and their families. Within this ML education microcontext, we could identify different components of the rural cultural and linguistic wealth framework (Crumb, Chambers, et al., 2023) that were put to work to maintain ML instructional continuity.

Based on Illinois state ML education policies and mandates, in the last two decades, the two district and school sites in this study systematically developed unique ML education programming by increasing the number and types of programs from ESL support to TBE and DL instruction, increasing the number of qualified ESL-/bilingual-endorsed teachers, and employing language facilitators who spoke many of the students' languages. With the leadership of dedicated and qualified ML directors in both districts, the ML educator group had become a

very closeknit educational team within the elementary schools. During the challenges and overwork of the pandemic, they became emotionally closer and mutually supportive.

We considered the idea of rural familism as "a rural community cultural capital asset derived from the intragenerational establishment of familial lineages within geography proximity who collectively care for each other... especially in the absence of immediate access to essential governmental services" (Crumb, Chambers, et al., 2022, p. 130). In this perspective, we could view ESL/DL/TBE teachers and directors and their collective knowledge, experiences, and dedication as creating and expanding their own kind of familism in support and protection of "their" ML families and students against marginalization and adversity during the pandemic. Where intergenerational support networks for immigrant and refugee families were not available, the local initiatives and ML policies that rural ML teachers and directors enacted during the pandemic to support educational equity for ML students and families provided voice and representation that ML parents and families otherwise did not possess within the district.

Crumb, Chambers, et al. (2023) also define rural ingenuity as "the inventiveness of rural residents, a collective attribute based on the rural community ecology and human and social capital" (p. 129). ML teachers, directors, and language facilitators had to employ team creativity to utilize the linguistic, cultural, and social capital available to individuals within their programs to support families for their technology needs and home instructional support. Due to the small size of the towns and the close proximity of rural living, ML teachers and directors used their knowledge of the struggles faced by each ML family and their children to create feasible and flexible support, mobilizing the appropriate human, cultural, and linguistic resources to engage with ML parents in need. In addition, ML educators showed rural community unity, defined as "the composite assets held by rural populations, resulting in unifying and organizing behaviors ... easily recognized when rural areas experience a crisis or natural disaster" (Crumb, Chambers, et al., 2023, p. 131). Rural ML directors and educators maintained and expanded their sense of unity as they collaboratively planned, created, and shared ML instructional materials, created alternative assessment schedules and modes, and supported each other emotionally to contend with the prolonged pandemic crisis. This case study

provides compelling data in support of reimagining rurality as a place of educational possibilities for ML students and their families and communities. It also tangibly contributes to rewriting the stereotypical “rural disadvantage” discourse of rural communities and schools by unveiling the workings of a tightly unified and professionally competent community of practice, deeply committed to educational equity for MLs during regular and extraordinary times.

This case study reaffirms the need for a strong commitment to the creation and implementation of long-term ML education and diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and practices on a wide scale in superdiverse rural settings. This effort requires a solid investment in PD and resources targeting the specific educational and instructional needs of the growing number of rural MLs and their families. One key to this process is reforming teacher education programs through the inclusion of ESL/bilingual/ML

education policies and practices within endorsements and other credentialing programs for all future teachers and administrators. This approach would help to overcome the persistent perspective that ML students’ education is the sole responsibility of designated ML teachers and directors. All educators in rural communities need to deepen their knowledge of ML families and their children to fully understand how “community, geography, topography, diverse demography, way of life, and limited resources shape EB [emergent bilingual] education” (Marichal, 2021, p. 69). To build stronger and more resilient systems to support ML students and their families, state policymakers can lead the effort to ensure equitable prioritization of resources through authentic collaboration with school leaders, practitioners, parents, and community members and organizations (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2021).

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