

Multilingual School Leadership: An Autoethnographic Inquiry Into an Aspiring School Leader's Journey

by

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Abstract

As the multilingual student population grows, the presence of bilingual school leaders remains disproportionately low in the southern rural United States. Research highlights the importance of diverse leadership in promoting integrative educational environments. However, a gap remains in understanding how personal narratives and lived experiences influence the leadership journey of bilingual educators, particularly in monolingual rural school systems. This autoethnographic study explores the experiences of a bilingual aspiring school leader, examining the intersection of language, identity, and leadership development within a traditionally monolingual educational landscape.

This study investigates how a bilingual educator navigates institutional norms, develops leadership strategies, and conceptualizes educational leadership by critically analyzing individual experiences through autoethnographic research. By highlighting support structures, this research aims to provide valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities that influence the pathways of bilingual educators to leadership. This study seeks to inform policies and practices that promote inclusive leadership representation, ensuring linguistically and multilingually responsive learning environments for all students.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure

In the preparation of this dissertation, the following Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used: Grammarly AI and ChatGPT. Grammarly was used solely for surface-level grammar and spelling and did not contribute to the conceptual development, analysis, or interpretation of the research findings. I used ChatGPT to create an image that would demonstrate how I incorporated two different theoretical learning theories. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has ensured that all AI-assisted sections have been reviewed and revised for accuracy and appropriate academic style. All AI-generated content was reviewed and validated for relevance, appropriateness, and accuracy before incorporation into the final document to maintain scholarly integrity of this research.

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Acknowledgments

I did not set out on this path imagining it would become a winding pilgrimage of growth, much like an ascent through the misty valleys and rocky terrain of life. What began as a simple curiosity, an eagerness to better understand the role of leadership and multilingual learning, soon revealed itself as a sacred journey marked by surrender, resilience, and transformation. I carried this dissertation across seasons: through early mornings when the house was still and quiet, in the margins of my lunch breaks, and late-night reflections after the last of my children had fallen asleep. God, my quiet companion, has been whispering, “Keep going,” through shadow and sunlight.

There were moments when I stood at the edge of Fear and Doubt, unsure how to move forward, especially as a part-time student juggling motherhood, teaching, and leadership responsibilities. However, I was blessed with faithful companions and guides along the way. Dr. Amy Serafini became more than an advisor; she was a gentle and steady voice of encouragement, always ready to rejoin me on the trail after I had paused too long. Her belief in the power of narrative and the beauty of my story breathed life into pages I was sometimes too weary to write. I will forever be grateful for her presence.

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Their belief in my potential and thoughtful advice helped me navigate the complexities of my coursework and research.

To my beloved husband, Joel Sewell, how often did you remind me why I started this journey? I could not have walked this far without you, your unwavering hope, your late-night pep talks, your coffee deliveries, and your hands that held everything else when mine were full. You are my safe place when the climb is steep, the one who believes in the mountaintop, even when all I could see was fog. Judah was only three when I began this journey; now, he is seven, and you have helped carry all four of our children through this season with grace, grit, and laughter.

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And to ALL my parents, thank you for instilling in me what hard work truly looks like. To this day, I cannot recall a single day when you stayed home because you were sick or needed a “mental” day off. Despite all your hardships, you always pushed through and showed us what real work is, and with dinner on the table each night. I am one lucky girl to have been raised by such loving, smart, and amazing examples of what hard work looks like.

This dissertation was never just about a degree. It was, and is, my story about overcoming and becoming brave, becoming whole, and becoming a leader with hinds’ feet —steady and sure-footed, even on high places (Hurnard, 1979).

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List of Abbreviations

CRSL	Culturally Responsive School Leadership
ELL	English Language Learner
ELP	English Language Proficiency
ILP	Individualized Language Plan
LEA	Local education agencies
ML	Multilingual Learners
PSEL	Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO MY JOURNEY

“It is God to whom and with whom we travel, and while He is the end of our journey, He is also at every stopping place.”

-Elisabeth Elliot

I still vividly remember my first classroom at an inner-city school on the Urban West Coast. I had spent numerous summers on mission trips to Mexico as a youth and had dreamt of this day. It was a hot day in the middle of August 2008, and I had about 2 weeks to get my classroom decorated and ready for students. I had posted all my realia, including brightly colored posters and handmade artifacts from my studies and travels abroad, on the walls, masking the chipped paint, and rows of desks pushed into an empty space. I was not shocked to hear all the hum of languages mingling in the air. I was a high school Spanish and ESL teacher, eager and slightly overwhelmed by the responsibility of teaching in an inner-city school. Even though I was a white female in a school where I was the minority, I couldn't wait to share my love for languages and cultures with my students. Fast forward eighteen years, and I now stand in a very different setting, the rural south, where the landscapes and culture have changed significantly. However, the vibrancy of multilingual learners continues to energize my classroom every morning.

In this autoethnographic study, I reflect deeply on my professional journey, revisiting journal entries scribbled late at night after challenging days and rummaging through photographs, old lesson plans, emails, and presentation notes that I have collected over the years (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Ellis, 2004). These artifacts are not just data, they are pieces of my story, glimpses into moments that shaped me as an educator, a learner, and, eventually, a bilingual school leader. By weaving together these reflections and artifacts, I draw on my experiences to carefully explore how my interactions with multilingual students, colleagues, and

the broader community have shaped my leadership identity (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Ellis, 2004). This process of self-reflection reveals nuanced intersections between myself and others, as well as the unique contexts I have navigated, identifying the constructs that continue to guide my journey toward multilingually responsive school leadership.

Research consistently shows that multilingually responsive school leadership is essential for ensuring equitable outcomes for all learners (Baecher et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2022; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). This need is particularly urgent in the South’s changing educational landscape, where there is a noticeable lack of bilingual individuals in school leadership roles, despite the increasing enrollment of multilingual learners (ML) in both urban and rural districts (NCES, 2021). Studies emphasize the importance of diverse leadership in creating integrative school environments (Barakat, Reames, & Kensler, 2012; Coady, 2019, 2020; Dewey, 1916; Hallinger et al., 2015; Ingram & Walters, 2007). However, bilingual educators often lack access and practical experience in navigating leadership pathways within traditional monolingual school systems (Gray, 2020; Hamann et al., 2015; Massey, 2020; Wortham et al., 2013).

With the multilingual enrollment more than doubling from 20,000 in 2012 to nearly 51,000 (NCES, 2021), schools face increasing pressure to adopt inclusive leadership practices that embrace linguistic and cultural diversity. This dissertation utilizes an autoethnographic approach to explore my lived experiences as a bilingual aspiring school leader in the rural south, highlighting how language, identity, and professional aspirations intersect in the pursuit of leadership within predominantly monolingual school systems.

Theoretical Framework

This autoethnographic inquiry seeks to uncover the underexplored dimensions of my journey as an aspiring bilingual school leader in the South, examining how these lived experiences have shaped my evolving leadership identity. This study is based on Knowles' Adult Learning Theory from 1970 and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory from 2000. It suggests that leadership development goes beyond simply acquiring skills. It is a dynamic and reflective journey that is deeply influenced by a rich tapestry of personal experiences, critical reflection, and transformative self-awareness (Barakat, Reames, & Kensler, 2012; Cashman, 2017; Ellis et al., 2011; Knowles, 1970; Mezirow, 2000). It dives into the strategies I employ to navigate the challenges posed by monolingual institutional frameworks and my evolving perceptions of parental engagement initiatives.

Adult Learning Theory, commonly referred to as andragogy, suggests that adults are naturally self-directed learners, motivated by intrinsic factors and informed by their diverse life experiences (Knowles, 1970, 1980; Knowles et al., 2005). Central to Knowles's (1980) conception of adult learning is the critical shift from dependency toward autonomy, emphasizing the need for adults to understand the purpose and value of their learning endeavors (Knowles et al., 2005). This theoretical perspective is especially resonant in my professional journey, underscoring the continual nature of learning beyond formal educational structures and recognizing informal experiences as pivotal opportunities for growth. Through reflective practice and self-directed learning activities, I engage deeply with Knowles's (1980) principles of andragogy, shifting my role from a passive recipient to an active participant and facilitator of learning in educational settings.

Complementing this perspective, Mezirow's (2000, 2009) transformative learning theory further enriches my inquiry by highlighting the essential role of critical reflection in meaningful

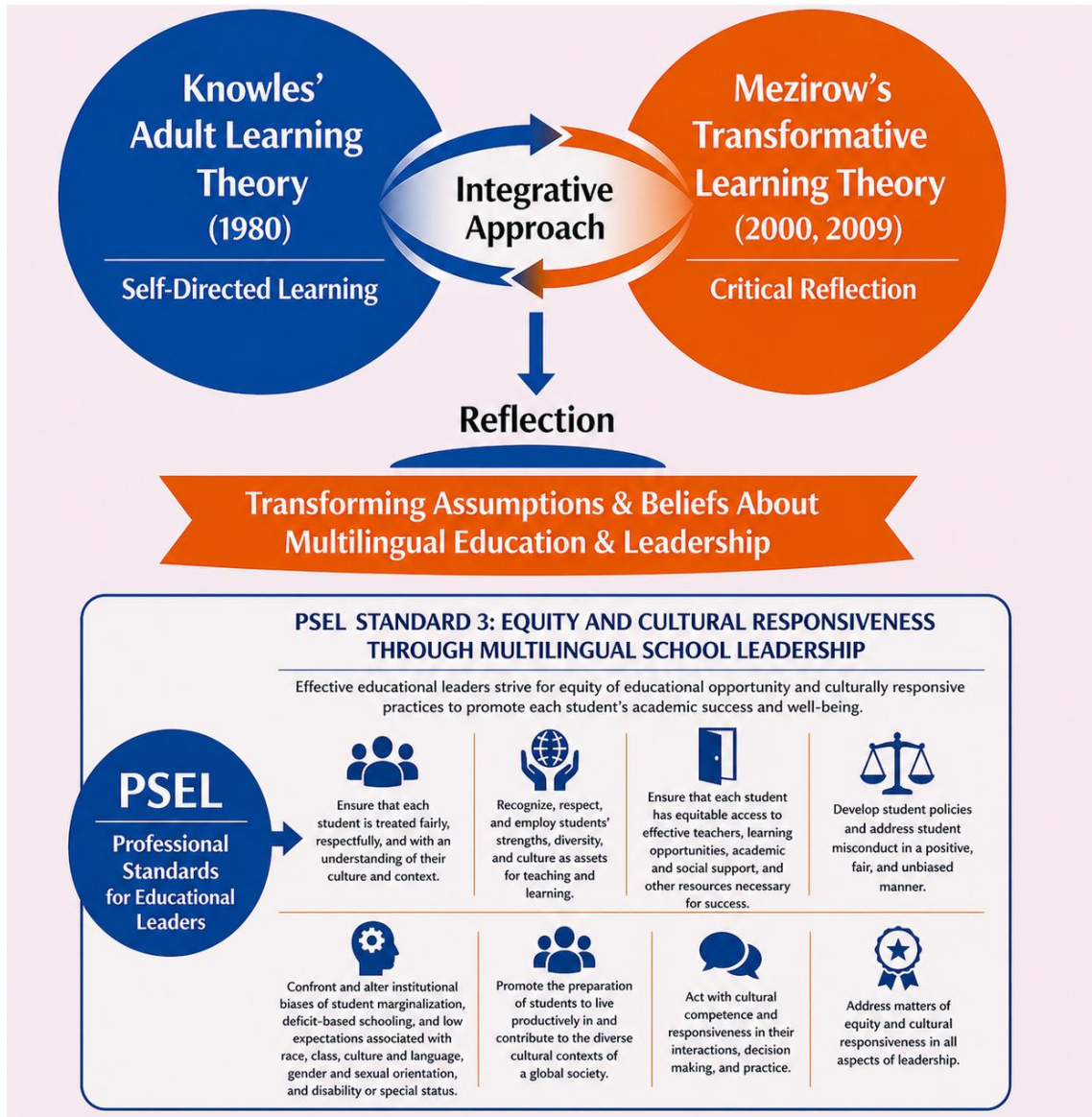
adult development. Transformative learning involves examining and reconstructing existing frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, and reflective, thereby allowing adults to adapt emotionally and intellectually to complex challenges (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Throughout my leadership development, reflective discourse has been instrumental in transforming my assumptions and beliefs about multilingual education and multilingual responsive leadership. Aligning my practice with the principles outlined in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (NPBEA, 2015), which promote inclusive leadership and multilingual responsive practices, highlighting how personal experiences can inform strategies for fostering inclusive educational leadership within diverse learning environments.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives fosters an in-depth exploration of my positionality and lived experience within educational leadership. It examines how I maneuver inclusive, discriminating, and reflective challenges to inform leadership practices. This study, therefore, provides critical insights into the necessity of leadership approaches that are responsive, inclusive, and actively engaged with the cultural and linguistic diversity of the student populations they serve.

The frameworks in this study guide my perspective on my leadership journey, emphasizing reflection and personal growth. The conceptual framework encompasses key ideas closely tied to my experiences and the research's purpose. These ideas include positionality, which means understanding how my background and experiences affect my perspectives and actions as an aspiring leader (Bochner & Ellis, 2022) and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) Standard 3, focusing on inclusive leadership and understanding different cultures in schools (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA],

2015), providing guidelines to help educators effectively support students who are multilingual and multicultural.

Figure 1: The Framework of the Study



Note. Original Work

Figure 1 above was created with the help of AI. It distinguishes the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning this autoethnographic study. The theoretical frameworks, Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory, describe how adults learn by reflecting

on their experiences and use those experiences to grow and become leaders (Knowles, 1980; Mezirow, 2000). While relying on the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL, 2015) to provide clear standards for leaders seeking to become multilingual and multilingually responsive school leaders.

Methodology

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that combines personal narrative with cultural analysis, positioning the researcher's lived experiences as a lens through which to critically examine broader social and cultural contexts (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Ellis, 2004). This approach facilitates a deeper exploration of the intersections among personal identity, lived experiences, and broader societal frameworks. In my journey toward becoming a bilingual school leader, autoethnography serves as a reflective tool that enables me to analyze my experiences in diverse educational landscapes, particularly those involving multilingual and minoritized learners (Bochner & Ellis, 2022). "Autoethnographers, instead, seek to put their readers in the experience, appealing to their hearts and senses as well as their intellects" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p.9). Engaging with autoethnography enables me to interrogate my role and responsibilities within the educational system, giving insights into the challenges and barriers linguistically and culturally diverse student populations face. Furthermore, this methodological framework illuminates my growth as an educator and leader, underscoring the critical importance of advocacy for systemic change and culturally responsive practices in school leadership (Ellis, 2004). By sharing my narrative and reflective insights, I aim to enrich the broader discourse surrounding integrative leadership and inspire educational practices that authentically embrace cultural and linguistic abilities.

Figure 2:

Continuum of Autobiography, Autoethnography, and Ethnography



Note. Original Work

Figure 2 shows the conceptual relationships of autobiography, autoethnography, and ethnography as research approaches. On the left, autobiography centers on the individual’s personal experiences and self-narrative. On the right, ethnography focuses on the study of culture and social groups from an external perspective. Positioned in the middle, autoethnography bridges these approaches by integrating both self and culture, allowing the researcher to examine personal experiences within a wider sociocultural context (Poulos, 2021).

In this autoethnographic dissertation, I present a series of analytical vignettes drawn from significant moments in my teaching and leadership practice. These vignettes serve as narrative data sources that illuminate my inclusive, discriminating, and reflective processes as I navigate multilingual educational leadership in the South. Each vignette was examined through values coding, enabling me to identify underlying beliefs, attitudes, and guiding principles that shaped my responses and evolving leadership identity.

Formative Vignettes

Over the past eleven years working in the rural South, I have encountered numerous pivotal experiences that have profoundly shaped my understanding of the relational challenges facing multilingual learners (ML) and the educational leaders who serve them across varied school contexts. These experiences did not merely inform my professional practice, they also unsettled assumptions, exposed tensions, and reshaped my lens on leadership. I will begin with the earliest memory in the South that lingered with me for years, an experience that left me

without adequate language to articulate my internal response until now. The subsequent vignettes, selected for their formative impact on my educational journey, are presented in Chapter Four as core components of the research narrative. Before introducing those moments, however, I situate myself in my upbringing on the West Coast, examining how that context shaped my expectations for educational leadership and informed my understanding of what it means to act in multilingual, responsive ways.

West Coast

Growing up on the West Coast, I experienced a childhood characterized by vibrant cultural diversity. I still remember the warmth of my elementary classrooms, filled with laughter and different languages twirling around like a symphony. My Laotian friends shared delicious dishes during class celebrations, opening my eyes to flavors I had never encountered. From school performances to classroom debates, I vividly recall the lively discussions in my classes, where we explored history through the lens of our varied cultural experiences.

One of the most impactful memories involves a female principal who took the time to know each of her students personally at the first school I worked at on the West Coast. Her unwavering support and fierce advocacy showed me what strong leadership looks like. Then there were my LGBTQ+ mentors and teachers, who taught me the power of authenticity and the importance of creating safe spaces where everyone can be their true selves. Ms. Steinbeck, my 7th and 8th grade ELA teacher, fierce camping club leader, and poetry expert, is a compelling example of how important it is to treat everyone with care. Growing up in these culturally diverse settings did not change my core identity, but it did grow my ability to love my neighbors despite our differences.

Amid these experiences, I developed a deep appreciation for human differences and a lasting respect for the richness and diversity they bring to education. A recent study by Thao (2023) resonates with my own experiences, highlighting how a diverse educational environment enriches teaching and empowers leaders to nurture learning spaces, especially for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds and languages.

These cherished moments from my formative years continue to fuel my passion for fostering inclusivity and multicultural awareness in my work as an educator and an aspiring school leader. It is not only about the lessons learned but also about fostering a sense of belonging for every student, as I experienced during my own journey. I believe that every child deserves to feel valued and supported in their pursuit of knowledge and in creating a better life for themselves.

The South

Introduction to Vignette #1

Vignette #1 describes a memory from my first year of teaching in the South. Moving to a rural area in 2015 exposed me to a different cultural landscape that challenged many of my assumptions about multilingualism and integrative methods. I was used to individuals being respected, regardless of race, culture, religion, or sexual orientation. Instead, I was struck by the South's deep-rooted societal divisions and cultural stagnation (Cardoza, 2024). As a white female teaching Spanish and English to non-native English Language Learners (ELL), I encountered greater levels of skepticism and misunderstanding from colleagues and community members than I had anticipated. This is one of my first memories as a teacher in the South.

Vignette #1: “Fog on the Horizon: Confronting Cultural Dissonance”

It was mid-fall, and I was still adjusting to the early Southern mornings when the streets were covered in fog. This fog was different from what I was used to on the West Coast, where you needed two sweaters to fend off the cold whenever fog was near. Here, it rose from the humid, sweaty earth. I was certainly missing the cold fall weather with the brightly colored trees. I had been teaching for nearly three months when the principal finally paid me an unexpected visit to observe my classroom. Up until this point, nobody had even checked on me to see how I was doing. I was beginning to wonder if anyone actually cared about what I was teaching all day. I felt left alone, but couldn't put my finger on why.

The head principal of Southern Pines High School, a fictitious school name to maintain anonymity, entered my Spanish classroom slowly, glancing around at the students as if he feared what might happen next. As he cautiously made his way to the small table nestled in the back of the room, he seemed pleasantly surprised to see the students working diligently or quietly asking their partner for ideas. He stopped a few times to see what the students were writing in Spanish and casually asked a few students within earshot whether they understood the standard set for the day. He sat quietly in the back for nearly the entire class period, observing and occasionally taking notes, as if to appear professional and engaged.

As I continued teaching and moved around the classroom to check on students, I couldn't help but notice his unease. And then, as if sensing a growing tension, he discreetly slipped out the door without a sound, avoiding eye contact as he left. It felt as though he were trying to escape any dialogue with me, perhaps anxious at the thought of discussing the lesson in Spanish in front of my class. By the end of the observation, a vague sense of discomfort lingered, leaving me worried about the evaluation of my teaching that day.

Later that week, I was summoned to his office to discuss my observation. With that lingering feeling of uneasiness, I begrudgingly made my way to his office. The principal gave me a few good reviews, but for the most part, he said I needed to apply Webb's (1997) Depth of Knowledge framework to my daily lessons to make them more "academically rigorous." I left feeling blindsided by his inability to see what I was teaching in my beginner-level language course. I spent months building relationships, teaching letter sounds, blends, and literacy skills so that these students could read in the target language and demonstrate comprehension by answering open-ended questions. As a language educator, I knew that proper rigor looks different when students are learning to build meaning through a new linguistic system, yet the disconnect between what I was teaching and what he was able—or willing—to see revealed a deeper cultural fog that extended far beyond the humidity outside, signaling the beginning of my journey toward confronting the cultural dissonance that lay ahead.

Reflecting on that situation at Southern Pines High School, I wish I had emphasized that my lesson that day did, in fact, focus on Depth of Knowledge (D.O.K). I feel frustrated that I didn't advocate for myself and explain that I was helping students acquire essential language skills. However, as a new teacher in a different state, I felt anxious about my job security. I now know that what occurred reflects a broader issue many principals face in linguistically and culturally diverse settings. According to Khalifa et al. (2016),

Principals are often ill-prepared to address the specific needs of multilingual and culturally diverse student populations. Many leaders struggle with a lack of resources, appropriate professional development, and culturally responsive strategies, which hinders their ability to create inclusive school environments (p. 1275).

By applying Khalifa’s principles, I’ve been better equipped to create an atmosphere where multilingualism is not just tolerated but celebrated. His seminal research has guided me in recognizing the critical role that educators play in dismantling systemic barriers and fostering a sense of belonging for all students. Consequently, I have made it my mission to advocate for practices that validate linguistic diversity and encourage collaboration among educators, families, and communities to cultivate an inclusive school culture. This holistic approach has been instrumental in driving positive changes in my leadership journey.

Current Status in the South

Schools across the South have been growing in diverse populations, especially in communities that have been predominantly white for decades (Cardoza, 2024). From 2021 to 2023, the number of public school students with limited English proficiency went from 37,000 to 47,754 (Alabama State Report Card, 2023). Of those almost 50,000 students, some 9,600 were first-year students learning English. Meanwhile, school administrators in the rural south struggle each year to improve the integration, culture, and academic success of their multilingual learners, with little to no budget or data-driven strategies to guide their schools (Cardoza, 2024).

Research has indicated that the impact of school leaders “is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). The role of school administration is crucial in equipping and supporting staff to ensure the success of all students (Barakat, Reames, & Kensler, 2012; Coady, 2019, 2020; Dewey, 1916; Ingram & Walters, 2007; Wong, 2022). Additionally, school administrators hold a pivotal influence in the development of programs, policies, and practices that significantly shape the educational experiences of multilingual learners (Phillips et al., 2023).

However, principal preparation programs often lack courses that aim to cultivate the pedagogical, programmatic, and cultural competencies necessary to effectively integrate and support the learning strengths of multilingual students, their teachers, and their families (Baecher et al., 2013; Bland, 2020; Buss, 2021; Genao, 2021; Halloran, 2020; Phillips et al., 2023). Despite this oversight, school leaders continue to play a central role in shaping the experiences of multilingual students. Alarming, the attrition rates among principals and teachers may be associated with a lack of preparedness for their roles, particularly concerning the effective instruction of the increasing population of multilingual learners (Grissom et al., 2021).

To address this issue, examining ongoing professional development for principals as instructional leaders is essential (Phillips et al., 2023). This involves integrating updated frameworks that span interdisciplinary mentor programs, parental engagement strategies, and best instructional practices for multilingual learners (Gray, 2020; Hamann et al., 2015; Massey, 2020; Wortham et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2023; Coady, 2019; Wong, 2022). These data-driven supports not only assist principals in their roles as instructional leaders but also contribute to the establishment of a comprehensive plan aimed at cultivating leaders proficient in accommodating multilingual and multicultural learners. Such initiatives could mitigate the loss of effective educators from the field.

Consequently, school leaders might encounter situations where they are prompted to consider critical questions: What multilingual programs can be implemented to support teachers of multilingual students effectively and efficiently? What specific experiences should an aspiring school leader possess to be a successful principal while remaining responsive to multilingual needs?

Background

The changing demographic landscape in the United States has heightened the need for educational leaders with administrative expertise and a profound understanding of cultural diversity and multilingual education (Genoa, 2021; Phillips et al., 2022a; Rucker, 2021). The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2015) recognized the need to address culturally responsive school leadership when they revised the Professional Standards of Educational Leadership (PSEL) in 2015. One indicator in the third standard of the PSEL Standard 3 requires that principals “address matters of equity and cultural responsiveness in all aspects of leadership” (p. 11).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021), the number of students who speak a language other than English at home has steadily increased over the past decade, with 22.6% of public school students identified as English Learners (EL) during the 2019-2020 school year. This trend is particularly pronounced in southern states, where the population of multilingual learners (ML) is expanding rapidly. In one rural district, 60% of children are Hispanic or Latino, and roughly a third are English learners (Cardoza, 2024). As schools strive to meet the needs of these students, there is a pressing demand for culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) to bridge the gap between diverse student backgrounds and equitable educational opportunities (Gay, 2018). With the steady rise in economically disadvantaged multilingual learners (ML), Coady et al. (2023) emphasize the need for further investigation into current empirical research to support rural locations grappling with this issue. They assert that “although the number of ML students continues to rise, astoundingly little scholarly attention has been paid to the education of rural ML students and families” (p. 365).

This study will refer to English language learners (ELL) as multilingual learners (ML). The term "multilingual learner" represents an asset-based perspective (NPBEA, 2015),

recognizing students who speak multiple languages as valuable contributors. Leaders need to champion practices that highlight these strengths and work to close the opportunity gap for this group (NPBEA, 2015). One effective approach a leader can adopt is to set high expectations for multilingual learners by ensuring educators implement culturally responsive teaching strategies and appreciate the cultural assets these students bring. Moreover, multilingual learners need to see themselves reflected in lesson content, significantly enhancing their learning engagement.

Culturally responsive school leadership emphasizes understanding and valuing students' cultural identities, language backgrounds, and lived experiences, ensuring that instructional practices and school policies support all students (Khalifa et al., 2016). However, in rural parts of the south, many school administrators and teachers face challenges in implementing these practices effectively, often due to a lack of comprehensive training and data-driven strategies (Coady et al., 2019). Research by Hammond (2015) suggests that teachers and leaders who are not well-versed in culturally responsive pedagogy may inadvertently contribute to educational inequities, particularly for ML who require tailored support to succeed academically.

One state reported a rise in students with limited English proficiency, increasing from approximately 37,000 in 2021 to 41,400 in 2023; the state remains anonymous due to the qualitative nature of this research. This growth, especially in traditionally less diverse communities, has posed challenges for schools that are unaccustomed to serving multilingual populations (Villegas, 2023). As a result, Barakat et al. (2018) explain an increasing need for school leaders who can adapt to these demographic changes and foster environments that support linguistic and cultural diversity. Providing continuous professional development in areas such as multilingual instruction, parental engagement, and community inclusion can significantly

improve teachers' ability to meet the needs of ML and reduce principal and teacher attrition rates (Hawley & Nieto, 2010).

Incorporating culturally responsive school leadership practices benefits ML and can create a more inclusive and welcoming school culture for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach emphasizes the role of school leaders as change agents who advocate for equity and inclusion, helping to build a school environment that celebrates diversity and promotes academic success for students of all backgrounds. Therefore, the South's educational leaders must develop a robust understanding of multilingual school leadership to effectively support multilingual and multicultural learners, guide teachers, and foster a sense of belonging among students.

This study highlights how school principals and educational leaders across the South can lead with multilingual responsive school leadership and promote inclusive and equitable learning opportunities. It provides valuable insights and strategies that can serve as a blueprint for other educational leaders working with an increasingly multilingual student population. By examining these practices through an autoethnographic lens, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research that underscores the importance of multilingual responsive school leadership in today's increasingly ever-changing educational landscape.

Problem Statement

The South's evolving educational landscape, the growing presence of multilingual student populations, contrasts with the limited representation of bilingual individuals in school leadership roles (Alabama State Report Card, 2025; Cardoza, 2024). Although research has highlighted the importance of diverse leadership in fostering inclusive school environments, there is a gap in understanding how personal narratives shape the leadership journey of bilingual

educators, especially in traditionally monolingual educational contexts. A critical need exists to explore the lived experiences of bilingual aspiring school leaders in the South, including how language and professional aspirations intersect to influence leadership development. Such an examination can illuminate systemic and individual factors that both challenge and support the progression of bilingual educators into school leadership positions, ultimately offering insights into more inclusive leadership pathways.

The population most affected by this issue includes school leaders, the general classroom teachers, and the multilingual students and communities they serve. These students, often economically disadvantaged and learning English as a new language, risk falling behind academically without proper support from school leaders and educators who understand how to foster culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments (Coady et al, 2019). Further exacerbating the issue is the shortage of teachers in these rural communities who lack competency in teaching multilingual learners (Coady et al, 2023). Without a pathway for educational leaders to further their specialized skills in multilingual, responsive school leadership, principals and teacher leaders cannot fully meet these students' needs, thereby negatively impacting overall school success and student outcomes.

This study will analyze the existing frameworks and incorporate an autoethnographic approach to explore the researcher's journey as an aspiring bilingual school leader. Drawing on personal and professional experiences, this research will provide insights into how aspiring and tenured school principals in the south can navigate current issues and policies in education related to the rise in the population of non-English-speaking students. Adherence to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) can equip rural school principals to lead more effectively in culturally diverse environments. By combining lived experience with existing

research, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on educational leadership, offering practical solutions to better prepare school leaders to address equity and cultural responsiveness, particularly in rural areas with scarce resources.

Purpose of the Study

Drawing on my journey as an aspiring bilingual school leader, this study seeks to illuminate critical gaps and prepare multilingual, responsive school principals in the South and in monolingual school settings. Drawing on my experiences growing up on the West Coast, participating in a multicultural teaching credential program, becoming a fully certified bilingual educator, and teaching for the first five years in an inner city, I have gained firsthand knowledge of the programs and practices that effectively support multilingual learners. In my fourth year of teaching, I furthered my studies by completing a master's thesis project, which involved writing an English Learner's Program Manual for High Schools and administrators grappling with little to no support. Reflecting on my journey as a teacher leader, school leader, and adult learners, I focus on my work with teachers, staff, students, and parents through the lens of multilingual, responsive school leadership and instructional strategies. I am interested in how these experiences have shaped my leadership identity and actions (Beattie, 2024). Understanding the pivotal role of multilingual responsive school leadership and inclusive educational environments. Combining my personal and professional insights with established research, this autoethnography study highlights the necessity of professional development and interdisciplinary mentoring for school leaders, particularly in settings where multilingual and diverse practices are often underrepresented. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) recognized this need when it revised the Professional Standards of Educational Leadership (PSEL) in 2015. One key indicator in the third standard of the PSEL (2015) requires that

principals “address matters of equity and cultural responsiveness in all aspects of leadership” (p.11). Genoa (2021) emphasized that “culturally responsive schools are a work in progress and a never-ending work that is required to evolve as communities change” (p.167). The purpose of this dissertation is to explore my experiences as a bilingual aspiring school leader in the rural south, with particular attention to how language, identity, and professional aspirations intersect in the development of leadership capacity. This study seeks to contribute to scholarship on culturally responsive school leadership while providing insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by bilingual educators navigating monolingual systems. By focusing on the intersection of personal narrative and broader institutional contexts, the research aims to inform both practice and policy on creating more inclusive pathways to educational leadership.

Research Question

How do the personal experiences of a bilingual aspiring school leader in the south influence the development of leadership identity, strategies for navigating monolingual institutional norms, and perceptions of inclusive educational leadership?

The research question examines how my identity and experiences as a bilingual educator have shaped my approach to leadership and decision-making in multilingual responsive school leadership. Building on the foundational work of Gay (2010), who emphasizes the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, I reflect on my own journey from growing up in a diverse community on the West Coast to my professional experiences in the rural South. Reflecting on my journey, I focus on uncovering how these experiences inform my strategies for supporting ML. The study will explore how my background, beliefs, and values contribute to the challenges and successes I encounter in fostering an inclusive environment for diverse student populations. This question relates to the problem statement addressing the need for access and practical

experience on how bilingual educators navigate leadership pathways in traditional monolingual school systems (Gray, 2020; Hamann et al., 2015; Massey, 2020; Wortham et al., 2013).

By integrating Knowles's principles of andragogy with Mezirow's transformative learning concepts, I can deeply explore my positionality and lived experiences within educational leadership. This exploration will illuminate how personal reflection, social interactions, and institutional contexts converge to shape effective leadership strategies while navigating the challenges inherent in monolingual educational environments. Ultimately, the intersection of these theoretical perspectives enriches our understanding of the unique contributions that bilingual leaders can make to foster inclusive educational practices.

Not only do aspiring principals need proper training, but tenured principals also require ongoing professional development opportunities that provide practical strategies for leaders (Baraket et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2022; Rucker, 2021). Given the limited focus on multilingual responsive school leadership in many principal and teacher preparation programs, this study will explore the types of professional learning that can enhance principals' abilities to support the academic and social needs of ML students. The study will focus on school contexts where professional development opportunities may be scarce, yet the need for such training is urgent. By examining existing professional development frameworks and whether principal preparation programs teach them as part of their foundational core curriculum, this question aims to contribute to the development of targeted training programs that align with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) to address the unique challenges of rural schools. This relates to the problem statement by highlighting the need for specific multilingual responsive school leadership and focused professional development to address gaps in leadership preparation programs.

This research question aligns closely with the problem statement by exploring how my own experiences, including documents, lesson plans, emails, photographs, and other materials related to multilingual, responsive school leadership initiatives, contribute to addressing the issue of inadequate principal preparation and the limited ongoing professional development available to school leaders in the South. This research could inform the development of professional development programs, influence policy decisions, and improve educational outcomes for ML students in academic settings.

Advancing Scientific Knowledge

There is a notable gap in existing literature concerning how effectively school principals are prepared to support multilingual learners (ML) in their schools (Barakat et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2022; Rucker, 2021). This gap is particularly pronounced in rural educational contexts, where research indicates that principals often lack adequate training, either in their principal preparation programs or after they assume their position, to address the specific needs of multilingual student populations (Barakat et al., 2018; Coady et al., 2019). Current leadership training programs frequently overlook critical components of multilingualism and cultural diversity, thereby limiting principals' capacities to integrate hard-to-reach groups within their school communities (Phillips et al., 2022).

This study seeks to address this gap through an autoethnographic exploration of my personal journey as an aspiring bilingual school leader. Reflecting deeply on my educational experiences in a bilingual multicultural teacher credential program, this inquiry aims to generate practical recommendations for enhancing principal preparation and ongoing professional development programs in the rural south. By analyzing my lived experiences and synthesizing established research on effective multilingual education, the research will offer meaningful

insights into the competencies required by school leaders to support ML effectively. Specifically, it highlights asset-based instructional approaches, including cultural competence, translanguaging strategies, and dual immersion models. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of providing continuous professional development, interdisciplinary mentoring, and parental engagement initiatives that equip educational leaders to serve diverse learners better.

This study advances scientific knowledge by applying Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory to the underexplored domain of bilingual school leadership development in rural southern states. These theoretical perspectives, traditionally used in adult education and leadership training, are adapted here to analyze the lived experiences of an aspiring bilingual leader navigating monolingual school systems and engaging community-based parental engagement efforts.

Adult Learning Theory, as articulated by Knowles (1970, 1980), posits that adults are self-directed learners whose growth is shaped by their accumulated experiences and intrinsic motivation. This study builds upon that foundation by using autoethnographic inquiry to reveal how informal, experiential learning—such as mentoring relationships, personal reflection, and problem-solving within multilingual contexts—contributes to the development of school leadership competencies. By tracing how these experiences shift the learner’s self-concept from dependence to autonomy (Knowles et al., 2005), the study extends the application of andragogy into principal preparation and professional development, particularly for leaders serving linguistically diverse populations.

Furthermore, Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) enhances the study's contribution by demonstrating how critical self-reflection facilitates meaningful shifts in leadership identity and practice. This theory supports the idea that adult

learners can reevaluate and reconstruct their beliefs, values, and assumptions in response to challenges. In this research, such transformation is evident in how the author processes and adapts to systemic barriers and institutional norms that often marginalize multilingual learners. The process of reflective journaling and narrative analysis provides insight into how educational leaders develop more inclusive, equity-oriented mindsets through ongoing transformation.

By situating this inquiry within these established theoretical frameworks, the study contributes to the field in several key ways: It applies adult learning theories to a new leadership context, multilingual education in southern rural schools, thereby expanding the practical relevance of andragogy and transformative learning in K–12 leadership preparation. It provides qualitative evidence of how reflective, experience-based learning shapes leadership practices, offering models for professional development grounded in adult learning theory. It generates practice-based knowledge that can inform policymakers, principal preparation programs, and educational leaders about the reflective and experiential learning experiences most impactful for preparing leaders to serve culturally and linguistically diverse or hard-to-reach students. This study fills a critical gap in the literature. It supports the growing call for educational leadership models that are informed by both theory and personal experience, particularly in contexts that have historically received less scholarly attention.

Further supporting this inquiry is the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) Standard 3, established by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. This standard explicitly states that effective educational leaders must strive for equity in educational opportunities and culturally responsive practices to promote academic success and student well-being (NPBEA, 2015, p. 11). This standard underscores school leaders' need to consider integrative practices for cultural awareness within their institutions. The National Policy

Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) recognized the need to address culturally responsive school leadership when they revised the Professional Standards of Educational Leadership (PSEL) in 2015. Specifically, PSEL Standard 3 states, “Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 11). Thus, it highlights the importance of principals addressing equity and cultural responsiveness in all aspects of leadership. These models serve as the foundation for understanding the competencies required of school leaders working in diverse settings.

Significance of the Study

This study addresses the critical challenge of identifying, hiring, preparing, and retaining multilingually responsive school educators and leaders capable of creating integrative learning environments for all students in rural southern schools. Additionally, it provides a historical perspective on the evolution of the South’s educational landscape, contextualizing its current state. Employing an autoethnographic methodology, the study explores the researcher’s journey as an aspiring bilingual school leader, emphasizing the importance of multilingual, responsive school leadership, inclusive parental engagement programs, and asset-based instructional practices designed to meet the needs of multilingual learners. These practices include fostering cultural awareness and competence, using translanguaging strategies in the general classroom, and offering multilingual responsive leadership strategies for administrators who may not have received direct instruction during their teacher and principal preparation programs.

The study underscores the pivotal role of school leaders in ensuring that asset-based, equitable practices are consistently accessible to students in southern schools. By reflecting on the lived experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds of school leaders who influence their leadership

practices, the research sheds light on their capacity to support linguistically diverse students, particularly in rural areas where such practices are frequently underrepresented (Barakat et al., 2018; Coady et al., 2019).

This exploration extends the existing body of knowledge by identifying how principal preparation programs can be enhanced to better address the unique challenges of bilingual, multilingual, and culturally responsible education. Also, offering solutions for tenured leaders who may not have received multilingual responsive leadership training, whose schools are underfunded yet have rising ML populations. Ultimately, this study aims to improve educational outcomes for hard-to-reach groups, multilingual students, and their families and advance leadership programs in diverse educational settings (Rucker, 2021).

Rationale for Methodology

In this study, I employ a qualitative methodology grounded in autoethnography to explore the development of multilingual responsive school leadership among tenured and aspiring principals, focusing on my journey as an aspiring bilingual school leader. As Beattie (2024) emphasizes, "Methodology provides explanation and justification for selected research design, choice of participants, the researcher's view of the world, as well as ethical considerations" (p. 37). This qualitative framework is uniquely well-suited to address my research questions, enabling a detailed examination of my lived experiences and uncovering the complexities of educational practices in southern schools.

In this autoethnographic study, I reflect deeply on these professional journeys, revisiting journal entries scribbled late at night after challenging days and poring over photographs, old lesson plans, the master's thesis I wrote almost ten years ago, and presentation notes collected over the years (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Ellis, 2004). These artifacts are not just data; they are

pieces of my story, glimpses into moments that shaped me as an educator, learner, and, eventually, a bilingual school leader. The influential work of Thomas (1993) provides a foundation for critical ethnography, shaped by critical theory and key scholars like Paul Willis, who examines the intersections of education and culture in his seminal text, *Learning to Labour* (1977). This perspective facilitates a deeper understanding of the educational landscape's power dynamics and cultural contexts.

By weaving these reflections and artifacts together, I triangulate my experiences, carefully exploring how my interactions with multilingual students, colleagues, and the broader community have shaped my leadership identity (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Ellis, 2004). Bhattacharya (2018) further develops the notion of autoethnography, highlighting its ability to intertwine personal narratives with broader social inquiries. This union enriches our comprehension of the transformative processes of developing multilingual responsive leadership. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks underscore the importance of an autoethnographic approach in capturing the challenges and realities aspiring bilingual school leaders face, ultimately paving the way for more informed and effective leadership practices in diverse educational settings.

This process of self-reflection reveals nuanced intersections between myself, others, and the unique contexts I have navigated, discovering themes that continue to guide my journey toward integrative and responsive leadership in education. Autoethnography is a form of qualitative inquiry where I undertake a personal and reflexive exploration of my experiences, systematically analyzing them within the relevant cultural context. Scholars often engage in autoethnographic work to document narratives that might be overlooked in mainstream research literature (Custer, 2021, p. 25). By centering on personal stories and reflective practices, this

study aligns with contemporary literature that underscores the significance of studying leadership development through the lens of those directly involved (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022).

This approach enhances understanding and deepens the discourse on what it means to lead in multilingual and multicultural educational environments. Through these narratives, we begin to uncover the complexities of leadership and the necessity for better responsive practices in education.

Nature of Research Design

To ensure the credibility of the findings, this research will utilize multiple data sources to enhance the study's reliability and promote triangulation (Patton, 1990). These materials may include documents, school policies, and other artifacts about creating an inclusive school environment focused on bilingual, multilingual, and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy (CRSL) initiatives.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach in which the researcher engages in a personal and reflective exploration of their experiences, systematically examining these experiences within a broader cultural context (Poulos, 2021). According to Holmes, this perspective offers an "insider's view of reality," emphasizing that it is rooted in the norms, values, and customs of the individual's cultural setting (p. 5). This approach allows the researcher to interpret actions from a culturally informed perspective, acknowledging that behaviors cannot be fully understood without considering the larger cultural context. By adopting an insider dialectic, researchers can reduce the biases typically associated with an outsider's viewpoint, achieving a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of the social dynamics under study (Holmes, 2020).

This aligns with the work of other scholars who highlight the importance of cultural relativism in qualitative research. Understanding the insider's perspective is crucial for a comprehensive view of the explored social phenomena (Beattie, 2024; O'Reilly, 2012). The research presented herein will be valuable to others as it offers findings that can be generalized to various rural settings experiencing growth in multilingual populations.

This method also serves to highlight narratives that are often overlooked or absent in mainstream academic literature. Researchers frequently use autoethnography as a tool for social justice, employing personal narratives to bring marginalized perspectives to light and advocate for equity (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Ellis, 2004). These methods are essential for collecting rich, detailed, and personal data, which will be analyzed through thematic coding and interpreted in the autoethnography findings. The data collection is designed to gather comprehensive information while ensuring data security (Beattie, 2024). Overall, this methodology is well-suited for exploring the complexities of multilingual school leadership development in rural educational contexts.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions apply to this study:

Artifacts

Physical mementos often serve as key artifacts in historiographical, ethnographic, and autoethnographic research. This autoethnography used various primary data sources as artifacts to support the narrative. These included memorabilia such as meeting agendas, keepsakes, pictures, print media, and personal notes and cards, all preserved chronologically to trace the research journey (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Bochner & Ellis, 2022).

Asset-based

This term highlights how students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds bring valuable knowledge from their homes and communities to be leveraged in the classroom. Rather than viewing these students through a deficit lens, educators should recognize and build upon the rich intellectual and cultural resources students already possess (Moll et al., 2006).

Autoethnography

“Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)

CRSL refers to leadership practices that recognize and respond to students' diverse cultural, linguistic, and social needs, particularly in multilingual and multicultural educational settings. CRSL emphasizes creating equitable learning environments by fostering inclusivity and addressing systemic biases (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Individualized Language Plan (ILP)

They are documents that outline a more tailored approach to supporting the English language proficiency (ELP) needs of ML (Kangas & Cioè-Peña, 2023).

Interdisciplinary Mentoring

Interdisciplinary mentoring fosters leadership development by connecting individuals with mentors from various disciplines, such as educational leadership, bilingual education, public health, and cultural studies. This approach provides diverse perspectives and strategies for addressing complex educational challenges, particularly in culturally and linguistically diverse settings (Parylo et al., 2012).

Monolingual Institutional Norms

Policies, practices, or assumptions that center English as the dominant and often exclusive language of instruction and leadership (Bourdieu, 1991).

Multilingual Leadership

Multilingual Leadership is an inclusive approach to school leadership that affirms and leverages students' linguistic and cultural assets (Khalifa et al., 2016), disrupts deficit language ideologies (Theoharis, 2007), and promotes institutional change within monolingual systems (García, 2009).

Multilingual Learners (ML)

ML students speak languages other than English and are learning English as an additional language. Due to language barriers, these students often face unique academic and social challenges and require tailored support to succeed in school (Coady et al., 2019).

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL)

The PSEL is a set of guidelines developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration to outline the leadership skills and behaviors that promote the success of all students. Standard 3 focuses on equity and cultural responsiveness, emphasizing the need for principals to address issues of diversity and inclusion in their leadership practices (NPBEA, 2015).

Reflexivity

“Reflexivity is a thoughtful, self-aware analysis of the intersubjective dynamics between researcher and the researched” (Finlay & Gough, 2003, p. ix). “Awareness of the impact that a researcher has on the process and outcomes of their own research is known as reflexivity” (Poerwandari, 2021).

Self-Identity

“Self-identity refers to parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 284).

Assumptions

This study operates under the fundamental assumption that readers not only recognize but actively embrace the significance of multilingualism within educational contexts. It is further assumed that the researcher’s autoethnographic narrative is essential for exploring the intricacies of bilingual, multilingual, and culturally responsive school leadership in the south. These foundational assumptions are crucial in guiding the research process, ensuring the data gathered authentically capture educational leaders' lived experiences and nuanced realities. By acknowledging these premises, the study seeks to align its focus with the contextual complexities of leadership practices that support diverse, multilingual student populations. These assumptions allow for an inquiry that is not merely theoretical but rooted in the tangible experiences of educators who navigate the intersection of culture, language, and leadership in underserved settings. Autoethnography is a recognized qualitative method for exploring personal experiences in educational research, assuming its value in this context is reasonable (Bochner & Ellis, 2022).

Limitations

This study faced several limitations. The initial literature review involved searching for key terms such as “assistant principals,” “multilingual learners in rural schools,” “aspiring school leaders,” “professional development,” “Culturally Responsive School Leadership,” and “asset-based leadership” using Auburn University’s online library databases, as well as consulting issues of *Principal Leadership* magazine, relevant articles, and books focused on developing future school leaders. Additional research explored the areas where assistant principals felt the

least prepared upon transitioning to principalship and examined prior studies involving multilingualism. The literature reviewed in this study primarily spans the last ten years (2016–2026), which may limit the scope of findings.

The limitation is the focus on a small, specific geographic region of the Southern United States, limiting the findings' applicability to schools usually considered rural or suburban. Additionally, autoethnographic data collection methods may not capture the full range of practices across Southern schools, and participants' subjective responses could introduce bias, as personal perspectives may shape the data collected (Patton, 1990).

This study deliberately focuses on Southern schools, restricting its findings to this context. By targeting a narrow geographic region, the study aims to explore multilingual practices in a rural setting, where the challenges multilingual learners and school leaders face may differ from those in inner-city, urban, or suburban contexts. Another delimitation is autoethnographic methodology, which limits the study to exploring personal lived experiences rather than specific, quantifiable data.

Chapter Summary

In today's increasingly diverse educational landscape, school leaders' ability to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments is more critical than ever. Multilingual responsive school leadership plays a pivotal role in addressing the unique needs of ML and ensuring that all students can succeed. As schools become more diverse in the South, educational leaders must develop and implement practices supporting students' academic and social well-being from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of bilingual, multilingual, and culturally responsive school leadership, many principals face significant challenges in becoming

highly qualified leaders in this area. These challenges are particularly pronounced in Southern states, where there is a pressing need to support ML students effectively. This dissertation explores my experiences as an aspiring bilingual school leader and the practices I implement to support ML students, teachers, and the community.

The significance of this study lies in my journey as an aspiring bilingual school leader and in the realization that, while there is a wealth of research on teacher preparation programs for multilingual learners, there is a notable gap in how school principals in the South are prepared to lead in multilingual responsive ways. The literature review will explore how reflexivity as an aspiring bilingual school leader influences my practices in implementing responsive leadership by examining existing research on culturally responsive leadership, professional development for school leaders, and the unique challenges rural school principals face. The review will first analyze how positionality, encompassing background, beliefs, and experiences, shapes a leader's understanding and implementation of multilingual responsive practices. It will then delve into the role of targeted professional development in transforming a principal's capacity to integrate positive experiences for teachers, students, and families whose primary language is not English. Finally, the review will identify the best practices for ongoing professional development, emphasizing how these opportunities can equip principals with the skills and perspectives needed to create positive, integrative educational environments. By synthesizing the research on these topics, the literature review will lay a foundation for understanding the interplay between reflexivity, professional growth, and multilingual responsive leadership, ultimately addressing how school leaders can cultivate inclusive, student-centered practices in diverse settings. Through this autoethnographic study, I hope to advocate for leadership training that can truly transform our schools and communities.

In the following chapters, this dissertation will provide a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, outline the research methodology, present the findings, and discuss the implications for practice and policy. Through this exploration, the study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of multilingual school leaders and their impact on the success of hard-to-reach and diverse learners.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous chapter, I examined the current status of educational outcomes among hard-to-reach students and multilingual learners (ML) across the Southern United States, highlighting the urgent need for multilingual responsive school leadership to bridge these gaps. This chapter reviews the existing literature that informs this study and is organized into strategic sections. The first section examines the significant historical events that shaped the lived experiences of multilingual learners in the South, outlining demographic shifts and educational policies that have limited the academic achievement of these students.

The second section explores the theoretical frameworks focusing on the Adult Learning Theory, which describes how adults learn by reflecting on their experiences and using those experiences to grow and change (Knowles, 1980; Mezirow, 2000). This theory guides how I look at my own journey as a leader, emphasizing reflection and personal growth. The conceptual framework includes key ideas directly connected to my experiences and the purpose of this research. These ideas include Positionality, which means understanding how my background and experiences affect my perspectives and actions (Bochner & Ellis, 2022); the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) Standard 3, focusing on fairness and understanding different cultures in schools (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015), providing guidelines to help educators effectively support students learning English.

The literature review also examines high-leverage and asset-based instructional practices that meet the needs of multilingual learners. These asset-based practices include cultural awareness and competency, translanguaging, and dual immersion programs. Lastly, it discusses professional development gaps for school leaders, emphasizing the need for ongoing online professional development to support multilingual responsive school leadership. It will examine

the crucial role that school leaders have in ensuring that asset-based, equitable practices are consistently accessible for students in Southern schools.

The literature reviewed in this chapter was identified through searches of academic databases such as ProQuest, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Search terms included "multilingual responsive school leadership," "multilingual learners," "principal as the instructional leader," "multilingual professional development for school leaders," and "asset-based instructional practices." Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy briefs, and research reports published within the past ten years to ensure that the study is informed by current research. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify critical trends and gaps in the literature relevant to multilingual responsive leadership, rural education, multilingual education, and principal leadership development.

Background of the Problem

The demographic landscape in southern states has experienced notable changes, with a rising number of multilingual learners entering the K–12 education system (NCES, 2021). Specifically, insufficient attention has been directed toward allocating English Learners (EL), the fastest-growing group within the U.S. student population, constituting 10% of all students and approximately 20% of nonwhite students. Given the South's longstanding racial dynamics, research shows that school leaders who adopt an asset-based approach in their decision-making are improving equality and overall school culture (Reardon, 2015). While considerable uncertainty surrounds the best practices for supporting multilingual students, there is a lack of research on how school leaders can handle these changes (Baecher et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2022; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Data reveal that multilingual learners frequently do not achieve academic goals at the same level as their monolingual peers (Gray, 2020; Hamann et al.,

2015; Massey, 2020; Wortham et al., 2013). This increasing linguistic diversity presents significant challenges for southern school leaders, particularly in rural areas where resources are often scarce to support marginalized and multilingual students (Barakat, Reames & Kensler, 2012; Coady, 2019, 2020; Dewey, 1916; Hallinger et al., 2015; Ingram & Walters, 2007).

Furthermore, school leaders are predominantly White and are expected to provide instructional leadership, build an organizational culture, and develop teachers' practices to address the unique needs of students of different ethnicities and their families (Alabama State Report Card, 2025; Zarate & Mendoza, 2020). Despite the growing population of multilingual learners, there remains a significant gap in leadership preparation programs and ongoing professional development opportunities that focus on multilingual, responsive practices tailored to their needs (Phillips et al., 2022). Existing research underscores that school principals, particularly in rural settings, frequently lack the training and support to effectively implement multilingual, responsive leadership strategies and advocate for the success of multilingual learners (Coady et al., 2019).

Gaps and Needs in the Literature

While there is substantial research on teacher preparation programs for ML, there is limited focus on the role of school principals in fostering multilingual responsive environments that support these learners in rural southern communities. Most existing studies on school leadership for multilingual learners focus on urban schools, leaving rural settings underexplored. Additionally, there is a scarcity of literature examining how principals can effectively oversee the implementation of Individualized Language Plans (ILP), particularly in schools with limited access to professional development on multilingual responsive leadership. A significant gap in existing literature becomes evident when examining the role of principals as instructional leaders

for multilingual learners. Current literature trends highlight the lack of multilingualism in teacher preparation programs. However, it neglects to focus on how principal preparation programs contribute to the issue by not offering specific curricula for these principal preparation programs (Barakat, Reames & Kensler, 2012; Coady, 2019, 2020; Dewey, 1916; Hallinger et al., 2015; Ingram & Walters, 2007). Just as principal preparation programs emphasize the necessity of training principals in Individualized Education Plans (IEP) to support special populations and students with diverse needs, the need for principals to be trained in overseeing and implementing ILP is an emerging concern. Although ILP are increasingly used to support the academic progress of ML, there is limited research that critically assesses how principals influence the development and effectiveness of these plans (Kangas & Cioè-Peña, 2023). In rural schools, principals often manage ILPs without state oversight or standardized guidelines, further complicating their ability to ensure that these plans effectively address the needs of ML (Kangas & Cioè-Peña, 2023).

This study seeks to fill a crucial gap by delving into how school leaders can support multilingual students in their educational journeys. Reflecting on my own transformation into a bilingual school leader, I recognize the importance of embodying the qualities inherent in multilingual responsive leadership. This journey has highlighted the need for comprehensive training prior to assuming leadership roles, as emphasized by researchers such as Genoa (2021) and Grissom et al. (2019), who advocate for focused preparation that addresses the complexities of diverse linguistic needs.

In conducting close observations of school leaders who embrace an asset-based approach in their decision-making, I have noted which programs successfully foster a supportive environment for multilingual learners. Effective strategies show that leaders who prioritize

students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds can foster meaningful engagement and learning (DeMatthews, 2016).

Additionally, establishing a culture of high expectations, one that not only includes quality core instruction but also fosters a sense of belonging for multilingual students and their educators, is paramount. As Garcia (2018) noted, such an environment can significantly enhance students' academic and social experiences. Through these reflections and the insights I have gathered, it becomes evident that adopting these principles can greatly empower school leaders to guide schools that effectively embrace linguistically and culturally diverse populations.

This gap in literature reflects the broader need for ongoing professional development and mentorship programs for school leaders that focus on multilingual responsive leadership and ML advocacy. According to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), school leaders must "address matters of equity and cultural responsiveness in all aspects of leadership" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 11). However, many rural school principals are not adequately equipped to meet these standards, mainly when supporting ML (Coady et al., 2019). This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how interdisciplinary mentoring and multilingual responsive school leadership, focused professional development, can help principals in the South become more effective advocates for ML.

This chapter provides an overview of the critical themes and gaps in the literature related to multilingual responsive school leadership, principals as the instructional leaders over Individualized Language Plans for their students, and the ongoing need for specific training for school principals in supporting ML, teachers, staff, and the community. By reviewing the historical context of ML in the South, examining existing research on multilingual responsive leadership, and identifying the gaps in principal professional development, this chapter will

establish the foundation for understanding the challenges faced by school leaders in rural settings.

The final chapters will build upon these insights and explain the research methodology in Chapter 3, including the rationale for selecting an autoethnographic approach and the data collection methods employed. Chapter 4 will present the findings from the qualitative methods employed through the autoethnographic analysis of my experiences as an aspiring bilingual school leader. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of these findings for educational policy and practice, offering recommendations to enhance multilingual, responsive leadership training and mentorship for school principals in rural areas.

Theoretical Framework

Geneva Gay recognized a history of disservice and culturally irresponsible practices toward minoritized students and conceptualized culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) (Gay, 2000, 2010). Building on Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, Gay defined CRP as the integration of marginalized students' identities into teaching. Gay (2010) called for transforming education systems, including policies, funding, and leadership, to be culturally responsive. CRP has since become a widely used framework in the United States. Vass (2017), as cited in Harrison & Skrebneva (2020), argues that CRP must go beyond celebrating diversity and evaluate its impact on student learning.

Continuing from the work of culturally responsive pedagogy is culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL). In CRSL, the focus is on prioritizing anti-oppressive and culturally responsive education. This approach aims to humanize minoritized youth by embracing their identities, implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, and establishing relationships with parents and community members (Khalifa, 2019). CRSL emphasizes that leaders must critically

self-reflect on the history of marginalization and their role in perpetuating or challenging oppressive contexts. Khalifa (2019) provides four key behaviors for CRSL:

1. **Critical Self-Awareness:** Leaders must critically examine how they and their organizations contribute to or contest oppressive practices (Gooden, 2005; McKenzie et al., 2008).
2. **Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Development:** This involves supporting curriculum and instruction that enhance the learning and humanization of minoritized students by incorporating community assets and experiential knowledge (Khalifa, 2019).
3. **Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments:** Leaders should create affirming environments that promote the cultural identity of students and utilize resources to foster cultural affirmation (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Riehl, 2000).
4. **Engaging Students and Parents in Community Contexts:** Effective leadership involves integrating culturally appropriate knowledge from community members and advocating for community goals (Ishimaru, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016).

I fully support Khalifa's Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) and would like to integrate it with Garcia's conceptual work on bilingualism and multilingualism (2011). By providing a clear connection to school leadership, this research also aligns with the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) advocacy for equity and culturally responsive practices, as outlined in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL, 2015). Standard 3 of PSEL stresses, "Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic

success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 11). This highlights the vital role of school principals and educational leaders in fostering culturally responsive environments.

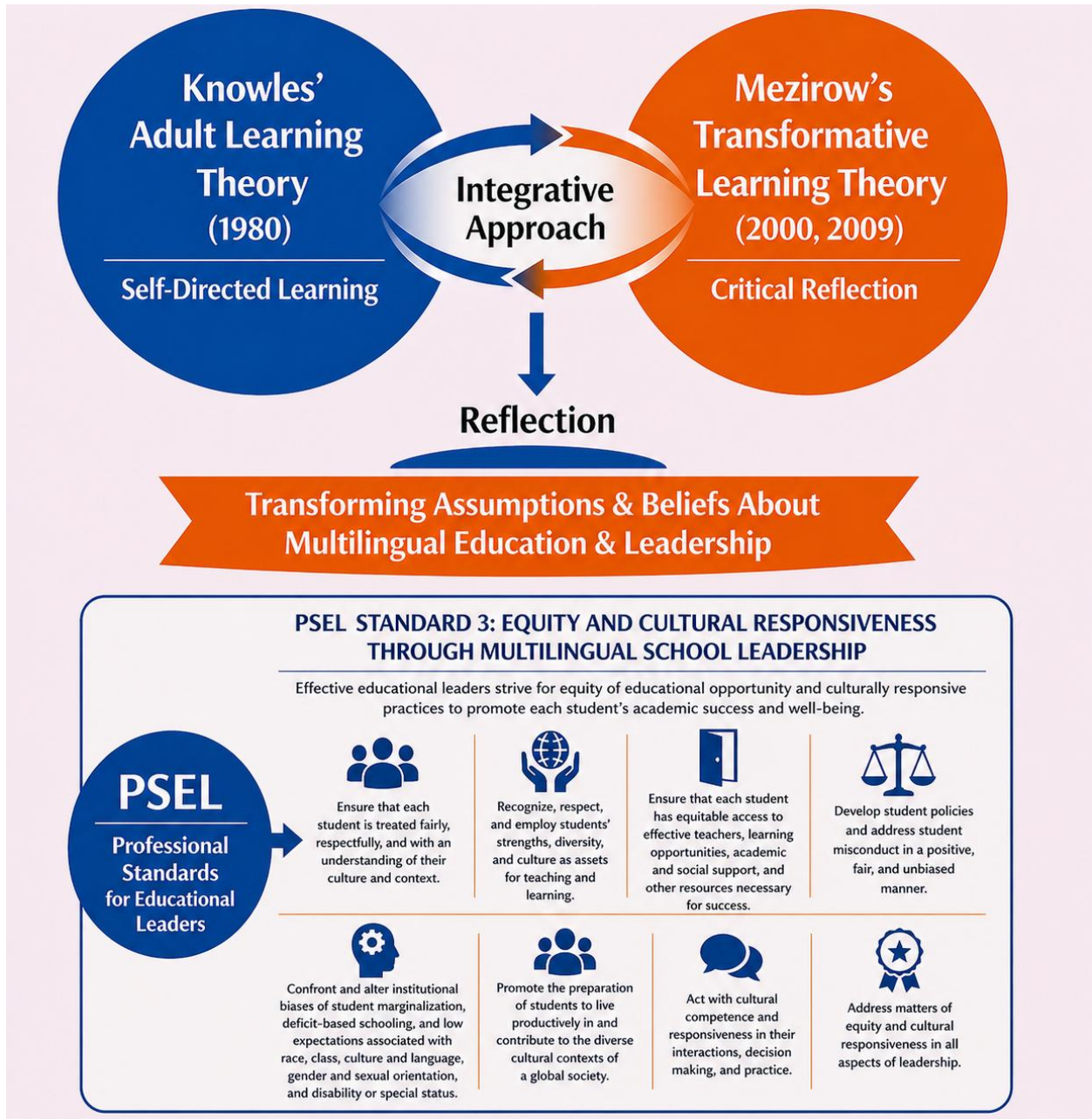
This study integrates culturally relevant school leadership, bilingual, and multicultural frameworks with a solid foundation in Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory. It proposes that leadership development is not simply about acquiring skills but a dynamic and reflective journey. This journey is deeply influenced by a rich array of lived experiences, engaging dialogue, and transformative self-awareness (Cashman, 2017).

Adult Learning Theory (andragogy), as articulated by Knowles (1970, 1980; Knowles et al., 2005), views adults as self-directed learners who are intrinsically motivated and possess a wealth of life experience. Knowles's (1980) emphasis on the transition from dependency to autonomy highlights the importance for adults to grasp the significance and purpose of their learning pursuits (Knowles et al., 2005). This perspective aligns closely with my professional experiences, illustrating that learning continues beyond formal education and that informal experiences are crucial for personal growth. In my journey, I resonate with Knowles's principles of andragogy, particularly through active participation in reflective practices and self-directed learning strategies, including informal peer mentoring and collaborative problem-solving, which enable me to shift from a passive learner to an engaged facilitator in educational contexts.

Mezirow's (2000, 2009) transformative learning theory complements this framework by emphasizing the importance of critical reflection in fostering meaningful adult development. Transformative learning encourages individuals to scrutinize and reconstruct their existing perspectives, making them more inclusive and reflective, equipping them to navigate complex challenges (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). In my leadership development, engaging in reflective conversations has been pivotal in reshaping my views on multilingual education and responsive

leadership, ensuring that my practices align with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL).

Figure 1: Framework of the Study



Note. Original Work

The image above, created with the help of AI, distinguishes the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning this autoethnographic study. The theoretical frameworks,

Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory, describe how adults learn by reflecting on their experiences and use those experiences to grow and change (Knowles, 1980; Mezirow, 2000). Combining these frameworks in this study guides my perspective on my leadership journey, emphasizing reflection and personal growth. The conceptual framework encompasses key ideas closely tied to my experiences and the research's purpose. These ideas include positionality, which means understanding how my background and experiences affect my perspectives and actions as an aspiring leader (Bochner & Ellis, 2022); the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) Standard 3, focusing on inclusive leadership and understanding different cultures in schools (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015), providing guidelines to help educators effectively support students learning English.

Literature Review

Evolution of Terminology for English Language Learners

Over the years, the terminology used to describe students learning English in the United States has evolved significantly, reflecting shifts in educational priorities and societal attitudes toward linguistic diversity (Linse, 2013). Historically, the term English Language Learner (ELL) was adopted to designate students whose primary language was not English and who required support to achieve English proficiency. However, as educational discourse has shifted toward more asset-based perspectives, this term has been scrutinized for its potential to perpetuate deficit thinking by focusing solely on students' need to acquire English rather than recognizing their multilingual abilities (Linse, 2013).

In recent years, alternative terms such as Multilingual Learners (ML) and Emergent Bilinguals have gained prominence. These terms emphasize students' linguistic strengths and

cultural assets rather than framing their English proficiency as deficient. For instance, "Multilingual Learners" encompasses a broader spectrum, including students proficient in English who maintain and use a heritage language, as well as students learning additional languages whose first language might already be English. Similarly, "Emergent Bilinguals" highlights students' potential to develop proficiency in two or more languages, promoting a dynamic view of language learning (Linse, 2013).

As the multilingual learner population continues to expand, educators are increasingly calling to move away from the "English Learner" (EL) label entirely. This shift aligns with a broader education effort to replace deficit-focused terminology with asset-based language that emphasizes students' strengths and linguistic diversity. Influential organizations such as WIDA, which administers widely used English proficiency assessments in the United States, TESOL, and the Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition have embraced or signaled a transition to terms such as "multilingual learner" (ML) or "multilingual language learner" (MLL). These terms reflect an inclusive definition, describing students who regularly engage with languages beyond English. Currently, three states exclusively use ML or MLL instead of EL, and the momentum suggests that more states will likely adopt this terminology shortly (Delloue, 2024).

While these shifts represent progress in fostering inclusive and equity-driven language, they also raise important challenges. Terminology is critical to determining access to services, funding, and educational programming in schools, underscoring the need for precision. At the same time, simply changing labels without addressing the underlying mindsets that perpetuate deficit thinking about multilingual learners and their families may fail to achieve meaningful change (Delloue, 2024). This tension mirrors broader conversations in areas like special

education, where terms such as "Exceptional Student Education" reflect similar efforts to adopt asset-based language while grappling with deeply ingrained inequities.

Ultimately, the ongoing evolution of terminology reflects a critical intersection of educational policy, equity, and advocacy. While refining language is an important step, the more profound challenge lies in shifting mindsets to recognize and celebrate the rich linguistic and cultural assets that multilingual learners bring to the classroom.

Historical Context of Non-English Speaking Students in The South

The South has sought equitable education for multilingual students since the era of segregation. As noted by Logan & Burdick-Will (2017), during the period of racial segregation (1896–1954), the South’s public schools were legally divided along racial lines, contributing to the widespread exclusion and marginalization of non-English-speaking students, particularly those from minority and immigrant communities. A key characteristic of education in rural areas of the United States was the tendency for students to attend racially and economically segregated schools (Byrant, 2015; Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). As Orfield (2014) brought to light, segregation laws primarily targeted racial groups, ML from immigrant families, especially Spanish-speaking populations, often received little to no language support in schools. Consequently, these students were primarily excluded from meaningful educational opportunities, illustrating the broader systemic inequities experienced by marginalized groups in the South. These disparities were consistent with the institutional barriers that hindered many minority communities from achieving equitable access to education (Orfield, 2014). The marginalization of EL, although not explicitly addressed in segregation laws, mirrored the exclusion of other minority groups from mainstream educational systems during this era, compounding their academic challenges and limiting their social mobility.

Historically, one of the most familiar cases affecting minorities in education was *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). In this case, the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was the basis for the Supreme Court's decision to eliminate the "separate but equal" longstanding creed that was established in 1896 in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. This was a strategic turning point for African Americans and for minorities as a whole (Valencia, 2005). As stated in the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution:

No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of laws.

This section, the Equal Protection Clause, establishes safeguards against state actions that may infringe upon individual rights, guaranteeing both due process and equal protection under the law.

During the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case, Thurgood Marshall was one of the chief legal advisors for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Marshall, with the assistance of other NAACP attorneys, organized lawsuits from several regions of the country that could be strategically used in his argument to affect school attendance practices on behalf of Brown. The assembly of these critical records, in conjunction with the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause, persuaded the Supreme Court Justices, resulting in a unanimous decision in favor of Brown (Hancock & Jones, 2005).

However, the South did not respond well to the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Bagley, 2018). Many white Southerners in rural areas responded with violent resistance to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision, which outlawed legally mandated racial

segregation in schools, as well as to subsequent efforts toward racial integration. In response to desegregation mandates, white Southerners established racially exclusive private institutions, often referred to as "segregation academies" (Bagley, 2018). These schools are still present to this day, and "Some would argue that the fear of the unknown or the idea that students learn better from those like them was a good reason to keep the schools segregated" (Bryant, 2015).

The Civil Rights Movement during the 50s and 60s in the South was one of the most racially difficult years for students in public schools. On January 14, 1963, Governor George Wallace, gave his infamous declaration during his inaugural address, stating, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." This was a clear and unapologetic statement of his commitment to uphold racial segregation in the South and resist federal efforts to enforce civil rights for African Americans. Wallace's speech symbolized the entrenched resistance to desegregation that characterized much of the Deep South during the Civil Rights Movement. His speech occurred amid growing federal efforts to enforce the desegregation of public schools and facilities (Klarman, 2004).

The very next year, in 1964, the Civil Rights Act significantly impacted education in the South by accelerating efforts to desegregate public schools and combat discrimination in educational institutions. Before the passage of the Civil Rights Act, southern schools remained primarily segregated, despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, which ruled school segregation unconstitutional (Klarman, 2004). Title IV of the Civil Rights Act empowered the federal government to enforce desegregation measures. At the same time, Title VI prohibited discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in federally funded programs, including public schools. These provisions enabled federal intervention in the South's resistance to integration, allowing for the withholding of federal funds from non-compliant

schools (Cascio, 2007). As a result, the state faced increased pressure to comply with desegregation mandates, leading to significant legal battles and federal oversight. Despite persistent resistance from some state officials, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 marked a turning point in the South's educational landscape, ultimately fostering greater access to equitable education for minority students (Lutz, 2011). However, while the law facilitated initial progress, ongoing challenges in addressing racial disparities in education remain evident in the South's school systems to this day (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012).

In a later case, in which the court based its unanimous decision on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the San Francisco court reported that the school system disregarded Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. The case *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) forever changed bilingual education across the United States. The case involved 1,856 Chinese-speaking students in San Francisco who argued that they were being denied equal access to education because they could not understand the instruction provided by their English-speaking teachers, and no accommodations were made for their language differences (Ovando, 2003; Nieto, 2009; de Jong, 2013; Gándara & Escamilla, 2016). The Supreme Court ruled that equal treatment of English-speaking and non-English-speaking students did not guarantee equal educational opportunity. The court concluded that schools must take affirmative steps to ensure that non-English-speaking students have access to the same curriculum as their English-speaking peers (Ovando, 2003, p. 9). This ruling compelled schools nationwide, including in the South, to address the needs of ML by providing meaningful language instruction, though its implementation has often been slow and inconsistent (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

The *Lau v. Nichols* decision highlighted the importance of language support in achieving educational equity. Still, the South's slow and uneven response exemplified the broader challenges of implementing federal mandates in states with historically marginalized populations. Despite the clear legal mandate, schools in the South struggled to adapt. Many lacked the resources, training, and infrastructure to effectively support ML, contributing to widespread disparities in educational outcomes. While the ruling provided a national framework for addressing linguistic diversity, the state's response remained inadequate, reinforcing long-standing inequities in the public education system (Crawford, 2004).

In 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) into law; it was an update to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, originally designed to provide federal funding to support disadvantaged students and promote educational equity. It represented a significant overhaul of federal education policy, increasing the federal government's role in K-12 education by establishing strict requirements for states and schools. The law also emphasized improvements for subgroups, including low-income students, students with disabilities, EL, and minority students, to close achievement gaps (United States Department of Education, 2004). Under NCLB, Title VII was transformed into Title III, reflecting a change in federal policy from promoting bilingual education to focusing primarily on English language acquisition and accountability for ELs' progress in learning English and achieving academic standards. Funding for Title III was allocated to states based on the number of ELs and immigrant students, with states responsible for distributing funds to local education agencies (LEAs) to support language instruction programs.

NCLB officially started to ensure that no child would be left behind regarding educational opportunities. It focused on accountability, standardized testing, and addressing

disparities in student achievement nationwide. NCLB also required that all ELs participate in statewide assessments (Menken & García, 2010).

The main clause in the opening line of the NCLB law states that the purpose is “To close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice so that no child is left behind” (USDOE, 2004, paragraph 1). In the clause, accountability refers to tracking students’ results and achievement through test scores. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), standardized tests were mandated to measure student achievement aligned with state academic standards. With all but five states adopting the Common Core Standards, standardized tests have been realigned to match them. A single test score was considered very high-stakes under NCLB, as tests were used to evaluate individual students, teachers, schools, local education agencies (LEAs), and states (Menken & García, 2010). School districts were forced to pay close attention to numerically significant subpopulations such as Hispanic, Black, low socioeconomic status, limited English proficiency, and special needs students through these tests. NCLB was not beneficial in many ways for ELs. “When looking at the EL subgroup, ELs have yet to reap the promised benefits of the NCLB; instead, the quality of education for ELs may indeed have worsened, rather than improved, during the NCLB era” (Menken, 2010, p. 127). The pressure to produce test-ready students in a limited time left little room for instructional methods supporting bilingualism or culturally responsive pedagogy (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

To address its criticisms and limitations, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was enacted as a successor to the No Child Left Behind Act. Signed into law by President Barack Obama on December 10, 2015, ESSA provides states with increased flexibility in education policy while maintaining accountability for student outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Unlike NCLB, which primarily emphasized standardized testing, ESSA allows states to

establish their own accountability frameworks that encompass a wider array of metrics, including school climate, graduation rates, and progress in English language proficiency. Additionally, ESSA prioritizes support for ML by merging Title III funding with Title I accountability measures, ensuring that ML receive the necessary resources to meet their linguistic and academic goals.

However, the separate but equal doctrine persists, allowing segregation practices to influence student placement and *tracking* within public school systems, as well as the allocation of funding for public education (Hunter, 2010). According to Mann and Rogers (2021), variations in policy context exist across different states in the United States. For instance, the South's state constitutions contained language explicitly allowing school segregation, though it was unenforceable, until it was officially removed in 2020. Many rural school districts in the South continue to experience racial isolation and economic challenges, reflecting national trends where rural minorities are among the most economically disadvantaged groups in the United States (Hertz & Silva, 2020).

In recent years, the South has implemented programs like the Language and Culture Institute, launched in 2017, to provide professional development for educators serving MLs and to promote culturally responsive teaching practices (Alabama State Department of Education, 2017). Then, in 2022, the Alabama Framework for English Learner Success (ALFELS) was created. The ALFELS vision statement asserts that:

Alabama ELs will have equitable access to high-quality, rigorous instruction designed within a systematic framework built on values and respect for students' cultures and languages and a socially and emotionally supportive learning environment,

empowering ELs to excel socially, academically, and linguistically and lead productive lives.

With the creation of the ALFELS, states in the South have demonstrated the need to establish a framework to guide educational institutions across the state.

Despite these efforts, gaps in access to resources and consistent language support for ML remain a concern, particularly in communities with teacher shortages and in rural areas (Coady, 2021). In recent years, changes in immigration patterns have significantly altered the demographics of rural areas in the South, transforming these regions into new destinations for immigrant families. This shift has created complex dynamics for schools and communities that have historically served predominantly Black and White student populations. Research indicates that schools in new destination areas, which have not traditionally hosted immigrant populations, are often less accommodating to multilingual learners (ML) than schools in established immigration gateway cities (Griffith, 2008). For example, Latino students in these contexts frequently face unique challenges as they navigate the cultural and structural landscapes of schools that are unaccustomed to their presence (Kandel & Parrado, 2006).

However, the number of ML students in these nontraditional gateway communities continues to grow (Massey, 2020). Nontraditional gateway communities are locations that do not have a large population of English learners and have historically been home to local families. Research offers conflicting insights into whether these regions amplify immigrant students' exposure to nativism, a sociopolitical attitude favoring native-born inhabitants while marginalizing immigrants, or serve as a buffer against such adversities. These dynamics, within and beyond the school setting, inevitably shape ML students' educational experiences and outcomes. Despite the increasing population of ML students, there has been remarkably little

scholarly attention devoted to understanding the education of these students and their families in rural settings (Coady, 2019; 2020). This leaves a critical gap in the literature regarding how schools in the rural South can better support their increasingly diverse student populations.

As of 2023, the South continues to work toward education for multilingual learners (ML), implementing initiatives to recruit more bilingual teachers, expand language programs, and increase state and local funding for English Learner (EL) services (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). These efforts include targeted programs to improve teacher preparation for working with linguistically diverse students, with a particular emphasis on rural and high-need areas. Additionally, the state has made strides in integrating language acquisition strategies into general education classrooms to support English proficiency and academic achievement for ML (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Despite these initiatives, the state's longstanding systemic barriers, such as insufficient funding, inadequate professional development, and slow policy implementation, continue to present significant challenges. The legacy of these barriers and the complexity of addressing educational disparities highlight the ongoing struggle for genuinely equitable educational opportunities for multilingual students in the South (Villegas, 2023).

According to the American Councils Research Center (2021), more than 3,600 Dual Language and Immersion (DLI) programs across 44 states were reported. California, Texas, New York, Utah, and North Carolina account for nearly sixty percent of all DLI programs. Spanish programs account for about 80% of these initiatives, followed by Chinese at 8.6% and French at 5.0%. Notably, the South reported having no dual language immersion (DLI) programs in public schools. These programs typically follow models such as the 50/50 or 90/10 approach, in which instruction is divided between English and the partner language, depending on the program's

design and goals. The absence of these programs in the South reflects a lack of commitment to embracing linguistic diversity and providing multilingual learners with equitable educational opportunities.

State Funding for Multilingual Support

In the South and across the United States, funding for multilingual learners (ML) comes from a combination of federal, state, and local sources. At the federal level, ML receive supplemental funding primarily through Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which supports language development, and Title I, which addresses the needs of economically disadvantaged children. In a policy brief focused on the rural town of Russellville, AL, Villegas (2023) states:

Previous scholarship has found that students with certain educational needs—students with disabilities, English learners, and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—require more resources to achieve the same educational outcomes as their peers. Many English learners, in addition to learning a new language, must also overcome the opportunity barriers created by socioeconomic circumstances since 37 percent of them live in poverty. This means that implementing successful instructional models for English learners requires distinct financial investments.

However, Title III funding is intended to supplement state and local funds and often falls short of meeting local needs. Over the past two decades, Title III funding for ML has decreased by 24 percent when adjusted for inflation (Villegas, 2023). Although ML also benefit from Title I funding due to their overrepresentation in high-poverty schools, it remains challenging to determine the exact impact of these funds on ML specifically.

One specific state in the South uses a categorical funding system at the state level that provides additional per-pupil funding for ML, separate from the base funding formula. This system allocates funds based on the number of ML enrolled, fluctuating annually according to the total set aside for these students. On average, this adds approximately 2 percent to the overall funding for ML. Multilingual learners also receive funding from local education sources, constituting a substantial portion of the overall education budget. In 2020, nearly half of all public school funding in the U.S. came from local sources, with about two-thirds derived from local property taxes. This dependence on local taxes creates significant inequities, as funding varies based on property values and the wealth of the community.

For example, the median property value (MPV) in the Upper City School District (a fictitious name for anonymity), which is predominantly white and affluent, was \$602,200 in the 2016–17 school year. The district's total revenue reached \$64.3 million, with 65.5 percent coming from local sources, resulting in per-pupil funding of \$14,772. In contrast, the same year, Eastern City, a district with a diverse student body and high poverty rates, had an MPV of \$93,700. This district generated a total revenue of \$26.8 million, with only 27.6 percent sourced locally, resulting in \$7,955 per student (Villegas, 2023).

The disparities in local funding highlight the broader challenges of ensuring equitable education for multilingual learners in the South. As Reardon notes,

Black and Hispanic students' test scores, relative to those of whites, are much lower when Black and Hispanic students attend schools with more poor schoolmates. Reducing school segregation—in particular, reducing racial disparities in exposure to poor schoolmates—may, therefore, be an effective means of improving the equality of students' access to high-quality educational opportunities (Reardon, 2015, p. 51).

In her policy brief, Leslie Villegas (2023) describes the situation in Russellville, AL, and the increase in its ML population. The superintendent of Russellville City recognized that other districts were facing similar funding challenges. In 2019, he established Leaders Advocating for ML to address inadequate funding and related issues. That same year, the South introduced a "density weight" to the categorical funding for ML, increasing the ML count by 1.5 in districts where ML comprised more than 10 percent of the total student population. In fiscal years 2021 and 2022, an additional weight factor was applied for schools with an ML population exceeding 20 percent. As a result, districts below the 10 percent density threshold now receive around \$200 per ML, while those above it receive closer to \$300. Although state and federal funds aim to supplement local resources, they often fail to close the significant funding gaps caused by differences in local tax revenues.

Districts like Russellville City, which has a higher population of ML and lower property values, are at a disadvantage compared to wealthier districts like Upper Brook, which benefit from higher local tax revenues and increased per-pupil spending. This uneven distribution of resources contributes to persistent educational inequities, limiting access to language programs, specialized services, and adequately trained teachers for ML. As the South strives to improve educational outcomes for multilingual students, addressing these funding disparities remains a critical challenge that requires targeted, sustained support at the state and local levels to ensure all students receive the high-quality education they deserve.

Principal as Instructional Leader

According to Hallinger and Murphy (1985), instructional leadership includes school leadership strategies to influence and improve teaching and learning practices, ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes. This understanding underpins more than 500 empirical

studies (Hallinger et al., 2015) and underscores the crucial role of effective leadership in promoting educational excellence and equity. The rise of a global accountability movement has intensified the focus on leaders who consistently drive measurable improvements in student achievement, elevating the importance of instructional leadership (Leithwood, 2001). This focus has revived interest in using instructional leadership to improve educational results in the United States. In contrast, this model marks a significant departure from the traditional view of school principals as primary implementers of national policies and administrative tasks in several other nations. This shift emphasizes school leaders' evolving responsibilities in advancing pedagogical and academic outcomes (Hallinger et al., 2015).

Research by Hallinger et al. (2015) reaffirms the critical role of instructional leadership in boosting student learning, supporting teacher development, and fostering academic achievement. Their conclusions resonate with earlier works, particularly the significant meta-analysis by Robinson et al. (2008), which demonstrated that instructional leadership has a more considerable positive effect on student performance than other leadership styles, such as strategic or transformational leadership. Hallinger et al. (2015) argue that the most significant benefits of instructional leadership are derived from focused support for teacher professional development. Principals who actively promote and engage in the growth of their teachers create effective pathways for improving instructional practices, ultimately enhancing student outcomes. Their findings indicate that instructional leadership not only aids academic progress but also strengthens teacher success by developing professional capacity and cultivating a culture of ongoing improvement. These insights align with a growing body of evidence that positions instructional leadership as fundamental in driving sustainable enhancements within educational settings.

Moreover, principals, as instructional leaders, are crucial in ensuring the effective implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Individualized Language Plans (ILPs), and co-teaching models to address the diverse needs of students, particularly multilingual learners and students with disabilities. Beyond cultivating instructional excellence, principals must actively collaborate with special education and ESL teachers to develop rigorous, differentiated instructional materials that align with curricular goals and individual student needs. This collaborative effort includes ongoing training and support for educators in managing caseloads, composing effective IEPs and ILPs, and monitoring compliance with legal and educational standards. Similarly, principals possess the knowledge and skills necessary to oversee the creation and implementation of these individualized programs, which are essential for advancing students' academic progress with specific needs. Kangas & Cioè-Peña (2023) describe the importance of ILPs: “These documents are intended to function as an instructional blueprint for teachers, establishing MLs' present linguistic skills, goals for growth, and the instructional supports needed to reach these goals” (p.523). Despite the critical role of IEPs and ILPs in addressing the needs of these students, research indicates that principal preparation programs often fall short in equipping school leaders with the requisite skills and knowledge for effective management of such plans (Kangas & Cioè-Peña, 2023). Specifically, the lack of standardized guidelines for ILPs for students who are learning English, particularly in rural schools, further complicates principals' efforts to ensure equitable and effective support for these students (Kangas & Cioè-Peña, 2023; Khalifa et al., 2016). To fulfill their responsibilities as instructional leaders, principals must be well-equipped to navigate these complexities, fostering an inclusive school culture where all students can thrive academically and socially.

Ongoing Professional Development of Principals

In a multi-phase study by Vera et al. (2022), there are not enough studies examining the essential content that should be included in EL-focused PD. Similarly, Barakat et al. (2018) identified significant gaps in the cultural responsiveness of educational principals, suggesting that school districts should incorporate ongoing professional development in this area to better prepare school leaders for interacting with multilingual staff, students, and community stakeholders. Such training could support teachers in their classroom instruction and provide principals with the expertise needed to accommodate multilingual learners effectively. Additionally, this approach could help prevent principal burnout, thereby reducing teacher and student stress.

Several studies have highlighted significant gaps in the training and ongoing professional development of school principals in the context of multilingual education. A recent study by Phillips et al. (2022) revealed that "all participants stated that they wished there had been more attention to working with multilingual students in their preparation or ongoing professional development and stated that opportunities were limited and often focused on teachers" (p.310). This finding underscores the urgent need for professional development programs tailored specifically to school principals with a greater focus on multiculturalism and multilingual education.

Effective school leaders face various challenges, such as adapting to specific student needs, navigating changes in educational policy, and implementing innovative teaching strategies. As such, professional development programs must be comprehensive and tailored to assist leaders throughout their careers. These programs should include mentorship opportunities, workshops on current educational trends, and collaboration with peers to share best practices.

Additionally, research by Rucker (2021) emphasizes the importance of ongoing professional development, noting that:

Principal preparation programs are certainly essential in equipping new principals with the basic tools and credentialing needed to lead their schools, but the complexity of the role and evolving educational standards call for high-quality ongoing professional development to support the leadership development of principals (Rucker, 2021, p.72).

This points to the need for comprehensive programs that continue to support leaders throughout their careers and address the evolving demands of school principals. Moreover, ongoing professional development can help principals remain informed about new research, technology, and instructional methods that can benefit their schools. By addressing the evolving demands placed on school principals, such initiatives improve the effectiveness of school leaders and contribute to the overall success and well-being of their students and staff. Thus, investing in sustained professional development is essential for cultivating effective educational leadership that meets the challenges of today's dynamic educational landscape.

Miller's (2013) research highlights that principal turnover can negatively impact student achievement. The findings indicate that “student achievement declines before a principal's departure and continues to decline for several years after a new principal takes over” (p. 60).

This emphasizes the need for stability and consistency in school leadership.

In this context, ongoing professional development for principals becomes crucial. Training focusing on responsive multilingual leadership can equip school leaders with the skills and knowledge to effectively serve diverse student populations. School districts can ensure principals are committed to long-term positions and prepared to address their communities' unique needs by prioritizing professional development to enhance cultural responsiveness.

Ultimately, retaining highly qualified leaders who are culturally aware and responsive will positively impact the overall health and success of the entire school community, fostering a more inclusive and effective educational environment.

Interdisciplinary Mentoring of Principals

Although providing rural school leaders with professional learning opportunities to support their ongoing school improvement efforts is challenging, effective strategies exist to bridge this gap (Salter, 2014). Professional development, mentoring, and coaching offer a pathway to equip school leaders with the tools and knowledge necessary to navigate complex educational landscapes. By leveraging these targeted learning opportunities, rural school leaders can enhance their capacity to lead effectively and foster sustained school improvements (Klar et al, 2024).

Irby et al. (2023) delve into the intricate relationship between mentoring and coaching, emphasizing that, while distinct, these two concepts can complement each other in developing school leaders. They describe mentoring as an ongoing, relational process between a mentor and a mentee, aimed at promoting professional and personal growth over time. Conversely, coaching is portrayed as a more structured, goal-driven practice focusing on honing specific skills. The authors note that even though mentors may utilize coaching techniques, coaches typically do not engage in the broader, more relational side of mentoring. Irby et. al. (2023) argue that both mentoring and coaching are crucial for the success of school leaders and recommend integrating these approaches to create a more comprehensive support system. They highlight that coaches can evolve into mentors as relationships deepen and shift beyond skill development.

Similarly, Salter (2014) conducts a comparative case study examining how mentoring and coaching function within disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary frameworks.

This research underscores the need for adaptability to meet the unique needs of mentees or coachees. Interdisciplinary mentoring can be a powerful form of professional development for principals and educational leaders, combining expertise from various fields to tackle the complex challenges of school leadership. Salter points out that mentors are often chosen based on their experience and seniority, which makes their specialized knowledge attractive to mentees. But beyond their expertise, building rapport and trust and providing psychosocial support is essential in fostering effective mentoring relationships. This combination of professional knowledge and personal connection helps mentees navigate transitions, boost their confidence, and take on greater responsibilities (Salter, 2014).

Interdisciplinary mentoring stands out for principals and educational leaders because it brings together insights from different sectors, enriching their perspectives on leadership. For example, having mentors with backgrounds in business leadership or community engagement can provide school leaders with fresh strategies for resource management, stakeholder collaboration, and crisis response, all vital in today's educational landscape. Salter also emphasizes that mentors often guide mentees in planning their career paths, setting long-term goals that encourage principals to stay in their roles or aim for advancement.

Additionally, interdisciplinary mentoring encourages adaptability by exposing educational leaders to various perspectives, enabling them to approach challenges with innovative solutions. Mentees benefit from the psychosocial support and encouragement their mentors provide, helping them gain the confidence needed to implement changes and lead effectively in ever-changing environments. The potential for sponsorship, where mentors actively support the advancement of their mentees, can significantly enhance the recognition and development of leadership potential among principals and educational leaders. Interdisciplinary

mentoring offers a comprehensive professional development model that blends specialized expertise, interpersonal support, and career guidance, ultimately helping educational leaders tackle immediate challenges while building the skills and confidence necessary for long-term success.

Asset-Based Practices for Integrative Schools

In the 2018–2019 school year, only 2.5% of school administrators in the South reflected the racially and linguistically minoritized backgrounds of their student population, resulting in a 38% disparity (Alabama State Department of Education, 2019). Having principals who mirror their student demographics is increasingly important for fostering an environment supporting minoritized students' success (Genoa, 2021). Research indicates that school leadership significantly affects various school outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021). To address these gaps, principals need to understand their students' backgrounds to ensure that their biases and values do not adversely affect the students' education.

Grissom et al. (2021) conducted a systematic synthesis of over two decades of research examining the impact of principals on student and school outcomes. Their findings reveal that principals play a more significant and multifaceted role in school success than previously understood, influencing student achievement, teacher satisfaction, retention, school climate, and equity. Effective school leaders were shown to positively impact student outcomes, with evidence indicating that their leadership results in notable gains in math and reading achievement. The researchers highlighted the importance of four principal practices: engaging in high-leverage instructional activities, fostering a positive school culture and climate, promoting collaboration and professional learning communities, and strategically managing personnel and resources.

The review also emphasized the critical role of principals in equity-driven leadership, particularly for marginalized populations, including low-income students and students of color. Principals influence equity both directly by implementing culturally responsive disciplinary practices and indirectly by hiring diverse teachers and fostering inclusive instructional practices. Principals of color were found to have especially positive impacts on students and teachers of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Principal turnover emerged as a significant challenge, with higher rates observed in schools serving marginalized populations. Turnover was generally associated with negative impacts on student achievement, teacher retention, and school climate, though replacing an ineffective principal with a more effective one could yield positive results. These findings underscore the need for equity-oriented policies to recruit, train, and retain effective principals, particularly in high-need schools.

Grissom et al. (2021) argue that leadership preparation and professional development programs must prioritize the foundational skills of instructional leadership, organizational management, and equity-focused decision-making. By identifying specific practices contributing to effective leadership, this research provides actionable insights for supporting principals as key drivers of school success. Their findings reinforce the importance of developing leadership practices that address the needs of increasingly diverse student populations and advocate for policies that enhance principal diversity and equitable access to leadership roles.

In a policy brief, Hawk et al. (2017) note that when educators are unaware of cultural differences between themselves and their students, "unintentional clashes" can occur. These clashes arise when an individual from one cultural or ethnic group misinterprets another group's symbolic meanings, behavioral norms, or language. A lack of awareness regarding students'

cultural backgrounds can hinder teachers and administrators from effectively promoting Culturally Competent Teaching and Culturally Responsive School Leadership. One significant consequence of this lack of understanding may be the disproportionate use of disciplinary actions in schools. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights found that Black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers. These biases may lead to increased rates of suspension and expulsion for minority students. Such misunderstandings can worsen existing inequities, as shown by the disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline among minority students compared to their White peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Together, these findings point to the necessity of leadership preparation programs that prioritize equity-focused professional development. By equipping principals with culturally responsive school leadership skills, schools can address systemic biases and foster environments where all students thrive. The research reinforces that principal diversity and cultural competence are not merely aspirational goals but foundational elements for addressing longstanding educational inequities and meeting the needs of increasingly diverse student populations.

Translanguaging

In classroom interactions, both students and educators draw on various resources, such as language, prior experiences, knowledge, and cultural backgrounds, to facilitate meaning-making and engage with the information, concepts, and ideas shared within the learning environment (Cazden, 2001; Freund, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Students must have the opportunities to participate in these educational spaces for these interactions to be effective. How multilingual individuals use and transition between multiple languages for communication has been the

subject of extensive research. To describe these practices, scholars have used terms like language hybridity, diglossia, code-switching, code-meshing, and translanguaging (Castro, 2015).

Translanguaging is a critical component of asset-based practices for multilingual learners, as it leverages students' full linguistic repertoire to enhance learning opportunities. In a mixed-methods comparative case study, Castro (2015) highlights the importance of translanguaging, and she answers three questions: 1) What factors shape language use in multilingual classrooms during mathematics instruction? 2) What forms of language are employed in multilingual classrooms during mathematics instruction? When? By whom? For what purposes? 3) Does translanguaging occur in multilingual classrooms? If so, how might we understand it? Can we identify any impact of translanguaging on learning? Castro examined language use among emerging bilinguals in multilingual spaces during mathematics instruction in transitional bilingual education and two-way immersion classrooms. The study, conducted in a rural Midwest elementary school community, examined how educators employed translanguaging practices to manage and organize content instruction, thereby creating meaningful opportunities for academic success. Through oral and written language samples, interviews with students, educators, and families, and document collection, Castro (2015) demonstrated that translanguaging can be a powerful pedagogical tool in mathematical instruction.

Castro's findings emphasized that the effectiveness of translanguaging practices is shaped by educators' personal histories, ideologies, and values, which often exert more influence than specific program models or instructional strategies. Castro (2015) observed that educators who embraced bilingual practices in different ways created unique opportunities to foster students' academic growth. By integrating translanguaging into instructional practices, educators acknowledged and celebrated the linguistic strengths of ML, thereby promoting more inclusive

and equitable learning environments. Castro (2015) advocates further research on how educators' backgrounds and beliefs influence the implementation of translanguaging practices, highlighting their potential to transform multilingual education.

Dougherty explains that educators could champion a positive school environment by allowing and implementing translanguaging strategies across the school community (2021). As multilingual learners utilize their full range of linguistic abilities through practices such as code-switching, code-mixing, and translation to deepen their comprehension (Song et al., 2022), these strategies could enhance the learning environment by fostering a richer understanding of complex content while encouraging active engagement in classroom discussions (Wawire & Barnes-Story, 2023). Moreover, translanguaging supports the social and emotional development of multilingual learners. Dougherty (2021) highlights the importance of creating a "translanguaging space" in which students' diverse languages are recognized and valued, fostering respect and inclusivity. Educators promote equitable learning opportunities, language development, and students' overall well-being by creating a classroom environment that celebrates multilingualism. Translanguaging thus represents a powerful, asset-based approach to empowering multilingual learners and maximizing their educational engagement.

Promoting Parent and Family Engagement

Coady (2019) explores the complexities of engaging rural multilingual families in educational settings, emphasizing the need for culturally and linguistically responsive family engagement practices. The research questions focus on understanding how rural teachers and educators can build effective partnerships with multilingual families and what differentiated practices can support these efforts. Specifically, the study poses critical inquiries into how family engagement models can be revised to address the socio-historical and sociopolitical contexts of

multilingual families in rural areas, identifies innovative approaches that can foster meaningful engagement between educators and multilingual families, and assesses how teachers and educational leaders can be better prepared to support such engagement.

The study conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on parental involvement and engagement, examining three standard family engagement models. Based on this review, Coady (2019) proposes a revised conceptual model explicitly tailored to rural multilingual families. This conceptual framework incorporates reflective and action-based components, emphasizing the importance of understanding family strengths and needs, building relational trust, and addressing the geospatial variations unique to rural contexts. Although the research is not an empirical study with direct participant involvement, it nevertheless focuses on the experiences of rural teachers, educators, and multilingual families, particularly in contexts where cultural and linguistic differences between families and schools are pronounced. Coady provides insightful findings and recommendations, drawing on prior research, demographic data, and theoretical frameworks.

Coady's differentiated conceptual model for rural multilingual family engagement includes two key phases: reflection and action. Educators are encouraged to listen to and learn from multilingual families' strengths, needs, and cultural histories in the reflection phase. In the subsequent action phase, educators are urged to collaborate with families to enhance communication, support learning, and advocate for systemic changes that benefit multilingual students and their families. The study underscores that family engagement must be relational and culturally responsive, particularly when tailored to the unique dynamics of rural settings. Coady (2019) emphasizes the need for more refined demographic data on rural multilingual families

and advocates innovative, non-traditional engagement frameworks that affirm these families' cultural and linguistic assets.

Additionally, Coady highlights a critical need for teacher and leader preparation programs to effectively incorporate strategies for engaging multilingual families. She recommends that future research focus on obtaining more nuanced demographic data regarding rural multilingual families, including insights into language use, cultural knowledge, and historical contexts. Furthermore, she stresses the necessity of developing and implementing innovative family engagement approaches that are culturally and linguistically responsive. Alongside these recommendations, preparing teachers and educational leaders to engage with multilingual families through specialized training and reflective practices emerges as vital. This study is valuable to understanding family engagement in rural multilingual contexts, an area often overlooked in educational research. Coady (2019) highlights the importance of reflection and action in fostering meaningful partnerships with families by proposing a conceptual model grounded in relational trust and differentiated practices. The emphasis on teacher preparation and culturally responsive practices aligns with broader priorities within rural education and underscores the need for systemic changes to better support multilingual families. This research thus advances the conversation on equity and inclusion in rural schools, offering practical insights for educators and leaders seeking to build stronger, more inclusive school-family partnerships.

One of the major obstacles to engaging multilingual families identified in research is the language barrier. Yol (2019) notes that many parents who speak multiple languages are reluctant to get involved in school activities or communicate with staff due to their limited proficiency in English. Good et al. (2010) further highlights that insufficient communication often leads

multilingual parents to feel frustrated, disconnected, and even angry, which creates additional hurdles to building trust and collaboration between schools and families. To address this challenge, schools must prioritize providing access to interpreters and translated materials, which is essential for fostering effective communication.

In addition to language access, schools should strive to help parents become familiar with the educational system's norms and culture. This can be accomplished through workshops, opportunities for classroom visits, and individual meetings with school personnel (Housel, 2020). Equally important is the need to create a welcoming and respectful environment, as many multilingual parents often feel their contributions are overlooked and may feel disconnected from the school community (Good et al., 2010). Such feelings of exclusion can further alienate families from their children's educational journeys, diminishing opportunities for meaningful collaboration.

Ocampo (2024) recognizes that families offer valuable insights into their children's cultural backgrounds, going on to say how crucial it is for teachers and school leaders to utilize these perspectives to cultivate inclusive and supportive educational settings. By addressing systemic barriers and embracing culturally responsive approaches (Young et al., 2010, as cited in Khalifa et al., 2016), educators can reinforce the vital connections between schools and multilingual families, ultimately enhancing the educational experiences of all students. These initiatives promote equity and inclusion and empower families to engage actively in their children's academic success and the broader school community.

Educational Leadership Development

Cashman (2017) asserts that leadership development has changed over the last two decades, from a focus on managerial competence and technical skill acquisition toward a more

holistic understanding of leadership as a reflective, relational, and identity-based process. He goes on to say that effective leadership requires more than procedural knowledge; it necessitates self-awareness, ethical clarity, and the ability to navigate complex organizational and sociocultural contexts (Cashman, 2017). Extending this to educational leadership preparation programs, it is increasingly recognized that technical expertise alone is insufficient to address the multifaceted challenges facing schools, particularly those serving diverse student populations (Barakat et al., 2018; Genoa, 2021).

Cashman (2017) conceptualizes leadership development as an “inside-out” process, arguing that sustainable and authentic leadership begins with deep self-examination. Rather than viewing leadership as a title or a collection of strategies that can be taught, Cashman explains how leadership capacity expands as individuals align their values, beliefs, and behaviors. This perspective shifts the focus from external performance metrics to internal transformation, suggesting that personal growth and reflective practice are central to effective leadership. Such an approach underscores the importance of intentional reflection in cultivating integrity, trust, and relational influence within educational settings.

Similarly, research on educational leadership highlights the role of critical reflection and experiential learning in shaping leadership identity over time. Transformative learning theory further supports this understanding, asserting that leaders develop through examining and reconstructing meaning structures in response to disorienting experiences (Mezirow, 2000, 2009). Within educational contexts, these moments often arise when leaders confront inequities, institutional limitations, or cultural tensions that challenge previously held assumptions. Leadership development becomes developmental, requiring ongoing reflexivity and responsiveness to evolving community needs.

Collectively, the literature suggests that educational leadership development is not a linear progression but an iterative process shaped by experience, mentorship, reflective discourse, and ethical decision-making (Barakat et al., 2018; Cashman, 2017; Genoa, 2021). Effective leaders cultivate self-awareness, engage in relational trust-building, and demonstrate a commitment to equity-centered practice. This broader understanding of leadership development provides a theoretical foundation for examining how personal experiences and professional contexts influence the formation of leadership identity.

Chapter Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities for multilingual responsive school leadership in the South, particularly for multilingual learners. The review encompasses several critical topics, including the historical evolution of terminology for English Language Learners, the historical context of non-English-speaking students in the South, and the role of federal and state funding in supporting multilingual learners. Additionally, it explores the principal's role as an instructional leader for ML, the importance of ongoing professional development for school leaders, and the potential of interdisciplinary mentoring as a form of professional development. Other topics examined include asset-based practices for ML, such as translanguaging and strategies for promoting parent and family engagement. Together, these areas provide a multidimensional perspective on the systemic, cultural, and instructional challenges school leaders face in addressing the needs of multilingual learners.

This literature makes a significant contribution to the field by connecting theoretical frameworks, such as the Alabama Framework for English Learner Success (ALFELS), the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), and culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL), to practical applications. By highlighting asset-based instructional practices,

professional development gaps, and the importance of family engagement, the review underscores the transformative potential of culturally responsive leadership in promoting equity and inclusion for ML in rural schools.

The literature's strengths lie in its breadth and depth, as it addresses a wide range of relevant topics and aligns them with current educational priorities. The focus on historical and contextual factors, such as the history of non-English-speaking students in the South and federal and state funding mechanisms, provides a solid background for understanding the systemic challenges faced by ML. Additionally, the review's emphasis on specific strategies, such as translanguaging, parent and family engagement, and asset-based practices, offers actionable insights for educators and school leaders. The exploration of interdisciplinary mentoring as professional development is particularly innovative, highlighting the need for collaborative and holistic approaches to leadership preparation.

Despite its strengths, the literature has several weaknesses. First, the focus on urban schools in most CRSL research leaves rural contexts underexplored, limiting the applicability of findings to the rural South. Second, while professional development gaps are identified, the literature provides insufficient detail on the specific content and structure of training programs for rural school leaders. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical research on how principals can effectively implement Individualized Language Plans (ILPs), particularly in under-resourced schools.

Key gaps in the literature include: Limited empirical studies on CRSL in rural southern states. Insufficient exploration of the design and implementation of effective professional development programs for rural principals. Minimal research on the unique challenges rural school leaders face and their actions that influence access, equity, and long-term achievement.

Lack of focus on strategies for leveraging community and family engagement to create culturally inclusive school environments.

Future research should address these gaps by conducting empirical studies focusing on CRSL in rural schools, particularly in the context of ML. Longitudinal studies could examine the impact of interdisciplinary mentoring and targeted professional development on principals' ability to support multilingual learners. Additionally, research should explore innovative approaches to professional development, with an emphasis on culturally responsive practices.

By addressing these gaps and building on the strengths of the current literature, future research can advance the field of multilingual responsive leadership and provide practical solutions to support ML in rural education settings. This focus will empower school leaders to create transformative educational experiences that honor and celebrate their students' diverse cultural and linguistic identities.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The population of multilingual learners (ML) in the South's schools has grown substantially in recent years, particularly in rural communities that have historically been predominantly white. Between 2021 and 2025, the number of public school students with limited English proficiency in the South increased from 37,000 to 51,000, with more than 10,000 identified as first-year ML (Report Card - Alabama Department of Education, 2025). Despite this growth, school administrators across the state face persistent challenges in fostering inclusion, promoting cultural responsiveness, and improving academic outcomes for ML, often operating with limited budgets and without access to diverse, data-driven strategies to guide their efforts.

The limited scholarly attention to rural multilingual education further compounds this issue. As Coady (2019, 2020) notes, "Although the number of ML students continues to rise, particularly in nontraditional immigration gateway communities (Massey, 2020), astoundingly little scholarly attention has been paid to the education of rural ML students and families" (p. 365). This lack of research leaves rural school leaders with few resources or models for addressing the needs of their increasingly diverse student populations, underscoring the critical need for targeted professional development, policy reform, and community engagement strategies to support these students effectively.

As student populations become increasingly diverse, many schools are exploring ways to enhance staff training to improve multilingual support services. This autoethnographic study examines the experiences of an aspiring bilingual leader as they navigate the educational climates of the rural South to provide insights into practical strategies for implementing multilingual responsive school leadership to promote inclusive and equitable learning

opportunities for multilingual learners (ML). Drawing from the key framework, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), this study integrates these perspectives to analyze the current state of rural principal leadership for linguistically diverse students. Findings highlight the importance of CRSL, family engagement, and asset-based practices for supporting ML and their teachers in rural education. Practical implications for addressing the unique needs of ML are presented, offering a pathway toward more inclusive and effective educational practices.

Overview of the chapter

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed in the study, detailing the design, data collection methods, and analytical framework used to explore multilingual responsive school leadership development in southern educational contexts. The chapter begins by introducing autoethnography as the central qualitative research approach, offering a rationale for its selection and emphasizing its alignment with the study's goals. It then provides an overview of the data sources and procedures utilized to ensure credibility and reliability, followed by a discussion of the analytical methods used to interpret the findings. Finally, the chapter highlights the significance of this methodology for advancing research on multilingual and multicultural responsive school leadership and its implications for addressing the needs of multilingual learners (ML) in rural settings.

Survey of the Literature

The literature reviewed in this chapter was identified through searches of academic databases such as ProQuest, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Search terms included “culturally responsive school leadership,” “multilingual learners,” “educational leadership,” “principal as the instructional leader,” “multilingual family engagement,” and “asset-based instructional practices.” Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy briefs, and research

reports published within the past ten years to ensure that the study is informed by current research. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify critical trends and gaps in the literature relevant to multilingual responsive school leadership, rural education, multilingual education, and principal leadership development.

Background of the Problem

The South's demographic landscape is undergoing a significant transformation, marked by a growing population of multilingual learners (ML) entering K–12 schools (Alabama State Department of Education, 2022). English Learners (EL), who comprise 10% of the U.S. student population and nearly 20% of nonwhite students, represent the fastest-growing subgroup. However, insufficient attention has been paid to addressing their needs in the southern education system. Research indicates that school leaders employing asset-based decision-making approaches can advance educational equity in the state, which has a complex history of racial dynamics (Reardon, 2015). Despite this, research on how principals are prepared to meet the challenges posed by increasing linguistic diversity remains limited in the South. Multilingual learners consistently underperform academically compared to their monolingual peers, particularly in schools where resources to support these students are limited. This underscores the pressing need for effective leadership strategies tailored to address the unique challenges posed by the South's growing multilingual student population.

Although the number of ML continues to rise, leadership preparation programs and ongoing professional development opportunities often fail to adequately address culturally responsive practices needed to support them (Khalifa, 2016; Phillips et al., 2022). Existing research highlights that rural principals, in particular, frequently lack the training and resources

necessary to implement culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) strategies effectively and advocate for the success of multilingual students (Coady et al., 2019).

Gaps and Needs in the Literature

While extensive research exists on teacher preparation for multilingual (ML) education, studies focusing on the role of school principals in fostering multilingual responsive school leadership remain limited, particularly in the South. Most research on multilingual responsive school leadership has centered on urban schools, leaving rural monolingual states largely unexplored. Moreover, the literature is limited in addressing how principals can effectively oversee and implement Individualized Language Plans (ILPs), a key tool for supporting the academic progress of multilingual learners. Although ILPs are becoming a tool that school leaders are beginning to utilize, little attention has been given to how principals influence their development and effectiveness, particularly in schools with limited professional development opportunities and without standardized guidelines (Kangas & Cioè-Peña, 2023). This gap is further complicated by the lack of curricula in principal preparation programs that address multilingualism, despite the widespread emphasis on training principals to support special populations through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The gap extends to current school leaders, who have experienced a shortage of affordable, comprehensible professional development focused on how to effectively support multilingual students and their families.

Statement of the Problem

In the South's evolving educational landscape, the growing presence of multilingual student populations contrasts with the limited representation of bilingual individuals in school leadership roles. Although research has highlighted the importance of diverse leadership in fostering inclusive school environments, a gap remains in understanding how personal narratives

influence the leadership journey of bilingual educators, particularly in traditionally monolingual contexts. A critical need exists to explore the lived experiences of a bilingual aspiring school leader in the South, including how language and professional aspirations intersect to influence leadership development. Such an examination can illuminate systemic and individual factors that both challenge and support the progression of bilingual educators into school leadership positions, ultimately offering insights into more inclusive leadership pathways.

The population most affected by this issue includes school principals and the multilingual students they serve. These students, often economically disadvantaged and learning English as a second language, face significant academic challenges when principals are not equipped to foster culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments. Without access to multilingual, responsive school leadership and focused professional development, principals may struggle to address the academic, social, and cultural needs of these students, leading to inequities in learning opportunities and overall school performance. The absence of such leadership not only impedes the success of multilingual learners but also hinders schools' ability to adapt to their increasingly diverse student populations.

This study will critically examine existing frameworks, such as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), to understand their applicability in addressing these challenges. Employing an autoethnographic approach, the researcher's journey as an aspiring bilingual school leader will offer a lens through which to explore the complexities of multilingualism. By integrating personal experiences with an analysis of current policies and practices, the study will uncover practical strategies for preparing school principals to lead in culturally and linguistically diverse settings.

Moreover, this research highlights the implications of inadequate leadership preparation, particularly in areas where principals often serve as the primary agents of change. Without adequate support, school leaders may perpetuate existing inequities, leaving multilingual learners without the resources or opportunities to succeed academically and socially. This study seeks to bridge gaps in leadership development and contribute to the ongoing discourse on multilingualism in education, offering actionable recommendations to foster culturally responsive leadership that can transform schools and promote success for all students.

Research Question

The following question guides the research:

1. How do the personal experiences of a bilingual aspiring school leader in the South influence the development of leadership identity, strategies for navigating monolingual institutional norms, and perceptions of inclusive educational leadership?

The research question examines how my identity and experiences as a bilingual educator have shaped my approach to leadership and decision-making as I transition into a leadership role. Reflecting on my journey—from my upbringing in a diverse community on the West Coast to my work in the rural South—I focus on uncovering how these experiences inform my strategies for supporting ML. The study will examine how my background, beliefs, and values influence the challenges and successes I encounter in creating an inclusive environment for diverse student populations. This question relates to the problem statement, which addresses the need for culturally responsive leadership in southern schools, where principals may require more preparation to meet the needs of growing multilingual (ML) populations.

Not only do aspiring principals need proper training, but tenured principals also require ongoing professional development opportunities that provide practical strategies for addressing

the unique challenges of rural communities. Given the limited focus on multilingualism in many leadership preparation programs and teacher certification programs, this study will explore the types of programs that can enhance principals' abilities to support the academic and social needs of multilingual learners. The study will focus on southern school contexts, where programs and opportunities may be scarce, yet the need is urgent. By examining existing multilingual programs and whether principal preparation programs teach them as part of their foundational core curriculum, this question aims to contribute to the development of targeted training programs that align with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) to address the unique challenges of rural schools. This relates to the problem statement by highlighting the need for specific multilingual-focused professional development to address gaps in leadership preparation programs.

This research question aligns closely with the problem statement by exploring how my lived experiences, including documents, vignettes about current issues related to multilingual school policies, and other materials related to multilingual initiatives, contribute to solving the issue of inadequate preparation and ongoing professional development for school leaders in the rural South. This research could inform program development, influence policy decisions, and improve educational outcomes for ML students in rural academic settings.

Autoethnography as Method

This study employs autoethnography as its primary qualitative research method.

Autoethnography is a deeply personal and reflective approach that explores the researcher's lived experiences within broader cultural and societal contexts. This methodological choice is supported by various scholars, including Beattie (2024), Chang (2008), Ellis et al. (2011), Poulos (2021), and O'Reilly (2012), who highlight the importance of cultural relativism in qualitative research. These scholars emphasize the importance of examining phenomena through the perspectives of individuals closely integrated into their social and cultural contexts.

Origins of Autoethnography

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) describe autoethnography as a method of both process and product, using tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Autobiographical writing involves the retrospective and selective reconstruction of past experiences not recorded in the moment (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Freeman, 2004). Authors often pull from multiple sources to support memory recall, including interviews, personal artifacts such as photographs, journals, and recordings (Chang, 2008; Goodall, 2006; Herrmann, 2005).

Autobiographical narratives usually focus on epiphanies, moments the author perceives as pivotal in shaping their life trajectory (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Denzin, 1989). These pivotal moments often stem from periods of crisis or chaos that require deep reflection on lived experience (Zaner, 2004). Epiphanies may be subjectively defined, but they illuminate how individuals navigate intense situations and how the emotional and cognitive effects of these experiences persist long after the event itself (Ellis et al., 2011).

Similar to autobiography, ethnography focuses on understanding a culture by examining shared values, relationships, practices, and lived experiences, providing both insiders and outsiders a better understanding of the cultural context (Ellis et al., 2011; Maso, 2001). Ethnographers typically engage as participant observers, collecting data through field notes, interviews, observations of communication patterns, use of space, and analysis of cultural artifacts and texts (Geertz, 1973; Malinowski, 1967). These methods allow researchers to interpret how meaning is constructed and maintained within a cultural group.

Figure 2:

Continuum of Autobiography, Autoethnography, and Ethnography



Note. Original Work

Figure 2 shows the conceptual relationships among autobiography, autoethnography, and ethnography as research approaches. On the left, autobiography centers on the individual’s personal experiences and self-narrative. On the right, ethnography focuses on the study of culture and social groups from an external perspective. Positioned in the middle, autoethnography bridges these approaches by integrating both self and culture, allowing the researcher to examine personal experiences within a wider sociocultural context (Poulos, 2021).

Autoethnography builds on ethnographic traditions but centers on the researcher’s personal experiences as a cultural insider. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) write, “Autoethnographers must consider how others might relate to these personal experiences, not only using their methodological tools and research literature for analysis, but also illustrating facets of cultural experience and making the characteristics familiar to both insiders and

outsiders” (p.276). Autoethnographers selectively and retrospectively examine significant experiences, or epiphanies, that emerge from their positionality within a specific cultural context (Ellis et al., 2011). However, autoethnography extends beyond personal storytelling by requiring systematic analysis grounded in theory, methodology, and existing research literature. The analytic framing of lived experience is what distinguishes autoethnography as rigorous qualitative inquiry rather than memoir or narrative alone (Poulos, 2021).

Researcher Positionality Statement

I am positioned to write from an outsider’s perspective, as I am from the West Coast (Geertz, 1973). However, having lived in this community in the South for over ten years, I am uniquely positioned to offer an insider’s perspective, shaped by my experiences with students, teachers, leaders, and community members. These memories have helped develop a body of knowledge about my social interactions. As I seek to understand the meaning of becoming a bilingual leader, autoethnography offers a means to draw on the insider knowledge I can contribute to this field of study. My self-narratives are not “just” stories; they are stories with a purpose- the practice of cultural analysis and critique (Poulos, 2021, p. 13). Therefore, taking on the roles of protagonist, storyteller, and analyst of my own journey is central to this study, as my goal is to cultivate sociocultural insights derived from my interactions, artifacts, and experiences throughout my time as an educator to become an aspiring multilingual leader.

Personal Background and Motivation

My interest in multilingual responsive leadership practices is grounded in my experiences as a bilingual educator working within predominantly monolingual educational contexts. Growing up on the West Coast, I developed an early appreciation for linguistic and cultural differences, which later informed my academic studies in Spanish and my professional work

with multilingual learners in the rural South. These experiences have shaped my understanding of language as an asset and have influenced my commitment to help leaders and educators become more aware of their schools and classrooms as safe spaces for students of all types.

As an educator and aspiring school leader, I have worked closely with multilingual students and their families, gaining insight into the ways educational systems can both support and marginalize learners. These experiences have informed my belief that leadership must be reflective, relational, and responsive to students' cultural and linguistic identities. Through this study, I examine how my lived experiences have shaped my leadership identity and how reflective practice can inform more inclusive and culturally responsive approaches to educational leadership.

Poulos (2021) writes, "Autoethnography arose out of the field of ethnography as a way to include the researcher's experiences and insights more directly into accounts of the scene being studied" (p.4). Anthropologists began practicing ethnography as research around the middle of the 19th century. As they observed, documented, and methodically analyzed individuals and their cultural practices, they created a systematic narrative that enhances our comprehension of the subjects' worldview (Poulos, 2021). One such early ethnographer, Clifford Geertz, examined how his "outsider" status set him apart but how the locals gradually came to trust him, leading to a shift in how they allowed his participation to shape the culture around him (Giddens, 1984). As Geertz sought to write more meaningful descriptions of culture, he developed the method of Thick Description, an intentional approach to writing that animates the scene as a reflection of the culture (Geertz, 1973).

As a qualitative methodology, autoethnography is both distinctive and compelling. It skillfully combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, allowing for the capture of

individual experiences while positioning them within a broader societal and cultural framework (Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). Poulos (2021) states, “If you want to read and write work that dares to tread into territory others have feared to enter, autoethnography is likely already there” (p. 78). Poulos goes on to describe autoethnography as:

An autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experiences of the author and connects the researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues (2021, p.4).

Often characterized as “action research of the self,” autoethnography seeks to document transformative moments or "turning points" from the past, thereby facilitating reflective exploration (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2008). Denzin describes this approach as the act of “reflexively writing the self into the ethnographic text; isolating that space where memory, history, performance, and meaning intersect” (2014, p. 22). Within this context, it is evident that the truth reflected in autoethnographies is inherently dynamic and rarely stable, as memory is an active, continually evolving process (Poulos, 2021). As individuals age or shift their perspectives, their understanding and interpretation of past events and relationships can also change. Consequently, the past remains open to reinterpretation, subsequently influencing the narratives constructed about earlier experiences and the meanings ascribed to them in the present (Bochner, 2013).

The process of conducting autoethnography compels researchers to engage in a critical analysis of their thoughts and beliefs (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). This reflective inquiry encourages them to challenge their own assumptions and assess whether they have adequately

navigated the layers of their defenses, fears, and insecurities in the context of their project (Ellis, 2013, p. 10; Hoppes, 2014). This practice of conscious reflection connects with Paulo Freire's conception of authentic reflection, which states that individuals and their relationships with the world coincide. Freire believed that no entity exists in isolation; rather, each aspect is interdependent. This interconnectedness contributes to an individual's capacity to critically perceive their existence within the world and encourages recognition that reality is in a constant state of change (Freire, 1993, p. 83).

Autoethnography is particularly well-suited to this investigation, as it explores the researcher's trajectory as an aspiring bilingual school leader. The researcher employs various data collection tools, including reflective journal entries, professional artifacts such as presentations, notes, emails, and photographs, educator evaluations, and lived experiences gathered over 18 years within the educational landscape. These experiences span inner-city schools on the Urban West Coast, to rural public schools located in the South, providing a rich basis for inquiry into how personal identity and cultural context shape leadership practices. Beattie's (2024) words align with the researcher's experiences almost perfectly,

My memories would have been incomplete without mentioning these encounters, as they became uniquely embedded in my life, and my perceptions of educational leadership changed by these interactions, as their stories affected my own, and “new selves formed through this constant reconstruction” (Trahar, 2006, p.83).

Not only does re-exploring experiences change how they are perceived, but through constant revisitation and reflexivity, a better, more informed leader is thoughtfully prepared for future situations. Bhattacharya (2017) emphasizes the merit of autoethnography in documenting narratives that are often underrepresented in mainstream research, making it an ideal

methodology for illuminating both the challenges and opportunities encountered in developing multilingual responsive school leadership in the South.

The primary data source for this study is personal photographs, emails, lesson plans, and professional artifacts from past teaching experiences that began on the West Coast and continued as a Spanish and English teacher of multilingual learners in the rural South. These vignettes or narratives were collected through recall, using a process described by Chang (2008) as visualizing the self through introspection. Through recall, the researcher drew on insider knowledge of cultural experiences as both a teacher and an aspiring leader to engage others. The use of autobiographical timelines was a primary recall exercise employed to elicit past experiences and collect personal memory data (Chang, 2008).

As is the nature of the autoethnographic research process, it was not linear. The timelines focus on the past 18 years of this educator's career across multilingual education. It covered three phases: the first seven years as a teacher on the West Coast, the next eleven years as a teacher in the South, and an additional period of experience as a leader and mentor of adult learners. The timelines focus on pivotal experiences in multilingual, multicultural, and leadership, with an emphasis on the recognition, or lack of recognition, of efforts to incorporate multilingual responsive school leadership practices. See APPENDIX 1 for the complete three-phase timeline of data sources.

Figure 3: *Autoethnographic Timeline*



Note. Original Work

Figure 3, is part of the autoethnographic timeline of events. As a teacher, I focused on one main event from each year, including my student teaching, and narrowed the final 7 vignettes based on Saldañas's (2021) Values Coding. To bolster the credibility and depth of the analysis, the study draws on a range of data sources, including school policies, documents, and artifacts relevant to multilingual initiatives. This approach is essential in constructing a robust dataset that captures the complexities surrounding the research topic (Saldaña, 2021). Multi-cycle coding techniques are used to identify recurring patterns and values, thereby revealing how the researcher's lived experiences intersect with larger contextual influences. In particular, this analysis highlights the challenges of fostering inclusive environments for multilingual learners, particularly in resource-

limited rural educational settings. Autoethnography also serves as a tool for social justice, amplifying narratives often overlooked in mainstream academic literature (Ellis, 2004). By incorporating the researcher's lived experiences, this study sheds light on the challenges and opportunities of multilingual responsive leadership in rural contexts. The findings have broader applicability, offering valuable insights for other rural settings experiencing demographic shifts and increasing numbers of multilingual learners.

Autoethnography was chosen because it emphasizes reflective practice and cultural awareness, making it particularly suitable for studying multilingual responsive leadership. Bhattacharya (2017) notes that autoethnography is often used to document narratives that are underrepresented in mainstream research, making it an ideal methodology for examining the lived experiences of rural southern leaders working to support multilingual learners (ML). Additionally, the insider dialectic central to autoethnography minimizes the biases inherent in outsider perspectives, ensuring that the findings authentically reflect the challenges and opportunities of leadership in rural, linguistically diverse educational settings (Holmes, 2020). By employing an autoethnographic approach to explore how reflexivity, as an aspiring bilingual school leader, influences the implementation of culturally responsive school leadership, the data sources and instrumentation capture the researcher's lived experiences, reflect on professional practices, and connect personal insights to broader cultural and institutional contexts. The primary data sources for this research include reflective journals, professional documents, artifacts, school policies, and anecdotal narratives, each contributing to a rich, multi-faceted analysis of the research question.

In summary, this autoethnographic study presents a unique perspective on the incorporation of bilingual educators into school leadership practices across the South. By

merging self-reflective analysis, examination of professional artifacts, and values coding, the researcher scrutinizes the intricate interconnections between cultural identity and leadership development. The findings from this research make a significant contribution to the growing body of knowledge on multilingual responsive school leadership. They offer practical insights designed to support leaders of rural schools as they navigate the complexities associated with the growing presence of multilingual populations, while also advocating for equity and inclusivity in education.

As demographic diversity continues to rise across educational institutions, the importance of effective leadership that recognizes and leverages this diversity becomes critical. By highlighting the essential role of bilingual and multicultural educators in leadership positions, this study not only enriches the discourse surrounding multilingual education but also underscores the necessity for nuanced, culturally responsive approaches to foster equitable learning environments. Such insights are vital to addressing the systemic challenges that persist in education, particularly in rural settings where resources may be limited, and the need for innovative leadership practices is increasingly pressing.

Research Design

Analysis and Interpretation

This autoethnographic study used Saldaña's (2021) multi-cycle qualitative values coding to analyze a diverse dataset of self-generated, authentic data, including emails, field notes, entries, photographs, and artifacts from professional development, such as agendas, handouts, and personal reflections. Consistent with Saldaña's (2021) guidance that coding is a cyclical, meaning-making process, the data were collected iteratively, with emerging insights informing subsequent coding cycles.

Similar to other autoethnographic studies (e.g., Chang, 2013; Hernandez et al., 2015), the data collection process of this study was autobiographic, dialogic, and ethnographic (Hernandez et al., 2015). Specifically, I collected two data sources commonly used in autoethnographic studies: teaching artifacts (Austin & Hickey, 2007; Brogden, 2008) and vignettes (Humphreys, 2005; Pitard, 2016). Data were analyzed using Saldaña's multi-cycle qualitative coding with a focus on Values Coding (Saldaña, 2021). By revisiting and allowing continuous comparison of new and existing data, an iterative approach identifies emerging values, attitudes, and beliefs found across the vignettes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2021). This analytical process allows the researcher to draw meaningful connections between personal narratives, institutional artifacts, and the broader cultural and social context. Gibson (2015) relates a participant's narrative to a "red thread" that weaves throughout the experience, making connections through codes. This "red thread" comprises the values, beliefs, and attitudes that run through each vignette. Values Coding recognizes individuals, other people, objects, or ideas based on one's thoughts and feelings about them. It examines how these perceptions are shaped by personal values, attitudes, knowledge, experiences, opinions, assumptions, biases, prejudices, morals, and other aspects that contribute to an individual's worldview (Saldaña, 2021). By employing this method, the study aims to uncover insights into the role of multilingual responsive school leadership in fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments for multilingual learners in southern schools.

Alignment with Research Question

The chosen data sources and instruments are well-suited to address the research question: *How do the personal experiences of a bilingual aspiring school leader in the South influence the*

development of leadership identity, strategies for navigating monolingual institutional norms, and perceptions of inclusive educational leadership?

This study comprehensively captures how personal and professional experiences shape multilingual responsive school leadership practices by integrating reflective journals, professional documents, anecdotal narratives, and policy analysis. These sources also provide a foundation for identifying gaps in leadership preparation and professional development, offering actionable insights for improving educational outcomes for multilingual students in southern schools. Through this multi-source approach, the study ensures the credibility, reliability, and depth of its findings, aligning with the goals of autoethnographic research to connect personal experiences with broader cultural and systemic issues in education.

Justification for Methodology

Scholars highlighting the value of reflective, narrative-based inquiry for leadership development further support autoethnography. Beattie (2024) asserts that qualitative methodologies provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the intersection of personal identity, professional practices, and systemic challenges in education. Autoethnography allows the researcher to engage deeply with their own experiences while situating them within broader cultural and institutional contexts, ensuring a balanced analysis of individual and systemic factors affecting multilingual implementation.

For this study, I use vignettes as my primary tool for reflection, drawing on Chang's (2008) definition. Vignettes are personal recollections written in a self-narrative form, allowing me to highlight meaningful moments from my journey as a language educator rather than recounting my entire life story in an autobiography. These reflective narratives will serve as the

central data source within the triadic framework of *auto*, *ethno*, and *graphy*, revealing the inner landscape of my experiences through detailed, emotionally rich storytelling (Poulos, 2021).

Data Collection

The research design integrates multiple data sources to comprehensively explore the research question. In addition to narrative vignettes, I conducted a document analysis to deepen and triangulate my autoethnographic inquiry into multilingual responsive educational leadership. The documents analyzed consisted of artifacts that were personally and professionally influential throughout my leadership journey and directly connected to my advocacy for multilingual students and families. These materials included professional development agendas, district and school-level communications, policies related to multilingual education, family engagement artifacts, and reflective correspondence involving teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians.

Document analysis did not occur in isolation; rather, it was intentionally interwoven with my narrative vignettes and reflexive journal entries to provide a holistic understanding of leadership practices, institutional responses, and social interplay (Gibson, 2015). Using Values Coding as defined by Saldaña (2021), I examined these documents for evidence of values (V), attitudes (A), and beliefs (B) related to multilingualism, inclusive education, equity, leadership responsibility, and family engagement. This approach enabled me to examine how both my own leadership actions and those of the institutions with which I interacted reflected—or conflicted with—stated commitments to multilingual responsive education.

The following table outlines the document categories analyzed in this study and their alignment with Values Coding (Saldaña, 2021), highlighting how each data source contributed to the identification of values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Table 1

Document Categories and Values Coding Alignment

Document Category	Purpose of Review	Values Coding Focus and Insights
State and Federal Policies Related to Multilingual Education	Reviewed to situate the study within current legal and educational frameworks for multilingual learners	Values Coding identified institutional beliefs regarding accountability and compliance, revealing how policy language influences leadership decision-making and shapes school-level attitudes toward multilingual students and families
District-Level Professional Development Agendas	Analyzed to examine district priorities related to multilingual inclusion, leadership development, and professional responsibility	Values Coding indicated whether professional development efforts reflected authentic commitments to multilingual support or functioned primarily as procedural compliance measures
School-Level PLC Agendas	Examined to understand collaborative practices and educator engagement with multilingual learner support	Values Coding revealed shifts in collective beliefs about shared responsibility, teacher efficacy, and the role of collaboration in serving multilingual populations
Training Materials Related to Multilingual Instructional Practices	Reviewed to explore how instructional strategies and theoretical frameworks are communicated to educators	Values Coding highlighted underlying beliefs about language acquisition, scaffolding, and culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as the extent to which these translated into classroom practice
Communications with Families, Teachers, and Students	Analyzed as qualitative artifacts reflecting lived experiences and relational dynamics within the school community	Values Coding showed evolving attitudes toward family engagement, trust, and belonging, particularly for multilingual families navigating educational systems

Note. Original Work

Data Analysis

By applying Values Coding to document analysis, I triangulated institutional narratives with lived experiences captured in my vignettes, thereby strengthening the study's credibility and trustworthiness. This process made visible the alignment, and misalignment, between stated educational values and enacted leadership practices, reinforcing autoethnography's capacity to critically examine systems through personal, relational, and cultural lenses.

Addressing the Research Question

The autoethnographic design allows an in-depth examination of how the researcher's identity and experiences influence their leadership practices. Reflexivity and multi-cycle coding provide insights into how decision-making and multilingually responsive practices are shaped, while professional artifacts and policy documents contextualize these practices within institutional frameworks. Vignettes enrich the analysis by highlighting the real-world applications, current trends, and challenges faced by school leaders who struggle to support multilingual learners in the South.

By integrating these data sources, the study will answer the research question by demonstrating how the researcher's lived experiences contribute to the development and implementation of the progression of bilingual educators into school leadership positions, ultimately offering insights into more integrative leadership pathways. This design addresses gaps in leadership preparation and provides actionable insights for developing professional development programs tailored to rural school leaders.

Instruments and Data Sources

- **Journaling Protocol:** A structured journaling protocol guides the reflective writing process, ensuring consistency and depth in capturing experiences related to leadership practices.
- **Document Review Checklist:** A checklist will ensure systematic analysis of policy documents, professional artifacts, and multilingual-related initiatives.
- **Values Coding Framework:** A coding framework will categorize data into values (V:), attitudes (A:), and beliefs (B:), facilitating the analysis of patterns and relationships across the dataset.

This autoethnographic research design is well-suited to exploring the complexities of multilingual responsive school leadership in the Southeastern United States. By combining personal narrative with cultural and institutional analysis, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how reflexivity shapes leadership practices. Using multiple data sources and values coding ensures credibility and depth, while the focus on underrepresented narratives contributes to the broader discourse on equity and inclusion in education. This approach addresses the research question and offers practical implications for enhancing leadership preparation programs and supporting multilingual learners in rural settings.

Sampling Procedure

General Population

The general population for this study comprises school principals and educational leaders working in educational settings across the rural South. These leaders face unique challenges in meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, including multilingual learners. Many southern school principals operate in under-resourced contexts, often without access to the training and professional development needed to implement multilingual responsive school leadership effectively. This broader population reflects the systemic challenges of leadership in schools, particularly as they foster inclusive and equitable educational environments for linguistically diverse students.

Target Population

The target population for this study is narrowed to me as an aspiring bilingual school principal in the South who is directly engaged in supporting multilingual learners. I aim to implement leadership practices aligned with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). My work involves addressing linguistic diversity in my school district, fostering

multilingual responsive environments, and supporting teachers and students in navigating the unique challenges of education in the South. The study focuses on my journey to become a bilingual, aspiring school leader operating in communities where the population of ML is rapidly growing, creating demand for leadership strategies that promote inclusive school practices and culture.

Study Sample

The study sample consists of the researcher, a Caucasian female originally from the West Coast, as the primary participant. The researcher uses an autoethnographic approach to reflect on personal experiences as an aspiring bilingual school leader. This sample is particularly relevant to the research question, which examines how reflexivity influences the researcher's practices in implementing multilingual responsive school leadership. At the same time, she achieves her goal of becoming an educational leader. As the researcher draws on her 18-year career in education, spanning experiences in both urban and rural settings, the sample offers a unique lens for exploring the complexities of leadership in the South.

Sample Size

The sample size in autoethnographic studies is inherently limited to the researcher as the primary participant. However, this approach is justified by its focus on in-depth, reflective analysis. Autoethnography is a qualitative method designed to explore personal narratives and their connection to broader cultural and institutional contexts, making a single-participant sample appropriate. Furthermore, comparable empirical studies using autoethnography emphasize the depth of analysis and the ability to uncover underrepresented narratives, as evidenced by my own journey as an aspiring bilingual leader in rural settings (Ellis, 2004; Holmes, 2020).

Sampling Procedures

The study used a purposeful, criterion-based sampling procedure consistent with autoethnographic methodology. Instead of selecting multiple participants, the researcher served as the primary participant, intentionally selecting lived experiences, critical incidents, and professional artifacts that were directly correlated to the research question and theoretical framework. Experiences were selected based on their alignment with leadership development, multilingually responsive practice, and interactions with multilingual learners within K-12 educational settings in the South.

Site Authorization

While this study does not involve additional participants or data collection in external settings, professional artifacts and documents related to the researcher's work in the rural South schools will be included. With the school site principal's approval, site authorization was obtained to review and analyze institutional policies, training materials, and initiatives related to multilingualism. All such materials are de-identified to maintain confidentiality.

Inclusion Criteria

The study's inclusion criteria focus on the researcher's experiences and professional background, which align with the research question. The researcher must be directly involved in leadership practices that address the needs of multilingual learners and reflect on these practices through the lens of multilingual responsive school leadership. The artifacts and documents included in the analysis will be relevant to inclusive school initiatives and to the researcher's professional journey.

Confidentiality Measures

All documents and artifacts used in this study will be de-identified to ensure confidentiality, removing any personally identifiable information related to students, staff, or

school sites. Reflective journals and professional materials will be stored securely, with access limited to the researcher. The data presented in the study will focus on values coding analysis and patterns, avoiding the disclosure of sensitive or identifiable details. These measures align with ethical research standards and protect the privacy of individuals and institutions connected to the study.

This study leverages the depth and reflexivity inherent in autoethnographic research by focusing on the researcher as the primary participant. The purposive sampling approach ensures relevance to the research question, while confidentiality measures and site authorization procedures safeguard the ethical integrity of the study. This design presents a unique opportunity to explore how reflexivity impacts leadership practices and contributes to a deeper understanding of multilingualism in the South's educational context.

Instrumentation

Overview of Instrumentation

This study utilizes autoethnography as its primary qualitative research method. Autoethnography is a deeply personal and reflective approach that explores the researcher's lived experiences within a broader cultural and social context. Holmes (2020) describes autoethnography as an "insider's view of reality," emphasizing how cultural norms, values, and customs shape behavior and meaning (p. 5). By adopting this insider perspective, researchers can reduce the biases that often accompany outsider interpretations, thereby fostering a more nuanced understanding of social dynamics. This approach aligns with scholars such as Beattie (2024) and O'Reilly (2012), who underscore the importance of cultural relativism in qualitative research and the value of examining phenomena through the perspectives of those directly involved.

Reflective Journaling

Reflective journaling is one data-collection method in this study. Journals are structured to capture the researcher's thoughts, decisions, and experiences in implementing inclusive practices. This instrument offers a rich narrative of the researcher's journey, providing insights into the challenges and successes of fostering inclusive learning environments for multilingual learners (ML).

The journaling process follows a guided protocol with prompts that encourage critical reflection on key aspects of leadership, such as inclusive school programs, cultural awareness, and decision-making. This structured approach enhances data validity by ensuring consistency and depth across entries. Qualitative research has widely recognized reflective journaling as a reliable instrument for exploring the interplay between personal identity and professional practice (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Holmes, 2020).

Professional Artifacts

Professional artifacts, including presentations, emails, meeting agendas, training materials, and notes, serve as supplementary instruments that provide tangible evidence of multilingual strategies and related initiatives (Ellis, 2004). These artifacts offer a contextual understanding of how multilingual responsive school leadership is operationalized in southern school settings. The researcher can identify the alignment (or misalignment) between institutional policies and leadership practices by analyzing these materials. The selection of artifacts is guided by their relevance to the study's research question and their potential to illuminate the broader cultural and institutional context. These materials, along with reflective journals and anecdotal narratives to enhance the study's reliability and provide a comprehensive perspective on the researcher's leadership practices.

Policy Documents and Analysis

Policy analysis focuses on existing frameworks, such as the Alabama Framework for English Learner Success (ALFELS) and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). These documents provide a benchmark for evaluating the researcher's leadership practices within statewide and national expectations for equity and cultural responsiveness.

The policy analysis instrument's structure involves a checklist of criteria derived from the research question, including the presence of asset-based practices, inclusive-focused strategies, and support mechanisms for ML. This approach ensures the analysis is systematic and aligned with the study's objectives. Educational research extensively uses policy documents to contextualize findings and assess alignment with broader institutional goals (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Vignettes

The vignettes were carefully selected from the researcher's interactions with teachers, students, and community members to provide additional data. These narratives, or "recovered memories" (Ellis, 2004; Poulos, 2021), illustrate real-world applications and highlight the relational aspects of leadership. The vignettes are analyzed using Values Coding, alongside reflective journals and artifacts, to uncover recurring values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldaña, 2021).

Validity

Ensuring validity is a critical component of this autoethnographic study, as it establishes the accuracy and credibility of the findings. In qualitative research, validity refers to the extent to which the data accurately represent the phenomena under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This

study employs a multifaceted approach, including coding, structured data-collection instruments, and a transparent, reproducible methodology to ensure validity.

Coding

The coding process adheres to Saldana's (2021) best-practice guidelines. The process employs a first coding cycle in which I applied descriptive codes to selected memories identified in the data (see APPENDIX 1 for an illustration of this cycle). The second cycle coding involved reorganizing and refining the codes to identify broader categories related to values, attitudes, and beliefs. Reflective journals, professional artifacts, policy documents, and vignettes are analyzed collectively to provide a comprehensive perspective of my experiences as an aspiring bilingual school leader. By comparing insights across these diverse sources, the study ensures that the data is consistent and aligned with the research objectives, reducing potential bias or misrepresentation.

Structured Data Collection

The use of structured instruments enhances the reliability and accuracy of the data. For example, reflective journals follow a guided protocol with prompts that focus on codes aligned with my values regarding inclusive, multilingual responsiveness and leadership practices. Similarly, professional artifacts are selected and analyzed based on a checklist of relevance criteria, ensuring that only pertinent materials contribute to the findings. Policy analysis employs a standardized framework aligned with the study's focus on multilingual learner support. These structured methods ensure the data are systematically collected and analyzed, contributing to the study's validity.

Transparency and Reproducibility

The methodology and data collection processes are thoroughly documented to ensure further validity, thereby allowing for transparency and reproducibility. Appendices include sample journal entries (APPENDIX 2), the artifact review checklist (APPENDIX 3), and the steps I took to recover memories and to apply Saldaña's (2021) Values Coding Roadmap (APPENDIX 4), providing a clear, step-by-step method for replicating the study. These documents outline the processes used to collect and analyze data, providing future researchers with the tools to reproduce or build upon this work.

Reflexivity

As autoethnography is inherently reflective, the researcher's reflexivity is key in maintaining validity. By critically examining personal biases, values, and assumptions, the researcher ensures that the findings authentically represent the interplay between personal experiences and broader cultural and institutional contexts. Reflexive journaling and transparent reporting of the researcher's positionality further strengthen the validity of the data. Furthermore, through triangulation, structured instrumentation, and transparency, this study ensures that the data are accurate, credible, and reflective of the research question. By referencing appendices that detail the methodological tools and processes, the study provides a robust framework for reproducibility, contributing to the validity and reliability of its findings.

Reliability

Reliability in qualitative research, particularly in autoethnography, is centered on consistency and transparency rather than traditional notions of generalizability or validity. Given the subjective nature of autoethnographic research, reliability is grounded in the researcher's reflexive practices and a systematic approach to data collection and analysis. As Starr (2010) explains, "autoethnographic cogency" replaces the traditional notion of validity, focusing instead

on the researcher's engagement in reflexive examination and the transparency of their interpretations. This concept aligns with the principles of reliability in autoethnography, emphasizing the consistency and trustworthiness of the research process.

Structured Instruments and Procedures

Structured instruments, such as journaling protocols, artifact review checklists, and policy analysis frameworks, provide consistency in data collection and analysis (Patton, 1990). Reflective journaling, for instance, follows a standardized set of prompts designed to elicit insights on culturally responsive leadership, equity, and multilingual learner (ML) support. Similarly, artifact reviews are guided by predetermined criteria to ensure that all professional materials analyzed are relevant and aligned with the study's objectives (Ortlipp, 2008). This systematic approach ensures that the collected data are dependable and reflect the research focus.

Reflexivity and Transparency

Autoethnography relies heavily on the researcher's reflexivity to maintain reliability. Reflexive journaling ensures that the researcher critically examines their biases, assumptions, and positionality throughout the study. Transparency in documenting interpretations further strengthens the trustworthiness of the research. By reflexively examining the data, the researcher aligns with Starr's (2010) concept of "autoethnographic cogency," ensuring that the findings are credible and coherent.

Documentation and Reproducibility

The study's methodology and analytical processes are thoroughly documented to enhance transparency and reproducibility. Appendices provide detailed descriptions of the journaling prompts, artifact review checklist, and thematic coding framework, enabling future researchers to replicate or build upon the study with confidence. This level of documentation demonstrates the

researcher's commitment to reliability by ensuring that the methods are clear and consistent. Reliability in autoethnographic research is achieved through reflexivity, transparency, and the use of systematic procedures. By adopting structured instruments, triangulating multiple data sources, and engaging in reflexive practice, the researcher ensures trustworthiness and coherence of the findings. Incorporating Starr's (2010) concept of "autoethnographic cogency" underscores the importance of critically examining the meanings in the data and maintaining transparency in interpretations (see chapter 5), thereby further reinforcing the study's reliability.

Data Collection and Management

Data Collection Procedures

This study employs an autoethnographic methodology, focusing on the researcher's reflective exploration of personal experiences in her journey to become a bilingual school leader. Data collection involves multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the research question: *How do the personal experiences of a bilingual aspiring school leader in the South influence the development of leadership identity, strategies for navigating monolingual institutional norms, and perceptions of inclusive educational leadership?*

The primary sources of data include:

1. **Reflective Journals:** The researcher maintains detailed journals documenting experiences, decisions, and reflections related to leadership practices. These journals are focused on exploring themes such as equity, cultural responsiveness, and multilingual learner (ML) support.
2. **Professional Artifacts:** Presentations, meeting notes, training materials, and other documents relevant to CRSL initiatives are collected to provide additional context and evidence of professional practices.

3. **Policy Documents:** Educational policies, including the Alabama Framework for English Learner Success (ALFELS) and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), are analyzed to align the researcher's experiences with established leadership frameworks.
4. **Vignettes:** Observations and narratives from interactions with teachers, students, and community members are documented to highlight real-world applications of multilingual responsive school leadership principles.

Reproducibility of Data Collection

To ensure reproducibility, the data collection process is guided by structured protocols:

- **Journaling Protocol:** Consistently reflecting on multilingual, leadership, students with limited English proficiency, and professional development across journal entries to ensure that all reflections address the study's core themes.
- **Artifact Review Checklist:** A standardized checklist is applied to evaluate the relevance and alignment of professional artifacts with the research objectives.
- **Policy Analysis Framework:** A systematic approach is used to assess how policies support or challenge the implementation of PSEL 3.
- **Narrative Documentation:** A written record through vignettes is recorded consistently, capturing the context, participants, and key observations for each vignette.

Procedures for Informed Consent

As the study focuses on the researcher's own experiences and does not involve other participants, traditional informed consent procedures are not applicable. However, the study relies on professional artifacts and documents associated with the researcher's leadership role. If any artifacts include sensitive information or references to other individuals, explicit permission

will be sought from relevant stakeholders, such as school administrators or district officials, before including these materials in the study.

Procedures for Protecting Participants

All data will be anonymized to protect individuals who are indirectly associated with the study, such as colleagues or students mentioned in professional artifacts or written vignettes. Names, locations, and other identifying details will be removed or generalized to ensure confidentiality. The study adheres to ethical guidelines for qualitative research by prioritizing the privacy and dignity of all individuals connected to the data.

Data Security Procedures

Data security is a critical component of this study, ensuring that all collected information is stored and managed securely:

- **Digital Data:** Reflective journals, digital artifacts, and policy documents are stored on a password-protected computer and backed up on an encrypted external drive.
- **Physical Documents:** Any printed materials, such as meeting notes or training manuals, are stored in a locked file cabinet accessible only to the researcher.
- **Anonymization:** Data is de-identified prior to analysis to prevent the disclosure of sensitive or personally identifiable information.
- **Access Control:** Only the researcher has access to the data, and all files will be securely deleted or destroyed upon completion of the study.

The data collection and management procedures outlined above ensure that this autoethnographic study is conducted ethically, securely, and reproducibly. By adhering to structured protocols, prioritizing confidentiality, and implementing robust data security measures, the study maintains the integrity of its findings while protecting the privacy of

individuals and institutions connected to the data. These measures align with best practices in qualitative research, ensuring a reliable and ethical approach to examining multilingual responsive school leadership in rural educational schools.

Ethical Considerations

This study follows strict ethical standards to protect individuals and institutions involved in the research. As an autoethnographic study centered on the researcher's experiences, it also examines professional artifacts, policy documents, and narratives that may reference colleagues, students, or community members. Consequently, maintaining anonymity, confidentiality, and data security is crucial.

Ethical Issues and Procedures

Although there are no direct participants, ethical concerns could arise if individuals are identifiable, particularly in contexts involving multilingual learners (ML) or culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL). All references to individuals, schools, and communities are anonymized to mitigate these risks.

To protect anonymity and confidentiality, the study employs several measures:

- **Anonymization:** Removing or generalizing names and identifying details in reflective journals and narratives.
- **Generalization:** Using broader descriptions instead of specific details about schools or communities.
- **Consent for Artifacts:** Obtaining permission from stakeholders for sensitive professional artifacts.
- **Ethical Reporting:** Presenting findings in a way that respects the dignity and privacy of all involved.

Data management procedures include:

- **Secure Storage:** Digital data is stored on a password-protected computer with encrypted backups, and physical documents are kept in a locked cabinet.
- **Controlled Access:** Only the researcher has data access, and all data will be securely deleted after the study.
- **De-Identification:** Data is de-identified before analysis to ensure no identifying information is included in reports.

Ethical Oversight

The study adheres to institutional ethical guidelines and will be reviewed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) if necessary. By prioritizing anonymity, confidentiality, and secure data management, this study addresses ethical concerns while contributing valuable insights into culturally responsive school leadership without compromising the privacy of those involved.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study assumes that readers understand and value the importance of multilingualism in educational contexts. Furthermore, it assumes that the researcher's autoethnographic narrative offers insights into the complexities of multilingually responsive school leadership in southern schools. These assumptions are integral to the research process, as they ensure that the data collected reflect the lived realities of educational leaders navigating diverse, multilingual student populations. By grounding the inquiry into tangible experiences rather than theoretical abstraction, the study aligns itself with the contextual intricacies of leadership practices in underserved rural settings. The use of autoethnography as a recognized qualitative method for

exploring personal narratives in educational research supports these assumptions (Ellis et al., 2011).

Limitations

The limitations may impact the scope and applicability of this study. First, the focus on a specific geographic region, rural southern schools, inherently limits the generalizability of findings to other settings, such as urban or suburban schools. Rural schools face unique challenges in serving multilingual learners, and the study's emphasis on this context may not capture the broader experiences of school leaders in more diverse or resource-rich environments.

Second, autoethnography as a methodology relies heavily on personal narratives. While this approach provides deep insights into the researcher's lived experiences, it may not comprehensively represent the full range of practices among all rural principals in the South. Additionally, the subjective nature of the data introduces the potential for bias, as personal perspectives and interpretations shape the analysis (Patton, 1990).

Third, this study's literature review primarily covers the past 12 years (2014–2026). While this ensures the research is grounded in contemporary findings, it may limit the study's scope by excluding older foundational works that could provide additional context or insights.

Delimitations

This study deliberately focuses on rural southern schools to explore multilingual, responsive school leadership in depth within a specific context. This geographic restriction allows the study to highlight the unique challenges multilingual learners and school leaders face in rural school settings. By concentrating on these underserved communities, the research seeks to address gaps in the literature that often overlook rural schools in favor of urban or suburban settings.

Additionally, the use of autoethnography as the primary methodology constitutes a delimitation. This approach prioritizes the researcher's personal experiences over more quantifiable data, enabling a reflective and nuanced analysis of inclusive, multilingual, and responsive school practices. However, this focus on individual vignettes means the findings may not be generalizable to all educational leaders or contexts.

Efforts to Minimize Limitations

To address the limitations of subjective data collection, this study draws on a range of data sources, including reflective journals, professional artifacts, policy documents, and memory recall. This approach enhances the reliability of the findings by offering a comprehensive perspective on multilingually responsive school leadership practices.

While the study focuses on the rural South, the findings are intended to offer insights that can inform broader discussions of inclusive educational leadership in similar underserved contexts. Furthermore, the study aligns its findings with frameworks such as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), which ensures its relevance to the discourse on educational leadership.

This study has certain limitations related to its geographic focus, methodology, and reliance on subjective data. However, these constraints are intentional and necessary to address the specific research objectives. By narrowing its scope and utilizing autoethnography, the research offers deep, contextually rich insights into the challenges and opportunities of culturally responsive and sustaining leadership (CRSL) in rural southern schools. The efforts to enhance the reliability and applicability of the findings ensure that the study contributes meaningfully to the broader field of educational leadership for multilingual learners.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 detailed the methodology used in this study, which is an autoethnographic approach to explore the central research question: *How do the personal experiences of a bilingual aspiring school leader in the South influence the development of leadership identity, strategies for navigating monolingual institutional norms, and perceptions of inclusive educational leadership?*

This chapter outlines the research design, data collection and management procedures, analysis techniques, and ethical considerations to ensure a comprehensive and reliable exploration of the research question. By grounding the study in the researcher's lived experiences, the methodology aligns with qualitative research principles prioritizing reflexivity, cultural context, and the nuanced dynamics of leadership in rural educational settings. The chapter began by justifying the choice of autoethnography as the primary research method, emphasizing its suitability for examining personal narratives in cultural and institutional contexts. It then described the instruments and data sources, including reflective journals, professional artifacts, policy documents, and vignettes, which collectively constitute a rich, multifaceted dataset. Data collection and management procedures, including secure storage, anonymization, and triangulation, were also detailed to ensure credibility and ethical compliance.

Key Points

1. Research Design and Rationale

The study employs autoethnography to provide an outsider's view from an “insider’s view of reality” (Holmes, 2020, p. 5), allowing the researcher to connect personal experiences to broader cultural and institutional challenges in multilingual leadership.

The methodology is justified by reference to the existing literature, which highlights the importance of reflexivity and cultural awareness in qualitative research (Bhattacharya,

2017; Ellis et al., 2010). This section establishes the study's foundational framework, aligning the research design with the central question.

2. Instrumentation and Data Sources

Multiple instruments were identified, including reflective journals to capture personal insights (Ortlipp, 2008), professional artifacts to provide contextual evidence, policy documents to ensure alignment with institutional standards, and anecdotal narratives to illustrate the practical applications of multilingual principles. This section aligns with the research design by ensuring data collection methods are consistent with the autoethnographic approach.

3. Data Collection and Management

Detailed data collection procedures were presented, including the use of structured protocols for reflective journaling, artifact review, and policy analysis. These procedures emphasize transparency and reproducibility, thereby ensuring the study's credibility. Data security measures, including password protection, encrypted backups, and anonymization, align with ethical research standards and further reinforce the integrity of the methodology.

4. Data Analysis Procedures

The chapter outlined a values coding approach for analyzing the collected data, focusing on recurring patterns and themes that address the research question. The alignment between the analysis procedures and the research question ensures that findings are directly tied to the study's objectives. Triangulation strengthens the reliability and depth of the analysis, connecting insights across data sources.

5. **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues related to confidentiality, data security, and the use of professional artifacts were addressed comprehensively. Anonymization and secure data storage ensure that individuals and institutions indirectly referenced in the study are protected. These measures align with broader ethical guidelines in qualitative research and contribute to the study's trustworthiness.

6. **Limitations and Delimitations**

The study's limitations, such as its focus on the rural South and reliance on autoethnography, were acknowledged and contextualized. Delimitations, including the decision to focus on personal lived experiences, were justified as intentional choices aligned with the research objectives. Efforts to mitigate these limitations include alignment with established frameworks such as PSEL.

In conclusion, Chapter 3 explained how autoethnography was employed and that Saldaña's (2021) Values Coding served as the analytical mode, while Chapter 4 presents the study's findings. By detailing the methodology, it establishes how the data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Chapter 4 will build on this foundation by examining the identified coding patterns and offering a deeper understanding of how my reflexivity shapes multilingually responsive leadership practices. Through this methodology, the study provides valuable insights into the role of reflexivity for aspiring school leaders, fostering equitable and inclusive leadership for multilingual learners.

CHAPTER FOUR: MAPPING IDENTITY

The heart of this study lies in the authentic reflection of my lived experiences and what they reveal about my evolving identity as a bilingual educator and aspiring school leader. Using an autoethnographic lens, I analyzed 18 years of professional experience as a Spanish and English teacher and an aspiring bilingual leader. These personal narratives, anchored in critical experiences, provided a contextually rich data source for examining how language, identity, and leadership intersect within a predominantly monolingual educational system. While some events left me feeling cultural shock, others sparked a more profound commitment to multilingual leadership; together, these vignettes provide foundational experiences for my personal and professional development. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how autoethnography, as both method and methodology, explains the findings, vignette by vignette, and synthesizes them to reveal cross-cutting patterns that inform multilingual-responsive educational leadership needs in rural southern schools.

Using an autoethnographic methodology, the narrative vignettes are treated as qualitative data rather than personal anecdotes. To ensure analytical rigor and trustworthiness, the vignettes were systematically analyzed using Saldaña's (2021) Values Coding framework. This framework is designed to capture the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the researcher and the data as multilingually and multiculturally situated. This approach moves the analysis beyond subjective reflection by applying a transparent, theory-informed hand-coded process to identify patterns in how meaning, emotion, and belief are constructed across experiences. The vignettes are further contextualized through reflexive journaling and supported by relevant scholarly literature, allowing personal experience to function as a site of cultural analysis rather than an isolated narrative. By explicitly linking lived experience to educational practices and leadership theory,

this analytic process demonstrates that the findings emerge from systematic qualitative inquiry rather than individual opinion, thereby strengthening credibility, dependability, and interpretive validity (Ellis et al., 2011; Patton, 1990; Saldaña, 2021).

To ensure transparency in the analytical process, this chapter begins with an overview of the examination of the selected autoethnographic vignettes using Saldaña's (2021) Values Coding framework. Each vignette was treated as qualitative data and analyzed iteratively for expressed and implicit values (V), attitudes (A), and beliefs (B), followed by reflexive journaling and cross-vignette patterning. This process enabled the examination of personal experiences as culturally and institutionally rather than isolated stories (Ellis et al., 2011). The narrative vignettes progressed through value coding, reflexive interpretation, and pattern identification to generate leadership insights related to multilingual responsiveness.

The analytic process illustrates the use of Saldaña's (2021) Values Coding framework to analyze my autoethnographic vignettes. Narrative experiences were coded for values (V), attitudes (A), and beliefs (B), followed by reflexive interpretation and cross-vignette patterning to generate leadership insights related to multilingual leadership responsiveness.

Data collection for this stage involved three sources: journal entries, emails, and professional development-related artifacts. As the primary participant in this study, I used journal entries as a primary data source. I have been documenting my experiences over the past 4 years. Initially, the journal entries served as a place for me to document, reflect, and "vent" about my experiences in the educational system here in the South. Over time, the journal entries were developed into narratives and used in the data analysis process of this study. I used the narratives to elaborate on my thoughts, reactions, and emotions regarding significant events I experienced during my interactions with students, parents, teachers, educational leaders, and university

professors. To align with the principles of autoethnographic research outlined earlier and to fully express my experiences, I chose to write the stories in the first person. I also hope that readers will connect personally with the narratives and reflect on their own experiences in relation to the stories presented in the data analysis section.

My data analysis process involved three recursive steps: coding, categorizing, and narrative construction. Guided by recall and memory visualization in data analysis (Chang, 2008), I began by reading through my journal entries and assigning initial codes. First, I developed descriptive codes to label topics and actions present in the data (Saldaña, 2021). These descriptive codes were applied to individual sentences and, when appropriate, to larger segments of text.

Next, I reread the data and applied values coding to identify emerging patterns connected to my research question. During this stage, I paid particular attention to significant events and to my emotional responses as they unfolded over time. This allowed me to examine not only what occurred but also how values, attitudes, and beliefs shaped my interpretations of those experiences. The following figure illustrates how I applied Saldaña's (2021) Values Coding framework to analyze my autoethnographic vignettes. Narrative experiences were coded for values (V), attitudes (A), and beliefs (B), followed by reflexive interpretation and cross-vignette patterning to generate insights into multilingual responsiveness.

Table 2

Values Coding for Vignette #1

Narrative Excerpt	Code Type	Example Code	Rationale
“I was used to individuals being respected, regardless of race, culture, religion, or sexual orientation.”	V	V: Inclusivity & respect	Expresses a core value shaped by prior cultural context
“I was struck by the South’s deep-rooted societal divisions and cultural stagnation.”	B	B: Culture shapes inclusion	Reveals a belief about systemic and cultural influences
“I was beginning to wonder if anyone actually cared about what I was teaching all day.”	A	A: Isolation / Self-doubt	Reflects emotional response to lack of leadership engagement
“He seemed pleasantly surprised to see the students working diligently.”	B	B: Deficit assumptions about language classrooms	Suggests implicit beliefs about rigor and language learning
“He discreetly slipped out the door without a sound.”	A	A: Avoidance	Interpreted affective behavior signaling discomfort
“I left feeling blindsided by his inability to see what I was teaching.”	A	A: Frustration	Emotional reaction to misalignment of values
“Proper rigor looks different when students are learning a new linguistic system.”	B	B: Rigor is contextual	Pedagogical belief grounded in language acquisition
“I felt anxious about my job security.”	A	A: Fear / Vulnerability	Affective response shaped by power dynamics
“Principals are often ill-prepared to address multilingual needs...”	B	B: Leadership preparation gap	Belief supported and strengthened by literature
“I have made it my mission to advocate for practices that validate linguistic diversity.”	V	V: Advocacy for multilingualism	Declared leadership value and moral commitment

Note. Original Work

The values codes from Table 4.1 come from vignette #1. After writing the vignette, I went back through and analyzed the words or phrases that related to overarching values (V), attitudes (A), and beliefs (B).

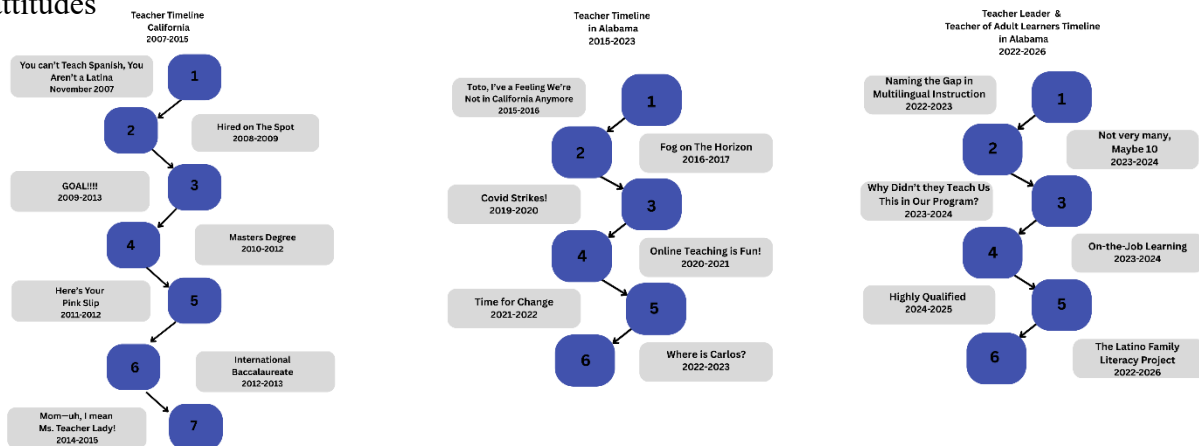
In the next stage of analysis, I developed analytic categories and organized the data accordingly, focusing on broader social and cultural themes across experiences. After reviewing my journal notes and entries, I composed short narrative vignettes to capture the complexity of my experiences related to language, identity, and educational leadership within a predominantly monolingual educational system in the South. Throughout this process, I engaged in sociological inspection and emotional recall (Ellis, 1999) to situate personal experiences within their social and cultural contexts. These strategies were particularly important when revisiting events that occurred several years prior. Finally, I selected and revised the vignettes to present them in a concise yet critical and evocative manner that foregrounds the reader's meaning-making.

These vignettes were collected through recall, using a process described by Chang (2008) as visualizing the self through introspection. Through recall, I drew on my insider knowledge of cultural experiences, as both a teacher and an aspiring leader, to engage others. The use of autobiographical timelines was a primary recall exercise employed to elicit past experiences and collect personal memory data (Chang, 2008). As with the autoethnographic research process, it was not linear.

Figure 4

Full Autoethnographic Timeline

attitudes



The timelines focus on the past 18 years of my career across multilingual education. It covered three phases: the first seven years as a teacher on the West Coast, the next eleven years as a teacher in the South, and an additional period of experience as a leader and mentor of adult learners. The timelines focus on pivotal experiences in multilingual, multicultural, and equity leadership, with an emphasis on the recognition, or lack of recognition, of efforts to incorporate multilingual and multicultural responsive school leadership practices. See APPENDIX 1 for the complete three-phase timeline of data sources.

The table below presents seven vignettes selected for data collection in this study, along with their timelines and secondary artifacts used to enrich my understanding of the experiences.

Table 3
Seven Critical Vignettes and Their Artifacts

Vignette #	Title	Timeline	Artifacts
1	Fog on the Horizon	Teaching in the South 2015-2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>literature/fact checking</i> • <i>member checking</i>
2	Where is Carlos?	Teaching in the South 2022-2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>literature/fact checking</i> • <i>member checking</i> • <i>journal</i>
3	Naming the Gap in Multilingual Instruction	Teacher Leader & Adult Educator 2023-2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>journal</i> • <i>photographs</i> • <i>presentation/slideshows</i>
4	Not Very Many, Maybe 10	Teacher Leader 2023-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>journal</i> • <i>lesson plans</i> • <i>fact checking</i>
5	On-the-Job Learning	Teacher Leader 2023-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>literature/fact checking</i> • <i>journal</i> • <i>emails</i>
6	The Latino Family Literacy Project: Part One	Adult Educator 2022-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>journal</i> • <i>photographs</i> • <i>literature/fact checking</i> • <i>presentation/slideshows</i>
7	The Latino Family Literacy Project: Part Two	Adult Educator 2023-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>journal</i> • <i>photographs</i> • <i>literature/fact checking</i> • <i>presentation/slideshows</i>

Note. Original Work

Table 3 depicts the seven vignettes selected for data collection in this study, along with their timelines and secondary artifacts used to enrich my understanding of the experiences. This table organizes these critical events and shows when they occurred over the past eighteen years.

Introduction to Vignette #1

Vignette #1 describes a memory from my first year of teaching in the South. Moving to the rural south in 2015 exposed me to a different cultural landscape that challenged many of my assumptions about multilingualism and inclusion. I was used to individuals being respected, regardless of race, culture, religion, or sexual orientation. Instead, I was struck by the South's deep-rooted societal divisions and cultural stagnation (Cardoza, 2024). As a white female teaching Spanish and English to non-native English Language Learners (ELL), I encountered greater levels of skepticism and misunderstanding from colleagues and community members than I had anticipated. This is one of my first memories as a teacher at Southern Pines High School.

Vignette #1: “Fog on the Horizon”

It was mid-fall, and I was still adjusting to the early South mornings when the streets were covered in fog. This fog was different from what I was used to on the West Coast, where you needed two sweaters to fend off the cold whenever fog was near. Here, it rose from the humid, sweaty earth. I was certainly missing the cold fall weather with the brightly colored trees. I had been teaching for nearly three months when the principal finally paid me an unexpected visit to observe my classroom. Up until this point, nobody had even checked on me to see how I was doing. I was beginning to wonder if anyone actually cared about what I was teaching all day. I felt left alone, but couldn't put my finger on why.

The head principal of Southern Pines High School, a fictitious school name to maintain anonymity, entered my Spanish classroom slowly, glancing around at the students as if he feared what might happen next. As he cautiously made his way to the small table nestled in the back of the room, he seemed pleasantly surprised to see the students working diligently or quietly asking

their partner for ideas. He stopped a few times to see what the students were writing in Spanish and casually asked a few students within earshot whether they understood the standard set for the day. He sat quietly in the back for nearly the entire class period, observing and occasionally taking notes, as if to appear professional and engaged.

As I continued teaching and moved around the classroom to check on students, I couldn't help but notice his unease. And then, as if sensing a growing tension, he discreetly slipped out the door without a sound, avoiding eye contact as he left. It felt as though he were trying to escape any dialogue with me, perhaps anxious at the thought of discussing the lesson in Spanish in front of my class. By the end of the observation, a vague sense of discomfort lingered, leaving me worried about the evaluation of my teaching that day.

Later that week, I was summoned to his office to discuss my observation. With that lingering feeling of uneasiness, I begrudgingly made my way to his office. The principal gave me a few good reviews, but for the most part, he said I needed to apply Webb's (1997) Depth of Knowledge framework to my daily lessons to make them more "academically rigorous." I left feeling blindsided by his inability to see what I was teaching in my beginner-level language course. I spent months building relationships, teaching letter sounds, blends, and literacy skills so that these students could read in the target language and demonstrate comprehension by answering open-ended questions. As a language educator, I knew that proper rigor looks different when students are learning to build meaning through a new linguistic system, yet the disconnect between what I was teaching and what he was able—or willing—to see revealed a deeper cultural fog that extended far beyond the humidity outside, signaling the beginning of my journey toward confronting the cultural dissonance that lay ahead.

Reflecting on that situation, I wish I had emphasized that my lesson that day did, in fact, focus on Depth of Knowledge (D.O.K). I feel frustrated that I didn't advocate for myself and explain that I was helping students acquire essential language skills. However, as a new teacher in a different state, I felt anxious about my job security. I now know that what occurred reflects a broader issue many principals face in linguistically and culturally diverse settings. In an article by Khalifa et al. (2016), they write, "Similarly, principals have been found to be unprepared to lead in diverse school contexts and unable to articulate meaningful discourse around diversity" (Young et al., 2010, as cited in Khalifa et al., 2016). With this knowledge of these principles, I've been better equipped to create an environment in which multilingualism is not merely tolerated but celebrated. Khalifa's seminal research has guided me in recognizing the critical role that educators play in dismantling systemic barriers and fostering a sense of belonging for all students. Consequently, I have made it my mission to advocate for practices that validate linguistic diversity and encourage collaboration among educators, families, and communities to cultivate an inclusive school culture. This holistic approach has been instrumental in driving positive changes in my leadership journey.

Introduction to Vignette #2

The second vignette took place in February 2022, while I was teaching 6th-grade English at a well-regarded elementary school in the South. I had recently switched from teaching high school Spanish to English Language Arts, hoping it would make me more hireable for potential educational leadership roles. Much of this vignette focuses on my perspective on leadership growth as I discover what parental engagement, multilingual mentorship, relationship-building, time, and intentionality can do to impact a child's life. I also dive into how collegiality involves colleagues working together towards a common purpose. Through this experience, I've come to

appreciate the profound difference that a supportive community can make in fostering a positive learning environment for both students and educators alike.

Vignette #2: Where is Carlos?

A new student, whom I will call Carlos to protect his anonymity, arrived from Chile that February and did not speak English. His father was brought to the South to work as an aircraft mechanic at the local airport. Despite his recent arrival and the apparent language barrier, the principal did not exempt Carlos from the mandatory state testing. Because of the timing of his arrival, in the first two months of his arrival, Carlos had to take the ACCESS test from WIDA to determine his English level, along with four state exams (two for English Language Arts and two for math), a daunting task for any student, let alone one struggling with a new language barrier and an unfamiliar educational system.

That morning, sunlight streamed through the classroom windows, illuminating the tense atmosphere as the clock steadily counted down to the exam. I scanned the room, my anxiety rising. Wait, had Carlos returned from the bathroom?

Just then, a classmate approached me with concern etched on his face. “Carlos is in the bathroom,” he whispered. “He will not come out, and I think he’s crying.” My heart sank. I quickly told the students to stand guard as I left my class door open and hurried a few doors down to the bathroom, calling the boy’s name, “Carlos!?” I said, my voice was loud but also trembling. There was no response.

I rushed further down the hall searching for Mr. Williams, the school’s custodian who had worked there for almost 25 years. I knew he had a key to the bathroom stall and thought he might provide Carlos with the support of a male figure in this moment. Mr. Williams always brought a sense of calm wherever he was, and the kids appreciated him for it. Out of breath, I

barely got the words out, “I have a student who is in the boys’ bathroom, but he will not come out. Can you please come and see if he will talk to you?” He grabbed his key rings and walked to the bathroom with a quiet concern on his face.

I waited impatiently as Mr. Williams went into the bathroom, and panic built inside me. Not only did I leave my 6th-grade classroom unattended and out of my sight, but the new student was not responding. Finally, Mr. Williams unlocked the bathroom door, revealing Carlos huddled on the cold tile floor, tears streaming down his face. The burdens of testing and the isolation of not understanding the language had overwhelmed this twelve-year-old boy, pushing him to his limit. He had an upset stomach that led to an accident, soiling his pants before he could reach the toilet. I had no words for him. I just stood there quietly while Mr. Williams reached for him. As Mr. Williams helped Carlos to his feet with gentle encouragement, I had a feeling that the emotional toll had already left traumatic scars on Carlos, Mr. Williams, and me.

Over the following weeks, Carlos started missing school, often absent one or two days each week. His increasing withdrawal left me aware and searching for a way to reach out to him; his absences were a stark reminder of how immense pressure can fracture a young spirit. The thought of him sitting alone in the bathroom lingered in my mind, a cry for help in a world that demanded too much, too soon, from a multilingual student experiencing culture shock and high academic expectations.

My sixth-grade team and I committed to connecting with Carlos during those last few months of school. We agreed that he did not need to take any more standardized tests but instead focus on language skills, building relationships with him and his family, and helping him enjoy school. It happened that I was offering a parental engagement program called The Latino Family Literacy Project that semester, a grant I had been awarded. So, I invited Carlos, his parents, and

his little sister. Each week, we would meet for an hour with like-minded Spanish-speaking parents, grandparents, older siblings, or their friends to come together and learn to read in English. Who would have guessed that the healing salve for a traumatized boy would be bilingual books, candy, music, and food, which may have helped bridge the gap between school and a child who desperately needed to know he would be all right in a new and foreign land. Friendships were formed, and a shared love of literacy emerged. Looking back, I realized that what Carlos needed most was not another test, but a lifeline—proof that someone saw him, believed in him, and refused to let him fade into the system.

Introduction to Vignette #3

The third vignette occurred in the fall of 2023. I was invited to speak as a multilingual consultant at a popular educators' conference. I was stepping into new territory by teaching adults this time. This event captures a pivotal moment in my leadership development, revealing how relational trust and intentional collaboration can influence student success and educator growth. It highlights my evolving understanding that meaningful change in education does not happen in isolation; instead, it emerges when colleagues unite around a shared purpose and commit to learning together. Building on the dissonance and systemic challenges revealed in vignette #1 and the urgent human needs illuminated through my experience with Carlos in vignette #2, this memory continues the journey by demonstrating how collective action and shared responsibility can transform frustration into movement and hope. This vignette explores how professional relationships, collective responsibility, and the courage to confront systemic gaps become essential components of multilingual responsive school leadership.

Vignette #3: Naming the Gap in Multilingual Instruction

I walked into the classroom at the University with a familiar flutter of nerves mixed with purpose. The room was filled with AP English teachers from across the state—experienced, accomplished educators who had gathered to learn strategies for supporting multilingual learners in advanced academic spaces. As I set up my materials, I could sense both curiosity and apprehension hanging in the air, much like the quiet before an approaching storm.

As the session unfolded, I demonstrated practical approaches to scaffolding assignments, adapting assessments, and creating access points for students with still-developing English proficiency. The teachers listened intently, their notes filling the margins of handouts. However, it was when I opened the floor for questions that the emotional undercurrent surfaced.

A teacher in the front row raised her hand, her voice tight with frustration: “Why didn’t we learn any of this in our teacher prep programs?” Another added quietly but urgently, “I have a master’s degree, and no one ever taught me how to support multilingual learners.” Around the room, heads nodded, resignation visible in tired smiles, the questions came faster—“How were we expected to help students succeed without these tools?” “Why does it feel like we’re unprepared to serve the students who need us most?”

Their voices revealed something deeper than professional frustration—an aching recognition that the system had failed both them and the students they cared about. I made eye contact with the regional administrator and noticed the weight of their words, a heavy silence settling across her at the back of the room. It felt as though we were all staring directly into a truth that was uncomfortable but necessary to confront: we were never taught what we most needed to know.

In that moment, I realized that the struggle was not rooted in unwillingness but in the absence of preparation and support. The conversation that followed was raw, honest, and filled

with a shared desire to do better. By the end of the session, we sat together not in defeat, but in solidarity—committed to learning, trying, and advocating for change.

Although I left unsure of how each teacher ultimately transformed their AP classrooms, I felt encouraged knowing that something meaningful had occurred—an awakening that carried both urgency and hope. It reminded me once again why educational leadership requires courage, humility, and a willingness to challenge what has always been done to imagine what could be.

Introduction to Vignette #4

The fourth vignette took place in a setting I will refer to as “Rural High School” in the heart of the South. After struggling and feeling like a failure while teaching sixth grade, I found myself once again interviewing for a Spanish teacher position in the fall of 2023. I was filled with ambition but also anxious about what lay ahead. By this point, I had hoped to be in a leadership position, perhaps as an Instructional Coach or an Assistant Principal, but the right timing and connections had not yet happened for me. As an educator who had moved to the South, I was still seen as an “outsider,” and I could sense this in the way many of my interviews concluded: “You interviewed very well and were a finalist for the position, but we ultimately selected someone else with more experience this time.” This event marked another turning point in my leadership journey, humbling me as an “outsider,” forcing me to confront institutional blind spots and discomfort around multilingual learners, as well as the persistent narrative that their needs were peripheral rather than central to school improvement.

Vignette #4: Not Very Many, Maybe 10

During my interview, the final question came, the one I always fret over with a love-hate type of relationship, knowing it could open the door or close it faster than a greased pig. Still, somehow, I knew it must be asked in the interview process to show conclusion and final

thoughts: “Do you have any questions for us?” I thought to myself for at least what seemed like several minutes, but was probably only 10 seconds, and then the question jumped out: “How many English learners do you have at your school?” Silence enveloped the room, thick with hesitation. The three administrators on my interview panel exchanged glances, their expressions a mix of uncertainty and disbelief. Finally, one ventured a timid response, “Not very many. Maybe 10.” Their cautious estimation hung heavily in the air, a reminder of the disconnect that often plagues schools grappling with a steadily growing population of multilingual learners.

As I dove into my role as a Spanish teacher, a wave of realization crashed over me; this was no mere oversight. The truth became undeniable: the number of multilingual learners was nearly three times that figure, twenty-seven eager minds navigating the turbulent waters of a new language. In my first few weeks at Rural High School, two English teachers approached me, their faces etched with concern and confusion. They each shared their struggles, concerned about the growing presence of a few newly arrived students and their limited ability to communicate. Their questions were as earnest as they were disheartening: How could they possibly assess the work of those who couldn't engage with the curriculum? I felt a fire ignite within me, eager to share the strategies I had employed in my own classroom, differentiated grading, scaffolding, visual aids, lifelines for students adrift in an unfamiliar sea.

Then came the tempest of the 2024 school year, when the school report card plunged like a heavy anchor into the depths of despair. The principal stood before us, a grey cloud of frustration overshadowing his features, his voice thick with concern. The numbers came with disappointment: the school's score was set to plummet from 82 to 77. However, what struck him most was the haunting cause of this decline, the increasing number of multilingual learners, whose struggles had become a stain on the school's performance. The ACCESS test, a cruel

metric of English language proficiency, hung over us, threatening to judge us as inadequate educators.

In the middle of this perceived crisis, I could almost feel the weight of expectation pressing down upon us. The principal sought a lifeline, and I stepped forward, determined to create a ripple of change. “Let me help,” I urged, my heart racing with purpose. He granted me permission to serve as an English Language Learner teacher for four blocks each week, dedicating myself to the very students who needed it most. I relinquished my planning period, feeling every loss of time transform into an opportunity to nurture these burgeoning hearts and minds, and help them conquer the language barrier that lay between them and their dreams.

It was an adjustment, a delicate balancing act that tested my resolve, but with every challenge came a renewed sense of purpose coursing through my veins. I envisioned not just raising the school’s report card score, but also building bridges between cultures, fostering understanding, cultivating a spirit of inclusion, and helping my colleagues who needed a reprieve.

In an email I received from the principal before the end of the school year last year, May of 2025, he shared with me that each multilingual student made *significant* growth on their WIDA ACCESS exam, and two students had even tested out of the program. That principal has since left the school, but I was always grateful for the chance he gave me to step into that role. Without him letting me teach those students, I wouldn’t have been offered the opportunity to teach an English Learner class.

Introduction to Vignette #5

In the summer of 2024, I enrolled in a university course titled “Trends and Issues in Leadership.” Encouraged by my professor, I conducted an Action Research project where I

interviewed several principals and district-level administrators about how they learn various aspects of their jobs. My research focused on understanding how one becomes an educational leader, particularly examining exemplary school leaders in the context of multilingualism. I not only analyzed school report cards but also delved deeper into student demographics related to ML's disciplinary actions.

Vignette #5: On-the-Job Learning

As a new teacher at Rural High School, I was finishing the spring semester when I began my Action Research project. This involved interviewing my principal and the Assistant Superintendent of our school district. I was concerned about coming across as overly eager since I had only recently started my job as a Spanish teacher at Rural High School, but my husband reassured me. He mentioned that Mrs. Adams, the Assistant Superintendent, had previously been the principal at my stepchildren's elementary school and that she is very approachable. Encouraged by his words, I decided to set aside my apprehensions and emailed her to request a telephone or Zoom interview for my research, which would only take about 20 minutes. Her quick response reassured me that she was indeed very approachable, and I felt relieved that she was eager to speak with me.

Mrs. Adams agreed to a Zoom call to answer all my questions and requested to see the questions in advance so she could be well prepared. This was my first interview with an Assistant Superintendent, and I began second-guessing my Action Research topic simply because I was a new teacher in her district. I felt like I had everything to lose. What if I said something wrong or was misunderstood? I had already burned bridges with my last school district by leaving in the middle of the school year, and I couldn't afford to do the same with this new one. One wrong word or look could end my career. I took a giant leap forward in faith that

day, in hopes that I could control my thoughts and attitude for a solid 20-minute interview, for Action Research's sake.

During the Zoom call, Mrs. Adams was very considerate and welcoming. I remember thinking she was very wise and had a lot to say about each question, and that this might be longer than 20 minutes. When she first told me that she had been in education for 35 years, I had to ask her to repeat herself. Why would anyone choose to stay beyond the required 25 years for retirement? After listening to her, I was completely convinced that she could run the Rural School District single-handedly. Over the years, though, she has learned the importance of teamwork. About halfway through our chat, after jotting down nearly two pages of notes, I asked her a particularly challenging question: "Were you adequately prepared in your principal leadership program for dealing with issues related to race and racism in your school?" She chuckled, clearly pondering my question, which just made me more intrigued. After a moment, she sighed deeply and replied, "Not at all. My leadership program didn't prepare me for that. I figured things out by practicing scenarios, shadowing other principals, and teaching myself to build relationships. It was all on-the-job training."

You could see she was reflecting back on her years as a principal, and I could tell she had faced some challenging situations involving race and racism at her school. As we wrapped up the interview, I thanked her sincerely, but I left feeling hungry for more—especially those specific stories about her journey of learning through real experiences. Clearly, there was more beneath the surface that I wasn't going to uncover in just a one-time Zoom interview.

As I reflected on our conversation, I realized my goal was not just to gather information but to truly understand how the leadership of principals and school districts affects students' academic performance and discipline records. What I took away from this experience was that

real leadership development goes far beyond what you learn in the classroom or the titles you hold. Genuine growth happens when adults engage in authentic problem-solving, build relationships based on trust, and apply what they've learned in real-world situations.

This experience resonated with the principles of Knowles' Adult Learning Theory, which emphasize self-direction, relevance, and hands-on learning in adult development. It reminded me of how important collaboration and reflection can be, not just for the leaders themselves but for all the students and families they serve, especially for multilingual students. This was real on-the-job learning, and it inspired me to step out of my comfort zone and advocate with confidence and purpose.

Introduction to Vignette 6

Almost a year later, in the spring of 2025, I finally got the courage to email the Assistant Superintendent, yet again, to ask permission to offer a parental engagement program I had received a grant for. I recently completed her leadership training course for our school district for aspiring leaders who want more information about how our district runs specific programs. She is over federal programs, and I figured, since she already knew me from last year's interview, she might be able to help me get my program started with her backing me up. I had received the grant a few years prior and had even begun implementing the program while teaching at the elementary school the previous year. The grant helped me get certified to teach the Latino Family Literacy Project and provided all the books and supplies needed to fully launch the project at the elementary level. I had one problem, though: I was no longer at an elementary school where I could offer this program. I needed to make meaningful connections to secure buy-in at the district level.

Vignette #6: The Latino Family Literacy Project

Part One

It was mid-April when my classroom phone rang just as the students were rushing into class, the fifth-period bell blaring in the background as I answered. “Hi, Mrs. Sewell, this is Mrs. Adams at the district office. I got your email about the Latino Family Literacy Project and wanted to see if you have any time next week to present it in person and explain it. Also, would it be okay if I bring our district EL Support Specialist along with me?” I tried to slow down my words to sound calm and cool, but I quickly said, “Yes, of course! Please!” I was excited to see what doors might open for our district if we started offering programs that show we care about our ML populations. We set a date for the following week during my planning period, and I began preparing a presentation that would “wow” them.

The following week, I dressed to impress and even had the students help clean the classroom before they arrived. This was my chance to take something that nobody was doing in the South and make it achievable and reproducible by other teachers, leaders, and schools. Mrs. Adams, the Assistant Superintendent, was accompanied by Mrs. Moreno, the district EL Support Specialist. I presented with confidence and enthusiasm that this program could help bring parents into the schools who typically wouldn’t get involved due to language barriers. It was relatively simple; we would offer it once a week for 8-10 weeks. I already had all the books and supplies; I just needed to use the elementary school library for a few hours each Monday night.

After I completed my presentation, they looked at each other, then back at me, almost in shock at how easy the program appeared. Before they started to say anything, I held my hands together like I was praying, “Would it be too much to ask that this start next school year? I could be ready to meet parents at Rural Elementary School’s Open House in August.” They both agreed and praised the program. They even offered to help purchase food, binders, paper, and

supplies for the program. Then, in June, I saw that the Board of Education approved the Latino Family Literacy Project as an official district curriculum. I was beyond excited and, if I'm being honest, a bit nervous for the outcome. I was shocked by how welcoming and open this school district was to all my multilingual recommendations and ideas.

Vignette #7: The Latino Family Literacy Project

Part Two

It is now the end of November 2025 as I write the second part of this vignette, feeling completely satisfied and hopeful for the future of this parental engagement program, the Latino Family Literacy Project, in our school district. We had over 19 parents and 10 children attend several literacy nights. Each night, a principal was present, holding babies and sitting with the parents, which helped build relationships and foster a love of literacy.

One night stands out and has remained vivid in my mind, prompting me to reflect on the challenges multilingual parents face as they navigate an unfamiliar educational system. We were wrapping up our lesson when I invited parents to ask any questions about vocabulary or pronunciation related to the assigned book they would be reading with their children that week. After several moments of silence, a mother raised her hand timidly and asked, so only I could hear, "What does 'caboo-say' mean in English?" I quickly traced back through the book and realized that was not a word related to the book and replied with, "What was the word again- ¿Cuál fue la palabra otra vez? ¿Puede repetirla, por favor? She began to repeat the word and then explained it as best she could in her broken English, "Caboo-say...My daughter told me the teacher made her the 'caboo-say' in class today. I need to know if that was a good or bad thing." I pieced together in my head what she was trying to ask, I repeated "caboo-say" out loud several times, not sure what the word was in English until I remembered that in the primary years

teachers give special jobs to students who are behaving well or showing leadership among their peers. I tried to explain in English that this was a good thing, but the mom didn't see how it connected to the classroom. She looked at me, maybe more confused now, and asked if it was a body part. I laughed and said, "Yes," but then added in Spanish: "Su hija fue reconocida por su buen liderazgo y por trabajar muy duro en sus tareas de clase. Ser el *caboose* significa ser la última persona en la fila, lo que demuestra que es lo suficientemente madura como para apagar las luces y cerrar la puerta después de todos. Es muy bueno ser la primera o la última en la fila, y esa última posición se llama *caboose*." She laughed so hard I had no other response but to laugh with her. Soon, the entire room erupted with laughter. I'm not sure if the other parents understood why we were laughing, but it filled my heart with joy to see this group of parents from all over the world come together and share this moment with us.

I now recognize that this work extends far beyond distributing books or organizing meetings; it is about dismantling barriers that have silenced multilingual families in the South and rebuilding systems in which their voices shape the educational landscape. Establishing parental engagement as a district-wide initiative has affirmed my belief that such leadership matters. When educational leaders create intentional spaces of belonging, we cultivate stronger students, stronger families, and stronger schools. In many ways, this vignette symbolizes the culmination of a journey begun in the fog-covered classrooms of Vignette #1 and the desperate cry for support through Carlos in Vignette #2: a testament to what becomes possible when advocacy, collaboration, and courageous leadership intersect in service of equity.

Table 4.3

Vignette Analysis with Values Coding

Vignette	Values (V:)	Attitudes (A:)	Beliefs (B:)	Leadership Meaning
Vignette 1: Fog on the Horizon	Inclusion, Professional Respect	Uncertainty, Isolation, Self-doubt	Rigor is narrowly defined; multilingual instruction is misunderstood	Leadership awareness begins with recognizing cultural dissonance and institutional blind spots
Vignette 2: Where Is Carlos?	Advocacy, Care, Student Dignity	Moral urgency, Empathy	Testing practices can cause emotional harm	Leadership as ethical responsibility grounded in student well-being
Vignette 3: Why Didn't I Learn This?	Accountability, Professional Responsibility	Frustration, Disillusionment	Preparation programs inadequately prepare teachers for ML	Leadership development is systemic, not individual
Vignette 4: Administrative Interview	Transparency, Accuracy, Equity	Hesitation, Awareness	Leaders may be unaware of multilingual demographics	Leadership requires honest data literacy and reflective inquiry
Vignette 5: On-the-Job Learning	Growth, Mentorship, Courage	Vulnerability, Determination	Leadership competence develops through experience and guidance	Leadership authority expands through proximity and practice
Vignette 6: Latino Family Literacy Project	Family Engagement, Trust, Collaboration	Hope, Commitment	Partnerships strengthen educational outcomes	Leadership through community-centered engagement programs
Vignette 7: Sustaining Change	Sustainability, Shared Responsibility	Optimism, Resolve	Leadership impact must be collective and enduring	Leadership resilience is built over time through shared advocacy

Note. Original Work

The above table outlines a cross-vignette analysis and illustrates how values, attitudes, and beliefs were experienced over eleven years as a bilingual teacher and aspiring leader, and how these experiences helped shape leadership development as a relational, ethical, and multilingually responsive process. By coding the vignettes as data, the analysis demonstrates how leadership identity is shaped over time through reflexivity and advocacy for students historically marginalized by systemic barriers, and the data provides insight into inclusive leadership development. The results will be examined further in chapter five.

This journey is far from over, yet it has solidified my belief in the transformative power of multilingual responsive school leadership. It rekindled my passion for advocating for my teacher-colleagues and students. These experiences were pivotal for me. They underscored the importance of multilingual, responsive school leadership and the critical need for parental engagement programs that equip principals with the tools to serve their teachers, students, and communities. Rural School District also reinforced my belief that, as an aspiring school leader, I could directly address these gaps and advocate for systemic changes that prioritize the needs of minoritized and multilingual learners.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

Chapter Five shifts from narrative presentation to reflective analysis, deriving meaning from the seven autoethnographic vignettes presented in Chapter Four. Drawing on Saldaña's (2021) Values Coding framework, this chapter unpacks how my values, attitudes, and beliefs helped forge a visual connection between the experiences that shaped my aspirations to become a bilingual leader and my navigation of multilingual education in a predominantly monolingual rural context. Through reflexivity, I synthesize data on inclusive, discriminatory, and reflective experiences that have shaped my leadership identity and instructional practice. The chapter situates personal experience within broader institutional and cultural structures, illustrating how leadership clarity emerged through reflection and sustained commitment to multilingual responsive practices. This chapter concludes with implications for instructional leadership, principal preparation, and future research, emphasizing that values-driven leadership is essential to serving multilingual learners amid ongoing educational uncertainty.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this autoethnographic inquiry was to critically examine how my experiences as an aspiring bilingual school leader in the rural South shaped and transformed my assumptions about multilingual education and educational leadership. Through systematic reflection, narrative analysis, and engagement with Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory, this study illuminates how critical self-examination through reflexivity can cultivate multilingual responsive leadership practices while incorporating the Professional

Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). Ultimately, this work deepens understanding of how reflective discourse shapes leadership dispositions, decision-making, and advocacy for multilingual learners across diverse school contexts.

The qualitative method of analysis employed autoethnography to critically examine my lived experiences as data, highlighting how leadership identity, strategies for navigating monolingual institutional norms, and perceptions of inclusive multilingual leadership intersected and evolved over time.

Research Question

The following research question was used in this study:

1. How do the personal experiences of a bilingual aspiring school leader in the South influence the development of leadership identity, strategies for navigating monolingual institutional norms, and perceptions of inclusive educational leadership?

Results

Saldaña's (2021) Values Coding allowed me to identify a golden thread connecting my personal values, beliefs, and attitudes to my leadership development across the vignettes. Using Saldaña's Values Coding revealed a developmental trajectory in my leadership identity over eleven years of professional experience. Patterns across the data indicated that leadership meaning emerged at the intersection of deeply held values, emotional responses, and evolving beliefs about multilingual education. Early vignettes were characterized by uncertainty, isolation, and the recognition of institutional blind spots, revealing how cultural dissonance prompted initial leadership awareness. As the years progressed, moral urgency and empathy grew,

particularly in response to practices perceived as harmful to multilingual learners, positioning leadership as an ethical responsibility grounded in advocacy.

A shift was identified in the later years, from individual frustration toward systemic analysis and collective responsibility. Beliefs about inadequate preparation and limited data literacy evolved into commitments to mentorship, transparency, family engagement, and leadership learning languages. Across the dataset, leadership development was not portrayed as a positional authority but as an intrinsic, relational, reflective, and community-centered process. These findings suggest that multilingual responsive leadership is cultivated through ongoing reflexivity, emotional engagement or awareness, and sustained advocacy rather than isolated professional competencies or achievements.

Commitments to Mentorship

An increasing commitment to mentorship emerged as a significant dimension of my leadership development as the vignettes progressed. Early experiences revealed isolation and uncertainty; however, over time, mentorship became central to building confidence, expanding competence, and sustaining advocacy for multilingual learners. The data suggest that leadership growth was not achieved independently but through relationships that provided both professional guidance and psychosocial support (Irby et al., 2023). This finding aligns with research emphasizing the integration of mentoring and coaching as critical supports for school leaders, particularly in complex or rural contexts (Irby et al., 2023; Salter, 2014; Klar et al., 2024). As reflected in the later vignettes, mentorship functioned as both a developmental scaffold and a relational anchor, reinforcing the belief that effective multilingual responsive leadership is cultivated through sustained, trust-based professional learning partnerships.

Transparency

Across the vignettes, transparency came up as a critical dimension of multilingual responsive leadership, particularly in moments when data, demographics, or institutional realities were obscured or misunderstood. Values coding revealed that hesitancy and uncertainty often accompanied conversations about identifying multilingual learners, assessment practices, and school performance, suggesting that limited data literacy and institutional avoidance can perpetuate inequities (Young et al., 2010; Khalifa et al., 2016). As my leadership identity evolved, transparency became synonymous with ethical responsibility, requiring accurate representation of student demographics, honest reflection on institutional blind spots, and open dialogue about practices affecting multilingual learners. This finding aligns with scholarship emphasizing that effective educational leadership requires ethical clarity, data-informed decision-making, and equity-centered accountability (Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, NPBEA, 2015, p. 11). Similarly, literature on multilingual leadership underscores the importance of making student data visible and engaging in reflective inquiry to challenge deficit assumptions (Kangas & Cioè-Peña, 2023; Khalifa et al., 2016). We see that transparency is not merely procedural; it serves as a catalyst for advocacy and systemic awareness, underscoring that multilingual, responsive leadership depends on truthful representation and courageous dialogue. Leaders who are willing to be vulnerable about their lack of preparation will benefit from asking for help in areas where they need it.

Family Engagement

Through my years of living in the rural South and my experience as a bilingual educator and aspiring leader, family engagement has emerged as a central component of my evolving leadership identity. Early experiences reflected limited institutional structures for meaningful engagement with multilingual families; however, across the vignettes, values of trust,

collaboration, and shared responsibility became increasingly central. Through critical reflection, I began to recognize that deficit-oriented assumptions about multilingual families were embedded in rural southern school systems, prompting a reassessment of my own leadership practices (Coady, 2019; Good et. al., 2010; Yol, 2019). As Mezirow (2000, 2009) asserts, transformative learning occurs when individuals critically examine previously held assumptions and create meaning through reflective discourse.

My experiences engaging with families, particularly through initiatives such as the Latino Family Literacy Project, have shifted my view from seeing family involvement as “difficult” or “ineffective” because of a language barrier to understanding it as relational and co-constructive (Ocampo, 2024). Within the data, family engagement functioned not merely as a strategy but as evidence of transformed leadership assumptions grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared advocacy for multilingual learners.

Leadership Development

The findings demonstrate that educational leadership development emerged as an ongoing, reflective process rather than a static skill set or a given title of authority. Early narratives revealed uncertainty, cultural dissonance, and limited institutional awareness, which served as catalysts for deeper self-examination (Barakat et al., 2018; Miller, 2013; Phillips et al., 2022). Through sustained reflection and lived experience, moments of tension became opportunities for reframing leadership identity. Values coding demonstrated increasing commitments to equity, transparency, mentorship, and shared responsibility, suggesting that leadership growth occurred through relational engagement and iterative meaning-making rather than formal preparation alone (Saldaña, 2021). These findings align with Cashman’s (2017) assertion that leadership development is fundamentally an “inside-out” process, requiring

ongoing self-awareness, authenticity, and alignment between values and practice. In this study, educational leadership development was conceptualized as a dynamic and reflective journey shaped by experience, reflexivity, and an ethical commitment to systemic improvement.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations may impact the scope and applicability of this study. First, the focus on a specific geographic region, the rural South, inherently limits the generalizability of findings to other settings, such as urban or suburban schools. Rural schools face unique challenges in serving multilingual learners, and the study's emphasis on this context may not capture the broader experiences of school leaders in more diverse or resource-rich environments.

Second, autoethnography as a methodology relies heavily on personal narratives. While this approach provides deep insights into the researcher's lived experiences, it may not comprehensively represent the full range of practices among all rural principals in the South. Additionally, the subjective nature of the data introduces the potential for bias, as personal perspectives and interpretations shape the analysis (Patton, 1990).

Third, this study's literature review primarily covers the past 12 years (2014–2026). While this ensures the research is grounded in contemporary findings, it may limit the study's scope by excluding older foundational works that could provide additional context or insights.

Implications for the Field

This study examined how the personal experiences of a bilingual aspiring school leader in the South influenced leadership identity development, strategies for navigating monolingual institutional norms, and perceptions of inclusive educational leadership. The findings offer

several implications for the preparation, support, and ongoing professional development of educational leaders, particularly in rural and linguistically evolving contexts.

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for the field of educational leadership. Principal preparation programs should intentionally include opportunities for candidates to engage in multilingual school leadership through coursework, field experiences, and reflective learning that develop the knowledge and dispositions needed to serve linguistically diverse communities. Formal mentoring systems for aspiring and novice leaders should also create space for mentees to develop a clear vision for multilingual school leadership grounded in equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive practice, by employing Standard #3 from the PSELs (Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, NPBEA, 2015, p. 11).

At the campus level, schools may benefit from expanding traditional LEP processes into more robust Language Placement and Acquisition Committees (LPACs) that continuously monitor students' growth in reading, writing, listening, and speaking while coordinating timely supports.

Schools should further prioritize meaningful opportunities for parental engagement tailored to hard-to-reach populations, recognizing families as essential partners in student success. Family engagement must be repositioned from a compliance-based expectation to a core leadership disposition. The findings demonstrate that authentic partnerships with multilingual families require relational trust, cultural humility, and structural access points for participation (Khalifa et al., 2016). This was evident using the Latino Family Literacy Project materials. Educational leaders should be trained to move beyond deficit narratives and actively co-construct engagement initiatives with families and community organizations (Coady, 2019; Ocampo, 2024).

Finally, districts and campuses should provide educators with accessible opportunities to learn a second language through apps, online platforms, or on-site learning experiences, fostering empathy, cultural competence, and a deeper understanding of the linguistic journeys many students navigate daily.

Collectively, these implications affirm that educational leadership development is relational, reflective, and contextually grounded. In educational leadership, particularly in states experiencing demographic shifts, preparing leaders for multilingual realities demands more than compliance with standards; it requires cultivating ethical clarity, reflective capacity, mentorship systems, transparent data practices, and authentic family partnerships. The findings underscore that leadership identity is not conferred by title (Cashman, 2017) but is constructed through sustained engagement, reflexivity, and advocacy within complex institutional environments.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this autoethnographic study offers insight into the development of leadership identity within a rural, multilingual context in the South, it reflects the perspective of one bilingual aspiring school leader. Future research should expand beyond a single narrative to examine how other stakeholders, such as principals, district leaders, teachers, multilingual families, and policymakers, perceive and enact multilingual school leadership.

Finally, research should analyze principal preparation programs to better understand the extent to which they are preparing future leaders to serve linguistically and culturally diverse school communities. Studies examining coursework, internships, clinical experiences, and leadership standards may reveal how preparation programs cultivate the competencies necessary for multilingual school leadership. Likewise, research should examine mentorship systems to

better understand how they prepare multilingual school leaders, particularly through coaching, induction supports, and opportunities for reflective practice during the transition into leadership roles. By expanding inquiry across stakeholders, preparation programs, mentorship systems, and policy contexts, future scholarship can continue refining the competencies required for effective educational leadership and increase multilingual, responsive leadership across the rural South.

In conclusion, the journey described in this study represents only one story within a much larger need for multilingual leadership in rural schools across the South. It is my hope that these experiences, reflections, and efforts contribute to a growing movement of educational leaders who recognize linguistic diversity as a strength and who are willing to create more inclusive, responsive, and equitable schools for all students.

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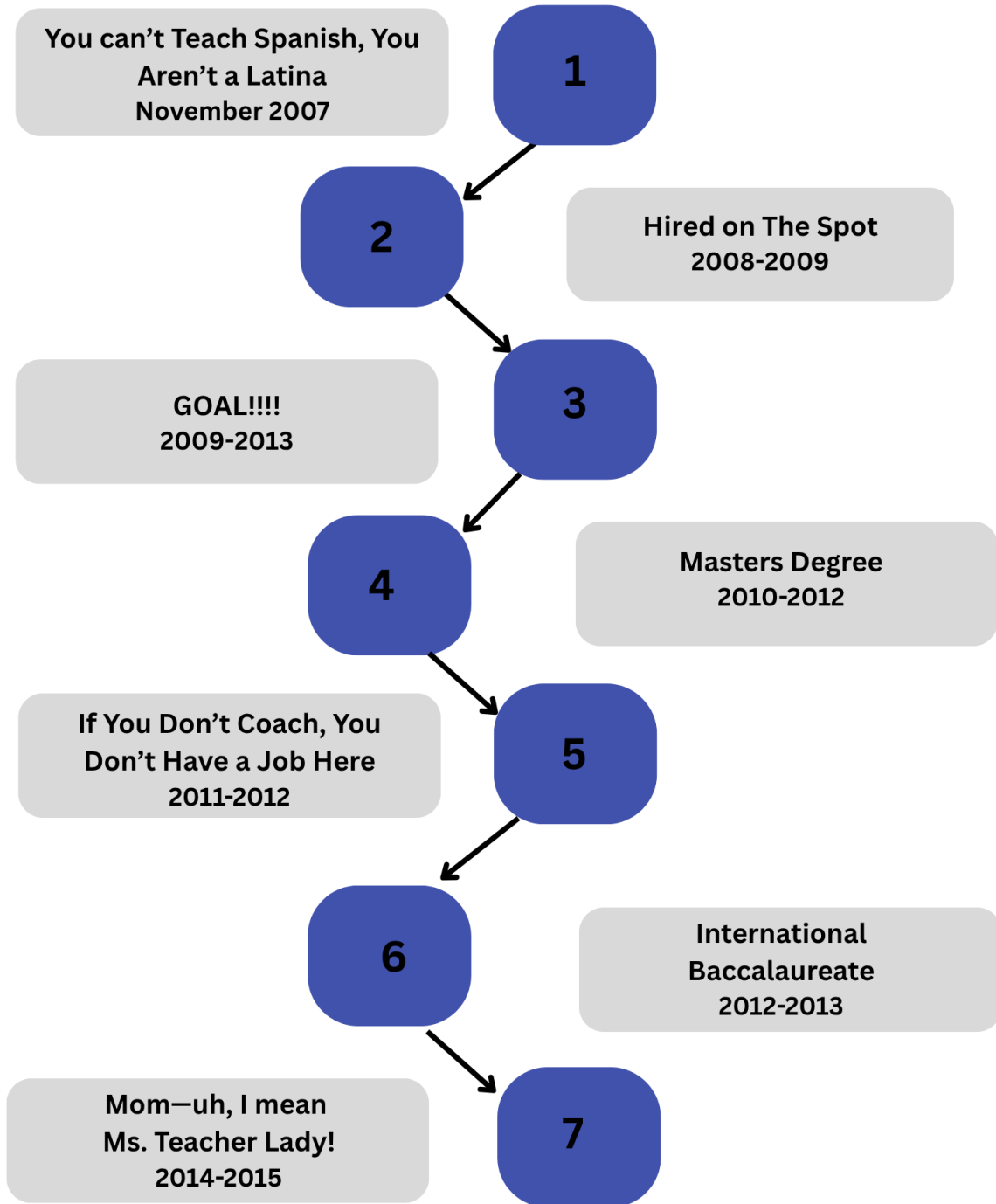
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APPENDIX 1

Teacher Timeline
West Coast
2007-2015



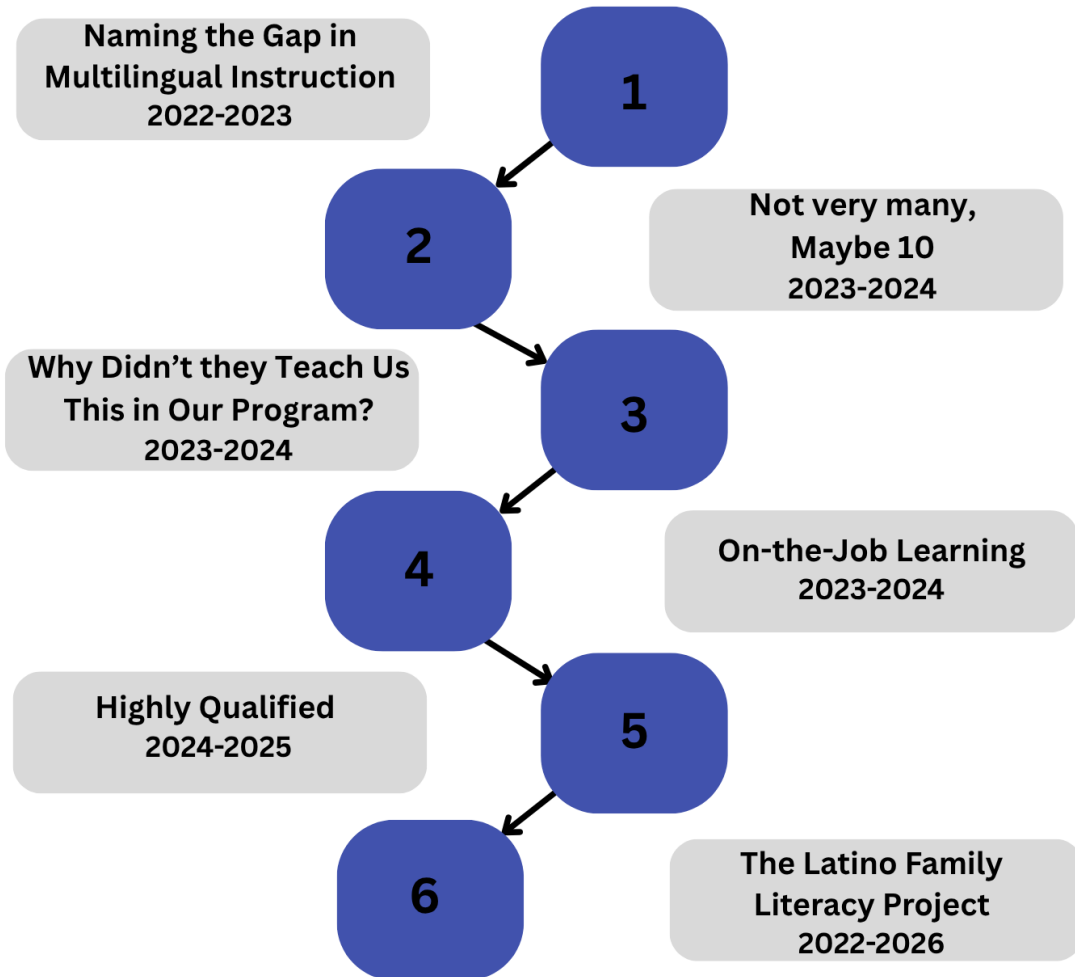
APPENDIX 1

**Teacher Timeline
in the South
2015-2023**



APPENDIX 1

Teacher Leader &
Teacher of Adult Learners Timeline
in the South
2022-2026



APPENDIX 2

Journal Entry: Vignette #1

First memories in ~~11/20/2015~~
- From Fall 2015 -

5/18/2024

It was sometime in late fall, I remember that the principal did not come observe me yet. He didn't even stop to see if I needed anything or greet me. I felt → this made me feel → not important, not seen, not a "core teacher" so I didn't matter.

When the principal did come to formally observe me teaching, it was random and maybe only lasted 30 minutes. He appeared apathetic or maybe he was trying to hold back facial expressions. He slowly entered and made his way through the class, asking students what they were working on.

- I was stressed out because this was my largest class with a lot of very talkative and somewhat fidgety students. One student even crawled across my floor the day prior, I was worried she'd do the same on that day!

- But, the students surprised me, they all acted engaged and stayed on-task while he was observing. When he left they all asked how or if I was impressed by their perfect behavior, as if they'd been trained to do this upon seeing visitors and leaders. I was shocked they knew this - as most were freshmen who didn't seem to notice such things.

APPENDIX 3

Artifact Review Checklist (Vignette #1)

Category	Values (V)/ Attitudes (A) / Beliefs (B)	Leadership Norm Alignment	Theoretical Framework Alignment	Researcher Interpretation
Artifact Identification	(V): Accountability, control (A): Skepticism (B): Traditional rigor prioritized	Misalignment with PSEL 3 & 4	Knowles': Prior assumptions Mezirow's: Unexamined beliefs	Institutional expectations rooted in monolingual norms
Context and Purpose	(V): Standardization (A): Limited awareness (B): Uniform expectations	Compliance- driven leadership	Knowles': Experience- based Mezirow's: Disorienting dilemma	Critical incident revealing a misunderstanding
Language and Tone	(V): Compliance (A): Deficit orientation (B): Remediation needed	Misaligned with equity leadership	Mezirow's: Cultural dissonance	Subtle marginalization present
Explicit Values	(V): Rigor (DOK) (A): Measurable focus (B): Traditional rigor only	Partial alignment with rigor	Knowles': Prior frameworks	Rigor is misunderstood in the language context
Implicit Values	(V): Control (A): Discomfort (B): Monolingual norms	Misaligned with culturally responsive leadership	Mezirow's: Disorienting dilemma	Avoidance signals a deeper issue

Category	Values (V)/ Attitudes (A) / Beliefs (B)	Leadership Norm Alignment	Theoretical Framework Alignment	Researcher Interpretation
Leadership Orientation	(V): Compliance (A): Risk-averse (B): Evaluation over support	Misaligned with PSEL 5 & 6	Mezirow's: Awareness	Lacked relational support
Alignment with Practice	(V): Procedures (A): Disconnect (B): Generalized models	Weak instructional coherence	Knowles': Experiential learning	Mismatch revealed
Family Engagement	Values: Minimal Attitudes: Absent Beliefs: Isolation	Misaligned with PSEL 8	Knowles': Social context	Disconnect present
Reflexive Notes	(V): Advocacy (A): Growth (B): Responsive leadership	Aligned with transformativ e leadership	Mezirow's: Perspective shift, reflection	Turning point in identity

Key Theoretical Framework Connections:

Adult Learning Theory (Knowles'): Experience as a foundation for learning; prior beliefs shape interpretation; reflective practice supports growth.

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow): Disorienting dilemmas prompt critical reflection leading to perspective transformation.

APPENDIX 4

Values Coding Roadmap

Step 1: Recall Critical Experiences	Timeline that identified meaningful teaching and leadership events connected to multilingual learners, inclusion, and cultural dissonance.
Step 2: Record Recovered Memories	Wrote reflective narrative accounts of each remembered experience as detailed autoethnographic vignettes.
Step 3: Revisit Contextual Artifacts	Reviewed policies, agendas, professional development materials, emails, and communications to deepen recall and confirm context.
Step 4: Reflect on Personal Meaning	Considered how each experience shaped emotions, assumptions, and emerging leadership identity.
Step 5: Apply Values Coding (Saldaña, 2021)	Coded each vignette and artifact for Values (V), Attitudes (A), and Beliefs (B).
Step 6: Identify Patterns Across Vignettes	Compared codes to locate recurring values, tensions, and shifts in perspective. Analyzed how patterns revealed leadership insights related to advocacy, equity, and responsiveness.
Step 7: Interpret Leadership Meaning	
Step 8: Synthesize Into Developmental Roadmap	Organized findings into a leadership progression from awareness to sustained, shared leadership.