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# Starting With Our Students and Ourselves

Manuel moved to the United States from El Salvador when he was 13 years old. In El Salvador, he had worked on his uncle's bus as the ticket taker and money exchanger. He is a very sweet, polite Spanish speaker who came to the United States without any formal schooling or prior exposure to English. His family moved to Centerville, a small town, to work in a relative's restaurant, where they hoped they could earn a living wage. Although Manuel had no prior schooling, Mr. Pronowitz, the principal at Centerville Middle School, decided to place Manuel in the eighth grade so that he could be with his same-age peers.

Ernesto moved from Mexico to the same town as Manuel. His father, an engineer, had been transferred to work in a city near Centerville. Before moving, Ernesto had completed seventh grade in a private school where he had received an excellent education. He loved mathematics and had won an award for "most promising mathematician." When his parents enrolled him in Centerville Middle School, his father tried to convey Ernesto's prior schooling experiences to Mr. Pronowitz. But because Ernesto's father's English was limited and Ernesto and his mother could not speak any English at all, Mr. Pronowitz could not understand much about Ernesto's strengths, achievements, and needs. He assigned him to the same grade as Manuel.

A few days after Manuel and Ernesto began school, they were given a standardized test to determine their fluency in English. Both scored at the beginning level. With this testing information, Mr. Pronowitz assigned them to the English as a second language (ESL) class that met for one 45-minute class period a day. He also placed them in the same remedial classes for the rest of their school day. He assumed that Manuel and Ernesto would feel more comfortable with each other because they were the school's only Spanish-speaking multilingual learners (MLs). He also thought that placing them in remedial classes would be less demanding for them because they were both beginning learners of English, unlike the other MLs in the school. Overall, Mr. Pronowitz thought that these placements were academically appropriate and sensitive to the boys' needs.

When Manuel and Ernesto began speaking to each other, Ernesto quickly realized that Manuel had never been to school. Ernesto felt that his classes, especially math, were much easier than he was used to. He assumed that being a Spanish-speaking ML in the United States must mean that he was not a smart or good student. He felt isolated and divorced from everything that was familiar to him. Within a few weeks, he began to feel very depressed. By the end of the first term, Ernesto had decided to stop attending school. His parents quickly moved him to a parochial school, assuming that it would be a much better place for their son than Centerville Middle School was. When Mr. Pronowitz was made aware of Ernesto's absences, he called Ernesto's home. He was unable to communicate with Ernesto or his parents. While he thought about Ernesto occasionally, he never knew why he missed so much school. When Ernesto stopped attending altogether, Mr. Pronowitz assumed that he had moved to another town.

Manuel also felt entirely lost. He could not understand any of his classes. They were moving much too quickly for him. He was constantly exhausted from trying to learn. At least Ernesto could help him understand a little about what was happening. But when Ernesto was absent, which had become a frequent occurrence, Manuel's day was hopelessly confusing. He began thinking about quitting school. After a month of struggling, he decided to meet with Mr. Pronowitz. He was failing all his classes and desperately wanted to do well. He asked his uncle if he would come to translate for him at the meeting. When they met, Mr. Pronowitz decided that Manuel should be referred for a special education evaluation to see if he had a learning disability. With Manuel's parents' approval (they trusted the school and didn't believe it was their place to do anything more than listen and heed the principal's advice), the referral process began. The assessors assumed that Manuel's poor progress was due to a disability as opposed to what it really was: lack of prior formal education and academic skills, even in his first language.

Sergi, a Ukrainian American multilingual learner who was born in the United States and had attended Centerville Middle School for 3 years, then moved to New York City, where he enrolled in the ninth grade. He was one of the city's 140,000 MLs (New York City Department of Education, 2020–21), and when his English proficiency was tested, Sergi was found to be at the fourth of five English proficiency levels for MLs (New York City Department of Education, 2022). The school decided that he did not need to be enrolled in the language education program as he appeared to be able to learn in the same classes as his English-fluent classmates. Within the first few weeks, Sergi was unable to keep up with his peers. He had trouble grasping some of the vocabulary and course assignments and tasks. He pored over his homework and stayed up well after midnight each night. He also attempted to go for after-school help but worried that he would be fired from the after-school job that his family depended on. As a result, Sergi began failing many of his courses and thinking that school was not for him. By the end of the ninth grade, Sergi was like 28% of the city's MLs—a dropout (New York State Education Department, 2019).

These scenarios are not unusual among MLs in the United States. Many are failing, being referred to special education programs, and dropping out of school. When we measure achievement by the tests that each state administers to its students, as required by federal regulations (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2015) or the graduation rates of MLs in the United States (USDOE, n.d.-c), the achievement gap between the nation's MLs and the overall student population is significant and growing. Data from the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.-a) show that close to 80% of eighth-grade English-fluent students scored at the basic or above level in reading, whereas only 32% of MLs performed at these levels. Additionally, 84% of students graduated from high school in 4 years as opposed to 67% of MLs (USDOE, n.d.-c). The difference in graduation rates between the two groups exposes a grave consequence to consider—especially because we know the economic and employment benefits of possessing at least a high school diploma.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the nation. One month into the crisis, Dr. Anthony Fauci, advisor to the White House, stated that the pandemic “shines a very bright light on some of the real weaknesses and foibles in our society” (C-SPAN, 2020). His words affirm the data that have been presented thus far about the growing ML population, and there are additional data that are as important for us to consider as we make our way forward. Shortly after the pandemic began, over 1.1 million students—2% of the total student population and five times more than what was anticipated—dropped out of school. It may take years for enrollment to return, if at all, to its prepandemic level (Lennon & Stanton, 2021). After a year of the COVID-19 crises, absenteeism surged among the nation's MLs (Lehrer-Small, 2021) and was in sharp contrast to prepandemic findings that MLs were 15% more likely to attend school than never-MLs (USDOE, n.d.-b). Further, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022), in its “nationally representative report of elementary and secondary public school teachers” (p. v), found that during the 2020–21 school year (the height of the pandemic), many MLs lacked access to school meals and school supports and lacked appropriate workspace to learn remotely. The cascade of obstacles that so many MLs and their families faced led many of us to see just how impactful the pandemic was for the most vulnerable of our students.

All of the data that have been presented about MLs thus far speaks not only to the need to think of more responsive ways of designing more effective language assistance programming, but also to the ways in which we must transform our practices for MLs to succeed in school and in their lives. This book focuses on creating, implementing, and sustaining effective language assistance programs for MLs. It is intended for school- and district-level leaders, teachers, leaders, advocates, and others who are charged with administering and supervising the curriculum, instructional programming, teachers and support staff, family and community outreach and engagement, and all related activities regarding the successful education of MLs.

The following questions are intended to help us in this reexamination process:

- Who are MLs?
- Typically, who are the educators of MLs?
- How does what we are doing complement our district's and school's mission and vision?

### Who are MLs?

MLs represent a large and growing population in U.S. schools. Between 2000 and 2017, the number of MLs in the United States increased by more than 1 million, from 8% to close to 10% of the total student population (Mitchell, 2020; USDOE, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2020). During the same time, the total number of students flatlined (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019, 2021). Urban schools, which were once dominated by monolingual speakers of English, have quickly become much more linguistically diverse. Simultaneously, suburban districts that had never had MLs are “rapidly becoming more culturally, economically, linguistically, and racially diverse, yet these diverse groups are likely to live in neighborhoods where they are isolated from whites regardless of income” (Edwards et al., 2017, p. 109–110). Rural areas of the United States are also experiencing significant growth in MLs (REL Central, 2019).

Almost half of the nation's students lived in poverty before the COVID-19 pandemic (Southern Education Foundation, 2020), and the number of MLs living in poverty is disproportionately higher than those who speak English only (Century Foundation, 2021). Further, MLs are much more likely to attend socioeconomically segregated schools with fewer resources (Quintero & Hansen, 2021).

One of the most profound factors among all the nation's students is the epic number of them who are exposed to adverse childhood experiences. Almost half of U.S. children and youth have experienced or are experiencing trauma, violence, and/or chronic stress in the form of abuse, neglect, or household challenges such as a family member who is seriously ill or has died, is incarcerated, abuses drugs, and more (Bethell et al., 2017; Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2013). In addition to this startling statistic about the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, many MLs and their families have also had major disruptions in their lives. Millions of MLs have experienced the following:

- ✓ living in war or conflict zones;
- ✓ being persecuted in their home countries; being displaced;
- ✓ the long, arduous, and extremely dangerous trip to perceived safety in the United States;
- ✓ being separated from families; being inhumanely treated in detention centers; and
- ✓ living in constant fear of being deported and/or becoming homeless.

(Zacarian et al., 2021, p. 47)

As a result, they have not had the continuous systematic acculturation experiences of schooling. Further, when many enroll in U.S. schools, it may be their first exposure to literacy and content learning (Calderón, 2007).

What constitutes a family is also evolving in our contemporary society to include children being raised by two parents, a single parent, foster parents, grandparents, blended parents, extended family, and/or with extrafamilial supports (Zacarian & Silverstone, 2015). It also includes MLs who have come to the United States as a whole family unit and those who have been separated from their families, as well as undocumented children or citizen children of undocumented families (Menjivar & Cervantes, 2016), many of whom are living with unrelated people and in extreme isolation (Yoshikawa, 2011).

To say the least, MLs are not a monolithic group. In addition to all the factors that have already been presented, MLs in the United States represent 400 languages (USDOE, n.d.-d). While 75% are Spanish speakers and 2% each Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese speakers, the diversity of languages is important to consider as we build language assistance programming for all MLs. Equally important is the reality that some schools have MLs from a wide range of language groups, while others have students from just one, and adjacent districts may have MLs who speak different languages than their neighbors. Further, there may be speakers of one language in one school and speakers of another language in another school in the same district. The sheer diversity of MLs' home languages is important for us to consider.

The primary language that a student speaks is but one descriptor. Even students who speak Spanish, for example, have distinct cultures and represent many countries. Some hail from countries in Central and South America, others are from Caribbean nations, and many others were born in the United States. They also speak different dialects. Similar diversity is the reality for students from any language group.

Additionally, some of the nation's MLs have had rich literacy and prior schooling experiences (Zacarian, 2013; Zacarian & Soto, 2020). Typically, these students' families have had strong literacy experiences and their child-rearing practices are oriented to developing the language and cognitive skills that their children will need in school. It is typical in these homes to observe families reading a variety of texts and for their children to observe these literacy behaviors as part of their development. As such, their home life includes everyday practices such as observing a family member reading the newspaper, recipes, books, and other written materials that demonstrate literacy as a cultural way of being and acting. Thus, one segment of MLs enters school with the type of school-matched language and thinking skills that are used in school regardless of what language(s) they speak. However, this does not negate the fact that they need responsive cultural supports to become members of their school and classroom communities and language supports to become proficient in English and able to perform

at grade level in core academic subjects in English (Zacarian & Soto, 2020; Zacarian et al., 2021).

Conversely, there is also a large group of MLs who have not yet had the opportunity to be exposed to the repeated and continuous school-matched language and literacy experiences that are used in school. While they must receive the same types of culturally responsive practices that support them to feel safe, a sense of belonging, valued, and competent, as do all MLs, they must also engage in learning and using the type of vocabulary, language functions, and context knowledge that is used in school settings (Zacarian & Soto, 2020). This is not to say that such students do not possess communicative skills or that they are not academically inclined! Indeed, they possess a repertoire of language practices that they routinely use, as we all do, to communicate, think, and much more. An essential condition, which is discussed in later chapters of this book, is that educators designing, implementing, and sustaining effective ML language assistance programming must take time to understand, affirm, and acknowledge the various experiences of such students and draw from this knowledge to support them in learning successfully in school settings (Solorza & Garcia, 2020).

Each of these factors is important to consider when building and sustaining effective language assistance programs for MLs. While many of us are most concerned with the speed at which students learn English and are often impatient with the process, the variation among MLs in the United States must not be ignored, as it will greatly help us in creating, implementing, and sustaining programs that work.

In sum, MLs in the United States come from a wide range of personal, linguistic, cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. They also continue to grow significantly as an important segment of the nation's students. However, overall, they are performing at a much lower rate than their English-fluent peers and have been dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To advocate for the best language assistance program and support students' success, district- and school-based administrators, teachers, specialists, and others need to understand their ML populations very well, from personal, social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. They also need to understand that MLs come from diverse backgrounds, including the epic number that have experienced one or more adversities and have varying degrees of school readiness. Simultaneously, we must acknowledge and affirm the wealth of personal, social, cultural, and linguistic assets and experiences that all MLs and their families possess and support these in all we do to create effective programming on behalf of this growing population.

### **Are there commonalities among the ways in which we organize programming for MLs?**

If you were to visit classrooms in the United States that have MLs, you might notice many different features. In some, you would hear the student's native language being spoken. In others, you would hear only English because even using another language informally is discouraged. You might also observe students having little to no

support to learn English in some schools, while in others you would observe MLs in multigrade classrooms spending the school day with other MLs. You might travel only a few miles to another school and see students spending half of their school day learning in one language and half in another. There are literally hundreds of programming models for MLs to learn English as they learn academic content (Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010; Soltero, 2004). While many believe that the name of a program, such as *transitional bilingual education*, defines how it is practiced, the reality is that any program model can be enacted differently in one district than it is in the next, adding up to the hundreds of types of language assistance programming offered (Lessow-Hurley, 2008). We will look more closely at these in the next chapter.

School leaders have to sift through each of these types to try to identify the one that they believe will work most effectively in their context. They also must consider how prepared their school's or district's teachers are to work with MLs.

### Typically, who are the educators of MLs?

In the early 1990s, most of the nation's teachers were white, middle-class, monolingual English speakers (Zeichner & Hoelt, 1996), and the situation has not changed dramatically since then (NCES, 2018). Further, the percentage of teachers and administrators formally trained in ESL or bilingual education has not kept pace with the growth in the nation's ML population (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). Teacher preparation programs are overwhelmingly dominated by faculty who are white (NCES, 2020). Additionally, in an empirical review of 101 studies that were conducted between 1980 and 2002 to investigate teacher preparation to work with students from diverse populations, Hollins and Guzman (2005) found that most students enrolled in teacher preparation programs were more comfortable and preferred working with students and parents from backgrounds similar to their own. Further, many educators who work in poor urban and rural areas were fast-tracked into teaching without the depth of training required to effectively teach MLs (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017).

Because many educators have no experience working with students unlike themselves—including students who live in poverty, students who have experienced adversities, and older students who have had limited exposure to literacy, or none at all, and no prior formal schooling—they have no experiential framework to draw from. Further, many report feeling inadequate in working with this growing population (Heineke & Vera, 2022; Samson & Lesaux, 2015). All these factors pose complex challenges for educators to truly create effective programs for MLs (Arias & Markos, 2016; Lindholm-Leary, 2015). Research in this critical area demonstrates the disparities between the significant number of MLs and the less-than-adequate workforce prepared to teach them (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017).

We must pay far more attention to the federal laws and regulations governing the preparation of educators and resources required on behalf of the growing population



of MLs in the United States. The U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education (2015) stated:

School districts have an obligation to provide the personnel and resources necessary to effectively implement their chosen EL [English learner] programs. This obligation includes having highly qualified teachers to provide language assistance services, trained administrators who can evaluate these teachers, and adequate and appropriate materials for the EL programs. At a minimum, every school district is responsible for ensuring that there is an adequate number of teachers to instruct EL students and that these teachers have mastered the skills necessary to effectively teach in the district's program for EL students. (p. 14)

While Title II of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) changed the previously used term “highly qualified” to the term “effective” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017, p. 436), the sheer number of teachers that need to be trained across the country is staggering. In 2013–14, the 10 states with the highest percentage of MLs needed about 82,000 “effectively” prepared teachers in the succeeding 5 years. When we consider the growth that has occurred in the ML population across the country, it is likely that most of the nation's teachers need training on how to work successfully with MLs. Just as we don't want MLs to sink or swim in the educational system, we all want educators who are prepared to meet the needs of our ever-growing, ever-changing MLs.

### What about teachers who have had training?

Some schools do have general education teachers who are trained to teach MLs. Many are members of the same language-minority groups as their students and have a solid understanding about their students' language, culture, and prior schooling as well as the developmental process of learning a new language and are prepared to teach this diverse population.

It is critical to support such educators to feel and be empowered as leaders in their schools and valued as assets for teaching MLs. In a study of a large group of teachers who participated in a longitudinal study that led to what is known as the *sheltered instruction observation protocol* (Echevarria et al., 2008), researchers from the Center for Applied Linguistics and the Center for Research on Equity and Diversity spent 5 years observing classroom teachers at schools in which MLs were performing well. At the heart of this research and the findings associated with it is a strong belief in working as collaborative partners on behalf of the success of MLs. In writing about moving beyond crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises that students experience, Zacarian et al. (2021) demonstrate the critical importance of partnerships among students, families, and educators in creating successful programming for MLs and overcoming longstanding inequities that have persisted for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

We need to understand ways to transform our schools so that students, families, and educators have a voice in the programming that we implement. MLs can succeed in the learning process and become active members of their school community when we work together and are copowered to do so. Educators and other stakeholders have an enormous, if not the most essential, role in the educational programming for the nation's MLs. We are the primary architects and supervisors of the instructional programming that is provided.

### How does what we are doing complement our district's and school's mission and vision?

Many, if not most, schools have a mission statement. Mission statements typically mean that educators have examined their school and its core purpose to define and make available to the community their school's or district's goals and how they will be measured. Mission statements might be considered the symbolic heart of the school, as they describe the best of an organization's core values and beliefs for building a school culture and climate. In mission statements, school leaders often encapsulate what they believe to be important for learners and the school community.

The same type of process is needed for creating a language assistance program for MLs. Doing so takes time, collaboration, and a belief that the program must complement the mission of the school while also addressing the complex needs of language-minority students. Selecting a one-size-fits-all model does not work for the widely diverse population of MLs.

To create optimal language education assistance programming, whether for large or small numbers of MLs, requires that we think of learners as individuals, members of the school community, and members of the town or city community as well. To lead our schools, we must collaborate with our students, their families, teachers, and other stakeholders.

In Chapter 2, we begin to look more closely at developing a rationale for a district's or school's program model for its MLs.

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