Being a 'WIDA kid':

Towards an understanding of multilingual students' experiences at MHS

OVERVIEW

This study is the third iteration in a partnership between Melvindale High School (MHS) and the University of Michigan's (UM) Marsal Family School of Education. This partnership is rooted in our shared commitments to creating schools that are welcoming and inclusive to migrant students and families with diverse identities and experiences. The fall 2023 study centered on multilingual students' relationship to language. We explored students' motivations and challenges in gaining language proficiency, particularly for those who have been classified as Long-term English learners (LTELs).

Drawing on methods of participant observation and interviewing with multilingual students, graduates, and MHS teachers and staff, we explored students' relationship to language in their current lives and in their imagined futures. In this report, we identify students' varied relationships to their primary languages, as well as a range of interactive spaces inside and outside of school in which they draw on their multilingualism. Most of the students we interacted with expressed ambivalence towards the WIDA test— uncertain about its purposes, unclear as to how to improve their scores, and overwhelmed with the test-taking experience. Some students who take the WIDA are able to derive meaning from their performance on the exam, which motivates them to set clear learning goals for language development and inspires them to improve their scores. If MHS is able to support students in recognizing these positive relationships, students may find themselves more motivated to pursue and demonstrate proficiency.

There is a sense of shared ambivalence across teachers and students that WIDA scores are not an accurate reflection of students' proficiency or their academic knowledge and skills in given content areas. Teachers make clear efforts to design instructional strategies that support multilingual students and all learners, while also seeing students holistically. Additionally, MHS teachers and staff support students in identifying a range of options for post-secondary educational, training, and employment opportunities, working to expand students' conceptions of what is possible. Supporting students in understanding how language, multilingualism, and language supports may play a role in their future opportunities can add to these existing efforts.

Recommendations follow from the findings presented, focused on (1) continued caution around the LTEL label, (2) clarifying the purposes and processes of WIDA, (3) ensuring students' access to WIDA scores and resources, (4) improving the WIDA test-taking experience, and (5) formalizing additional language support and community-building options for current students and graduates.

BACKGROUND ON THE COLLABORATION

This collaboration aims to build an equitable, reciprocal, and sustainable partnership between Melvindale High School (MHS) and the University of Michigan (U-M) School of Education. The foundation of our collaboration is rooted in a shared commitment to creating schools that are welcoming and inclusive for migrant students and families with diverse identities and experiences. Our goals for this collaboration are multiple. U-M graduate students gain an opportunity to design and practice qualitative research methods in the context of an authentic school space, supporting graduate students' learning of concepts and skills. Meanwhile, the research inquiry is constructed collaboratively, centering on issues of importance to MHS. Our hope is that the research generates an opportunity for MHS participants and leaders to reflect upon current practices, as well as identify areas of strength and openings for continued dialogue and improvement. We appreciate how these sentiments are echoed as MHS faculty, staff, and administration seek feedback for positive change in the school. Previous collaborations took place in 2020 and 2021, and artifacts can be found here.



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RESEARCH METHODS

STUDY FOCUS

From September to December 2023, our team conducted school-based observations and interviews at MHS. We framed our research questions after initial conversation with MHS leadership, and refined them over the course of the study.

The three questions that guided our work were:

- 1) What is students' relationship to language, and how does MHS support language learning?
- 2) What motivates students to reach higher proficiency in English? What challenges do they face in reaching proficiency? How do experiences taking the WIDA exam contribute to students' perceptions of their language skills?
- 3) How do students and recent graduates envision language playing a role in their future lives?

This study was designed as ethnographic in its approach, with value placed on local discourses, practices, and meanings that are in circulation at MHS. To explore students' relationships to language and everyday language use and practice, we conducted 60 hours of participant observation of diverse classes and school-based activities. We designed semi-structured interview questions to gather perspectives from students, recent graduates, and educators. As external observers, these methods allowed us to understand and articulate students' authentic experiences with language, and how they imagined language playing a role in their future lives. We designed our research study with an eye towards the relational and ethical dimensions of research. For example, our consent scripts outlined options for levels of selective information sharing and attribution, and follow-up conversations worked to ensure participants felt empowered and autonomous over the decisions they made.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Our interview sample comprised a diverse mix of 29 individuals, including students, alumni, teachers, and staff. A more detailed breakdown shows that there were 19 long-term English learners (LTEL) students, 2 Former English Learners (FEL) students, 3 alumni (who were multilingual learners), and 5 teachers and staff. Subsequent to the interviews and observations, we developed transcripts and fieldnotes, respectively. This information served as the key dataset for our analysis.

Analysis was collective and iterative, involving inductive and deductive approaches (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). We identified five principal themes: supporting student learning, language support, students' relationship to language, future aspirations, and taking the WIDA. Each of these themes housed more specific sub-categories, such as "moving between languages" and students' perceptions that WIDA was "an inaccurate reflection" of language proficiency.

*A note on language: while we continue to recognize the constraints of labels like "LTEL," we nevertheless employ the term here in order to differentiate between language learners. LTEL is used exclusively for those students who have not passed the WIDA test within six years of their first attempt. This label is all the more complicated alongside students' general indifference to WIDA test taking. We use the label here, but continue to recommend that it be an administrative descriptor only.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

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What is students' relationship to language, and how does MHS support language learning?

Students' relationships to language and language practices are heterogenous. Some students only speak English at school, using their primary language for family, social, and work interactions; others rarely speak their primary language and in some cases report language loss. We also find examples of students teaching one another languages, or actively seeking out opportunities to learn new languages, beyond what is required in school.

Multilingual students carry out valuable translation work inside and outside of school. Students frequently take on translation roles to help their peers with classwork, assignments, and other related tasks. Teachers rely on students to support translational work to support other multilingual learners. Peer translators are especially valuable when instructional aides are not available. Overall, students express appreciation for opportunities that arise in school for translation, as they are able to illustrate and practice their multilingual skills, while helping their peers. Students express pride in this translational work, viewing it as an indicator of progress in their own language development. In a few cases, students report not feeling prepared to translate, either because the vocabulary is too advanced or because they have limited proficiency in their primary language.

Normally in the other schools, they used to help me and now I'm helping my friends. That's like a big progress...if they don't understand an assignment, I'll help them like how to do it. Or if they don't understand the teacher or what they are saying, I'll explain to them what they need to do...I feel good because I got to help people and I got to help my friends." - 10th grade student, 10.30.23

Students do a lot of translanguaging (fluid movement between languages) and language shifting in their daily lives, as they navigate formal and informal uses and contexts of language. Students often shift languages between school and home environments, using their primary language at home and English at school. However, these shifts can also be fluid and more spontaneous, navigating multiple languages in the same conversation.. Translanguaging is a pedagogical strategy that supports multilingualism (Garcia & Lin, 2017), which we have observed at MHS in past years (Bellino et al., 2022).



...at home we were taught to speak our language. . . . and when we go to school, we speak English. at home, we're strictly supposed to speak our language, just because I feel like [my parents] knew that we was gonna move here one day and we might forget about our culture and how to speak our language, and they didn't want that for us."



- 10th Grade Student, 10.26.23

I speak Spanish, English. Yes, I mix them both so like... when I'm talking with friends I speak Spanish. I usually just speak English with my teacher....In school...Yeah, I speak more English. But everywhere else I am speaking in Spanish." - 11th Grade Student, 11.6.23

Teachers make instructional decisions aimed at supporting all students' language development. Teachers engage a range of pedagogical strategies to support language development. They utilize AB partnering and other grouping strategies to address translation needs and language support in their classrooms. Teachers do not regularly draw on students' WIDA scores in making instructional decisions. In some cases, they actively pair students with different languages together to support language development. They also create or draw on various resources including sentence stems, visual aids like pictures or word tables, and technological supports like SMARTboards or Khan Academy, to support students' language learning and content knowledge. We found that teachers make efforts to learn students' languages to better support ML students, and their efforts do not go unnoticed. Even after graduating from MHS, one student still remembers how their teacher took the time to learn two new languages to interact with their students.



I don't use native language as a measure to group students together. I like students to feel comfortable... and be able to learn off each other... and if they didn't use their ... newly learned language skills here, where would they use it? ... in schools this is the space where they're able to meet different cultures and different kids from different backgrounds and able to learn about and respecting different cultures and learn about different people." - Mr. Bader, 10.20.23



the iReady test, that's like the quickest fingertip test... but I haven't had the time to, to analyze how close that score is with WIDA score. So I think the WIDA score is a better true measurement of what a student's reading ability is. But what's nice about the iReady is that it's got everybody in my class in there, whereas the WIDA scores only have the kids who are taking the WIDA... but just like anything, a test is only valuable if the student tried. So I know I have kids who have a kindergarten level that iReady because all they did was push buttons because they didn't want to take the test. So that's like, that's where I struggle and it's like when I get to know my kids, that's when I know what their reading level is because you can have anything on paper and from a test."

-Ms. Gilleran, 11.17.23



Especially the teacher that I worked with, she even learned some Arabic phrases and some Spanish phrases to actually try to communicate with the kids. I think that really helped her and helped the kids as well."- MHS Graduate, 11.6.23

There is an ethos in the school that everyone is a language learner. Teachers emphasize that everyone is a language learner when it comes to academic literacy or content-specific language, regardless of one's primary language (e.g., mathematics vocabulary).



Everyone benefits from learning the language used for the content, so we might be native speakers and we think of us as a group of native speakers, think they capable of using the language, but when it comes to content specific, I think everyone is a language learner.

. . So everybody benefits from learning and connecting the language, even if they know if they came across the vocabulary previously many and this is common in math where vocabulary will have a general meaning of every day and it will have its more or twisted meaning in math or in science" - Mr. Bader, 10.20.23

RECOMMENDATIONS

- LTEL is a relatively new term, within the larger umbrella of EL experiences. As such, there is limited empirical research about LTEL student experiences in schools (Thompson, 2015). Across contexts, there is variability in how this term is defined and applied by educational leaders (Halloran, 2020), and in terms of students' academic opportunities and outcomes (Thompson, 2015). Existing research that focuses on LTEL experiences has shown that this classification has a negative connotation and is largely associated with deficit perspectives on students' abilities, as it can prevent educators from seeing students' linguistic, cultural, and other assets (Clark-Gareca, 2019; Kibler et al., 2017). Instead, schools should look at students' academic and social development more holistically. The lack of widespread recognition or use of the term LTEL amongst MHS teachers (and students) affirms that this is largely an administrative category, which has meaning in identifying students who may require additional support. We recommend continued practices that limit use of the "LTEL" label to administrative contexts. Affirming language such as "multilingual" and "emergent bilingual" recognize student's linguistic assets (Garcia, 2009).
- 2) MHS can formalize a peer translation program to recognize and honor the translational work that multilingual students do. One possibility is that passing the WIDA is a requirement to join this program, so that students have added incentives to improve their scores. Alternatively, translational work can be recognized with a school service award. Importantly, our research did not intend to explore student translation as a particular site of inquiry, though it emerged as a central practice in students' everyday lives, both inside and outside schools. Future MHS-UM collaborations could further investigate this topic more directly.



What motivates students to reach higher proficiency in English? What challenges do they face in reaching proficiency? How do experiences taking the WIDA exam contribute to students' perceptions of their language skills?

Our original questions regarding language inquired about what motivates or blocks students from reaching higher English proficiency. When we originally approached this research question, we conflated language proficiency with WIDA scores. After reviewing our observations and interviews with students, staff, and graduates, we instead interrogated the relationship between students and the WIDA. We found that students' motivation for English proficiency is not necessarily tied to the WIDA. Students want to do well and gain proficiency in English for various reasons, such as familial obligations, college interest, or wanting to advance to higher placement high school courses. Students also show interest in supporting their classmates, emphasizing a sense of obligation that their language development and academic progress are collective.



I think what motivates me is like my family and that they are here because of me, kind of because of me. And to help my friends too. Because I am like the one that is like the more fluent in English in my group of friends. And I help them and if I don't know how to help them, it's going to be like not going to make progress. They are not going to make progress because I'm not making progress." - 10th Grade Student, 10.30.23

Many students who take the WIDA do not understand the purpose of the exam. Not understanding the purpose feeds a cycle of frustration and lack of motivation. Some question why they are pulled out of what they viewed as more important classes, which are more relevant to their future preparation and aspirations.



I just feel like some students are like, "Why do I take this" or like "What's the need for it?" Like, WHAT IS WIDA basically like? What? What do we have to test for? What do you - what do you have to know about us? Like I don't know. Like, what is WIDA? . . . I just feel like people think it's pointless. Because if they want to know how we speak or something, they can talk to us. WIDA doesn't really.. . . Like what is it? I don't know." - 10th Grade Student, 10.20.23



When they pull me out of Math class - which is something I need for college or need for my GPA - it's just so annoying because the WIDA doesn't like, matter as much." - 11th Grade Student, 10.24.23



I feel like colleges don't look at that (the WIDA). So I don't think it's really important. So that's why, like, I want to take my senior year, I want to take AP classes because I like a rigor I want to take. I want to get good SAT scores because they look at that. I want to do stuff that's good for my future. I just don't feel like WIDA fits it." - 11th grade student. 10.26.23

Students question the accuracy of WIDA in determining their language proficiency. Some students feel they are proficient in the English language, but the WIDA does not reflect their actual English abilities. Passing the WIDA is not tied to students' abilities to succeed academically in advanced courses, or their aspirations to take these courses as they progress through school. Students see advanced courses (and other standardized tests) as more important and relevant to their future plans, and clearer indications of their academic and linguistic abilities. Due to these feelings, many students feel unmotivated when taking the WIDA. Students also expressed feeling nervous, tired, and overwhelmed during the test.





RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Clarify the purpose and process for the WIDA test with students. Interviews with students revealed that many students have misunderstandings and confusion around the WIDA test, including the possibility of passing out of the exam. Though MHS makes efforts to disseminate information about the WIDA, there is a gap between these efforts and what students retain from those conversations.
- 2) Ensure that students understand when they will be taking the WIDA test, so that they can mentally prepare and make practical arrangements, such as ensuring they have a good night's rest and access to materials from missed classes. Ensure that students have access to WIDA practice tests and related resources.
- 3) Communicate scores to students with opportunities to understand their performance. After the WIDA exam, a discussion with students on how to understand their WIDA scores would be helpful for students who do not understand their reports. Additionally, it can help them to celebrate progress and set clear targets for future language development.
- 4) Make the test-taking process more accessible. Where possible, implement personalized breaks, staggered WIDA schedules, and more private spaces for speaking and listening portions. The WIDA exam takes hours to complete if students put effort into it. By creating breaks during the exam, students are likely to feel less anxious and tired. Based on the WIDA 2023- 2024 Accessibility and Accommodations Manual, options include supervised breaks, short segment testing, and extending the testing time. Multiple students stated they felt nervous talking when other people were nearby. A private space may help students feel more comfortable speaking up during this portion of the test.
- 5) Celebrate students' achievements through progress markers and formal recognition of WIDA completion.
- 6) Consider opportunities for peer networking for current students taking the WIDA, or between those taking the test and those who have completed it. Opportunities for peer networking can help increase confidence in language skills (Berthelon et al., 2019; Kibler et al., 2017).





How do students and recent graduates envision language playing a role in their future?

This question emerged from trying to understand the ways in which students' relationship with language is shaped, and the role it plays in their real and imagined futures. We approached this question to articulate students' social and aspirational connections to language learning.

Families play a significant role in shaping young people's relationship with language and in shaping students' perceptions of post-secondary opportunities. Students' aspirations and relationship to language proficiency are influenced by their familial obligations, support, and encouragement. Many students expressed ways in which their families supported them to learn English, retain their primary language, and exposed them to potential future opportunities. Specifically, families encouraged their children to do well academically, based on their desires to ensure more opportunities for their children in the future. Importantly, not all students access the same kinds of support amongst families, as a result of varied family circumstances (including family separation across borders), incomeearning expectations, and a range of formal educational experiences. MHS teachers and staff that we interacted with show a great deal of awareness of these varied circumstances of children's lives.



I mostly talk to my mom and my brother about my future plans...I'll tell her about all the nursing programs they have, colleges, and how medical school would be, and she'll help me and motivate me to do better so I can get into good programs and stuff." - 10th Grade Student, 10.10.23

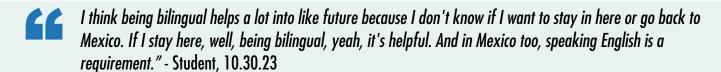
MHS works to expand students' perceptions of what options are available to them after completing high school. Teachers and staff actively broaden students' perspectives on future careers through inviting speakers, connecting students to college resources, and incorporating culturally-relevant lessons into their classes. Teachers motivate their students towards future pathways by sharing real-world, culturally relevant examples and exercises in class.

Teachers believe this approach helps students visualize potential careers, and gain valuable skills. Teachers at MHS put in significant efforts to ensure their classes are relevant to students and their potential future aspirations, as well as rooted in their cultural meanings and understandings.

- But, you know, what I've told myself is we can only plant seeds, like even with these visits, we can only plant seeds and hopefully in time, they'll just be exposed to more things"

 Teacher/Staff, 10.26.23
- He (teacher) made students in the class to write an application, develop a résumé, and do a mock interview...there is also a training students do before they actually start running the store.
 - Researcher fieldnotes, CTE class, 10.9.23
- They're still getting clinical skills. They have already done wheelchair to bed transfers, bed to wheelchair, stretchers to bed transfers...They've had to pretend there's a door and knock and go in and talk to each other like they're a real patient." Teacher/ Staff, 11.9.23

Looking to their futures, students express a strong desire to develop and maintain proficiency in multiple languages, including English and their primary language. Language is seen as useful and valuable in the workforce, providing an advantage for multi-language students. Students recognize this advantage when considering their post-secondary plans, particularly those who shape multiple possible future plans that traverse national contexts. In these cases, we find evidence of students' "multidirectional aspirations" (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017), as migrant students consider the role of language in futures set in multiple national contexts.



when I grow up I'm gonna see if I can be a math teacher in English. If math don't really work well, I do English. So basically, learning English kind of gave me an option—a lot of options" - Student, 11.10.23

Students largely see language not as a barrier to overcome, but as an advantage that will expand their potential future opportunities. Nevertheless, some students still struggle in the post-secondary process, particularly those seeking higher education. Being a multi-language learner, migrant, and/or first-generation can make the college application process more difficult. Even as MHS provides multiple resources and opportunities to expose students to post-secondary options, college still seems to be a less familiar pathway and can be overwhelming. Some students express confusion about application procedures, while some feel unmotivated due to a lack of knowledge or role models in their family.

When I was about to graduate from high school, they told me, apply for this... I didn't know what to pick because I barely understand high school. I've been here [in the US] for two years and a half. Like, what do I do in college? "...I'm waiting for any of these schools to talk to me... no one contacted me....I took my uncle with me because, you know, the language barriers....I've been waiting for someone to contact me so I can come and apply because I'm, I'm first gen." - MHS Graduate, 10.30.23

I didn't take it [school] as serious in the beginning. Which is has messed my GPA, my overall GPA a little bit...Cause I, I really didn't know that college looks into it overall until junior year and I don't have siblings that went to college...I took school serious since sophomore second semester." - Student, 10.17.23

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Continue to emphasize multiple pathways and the importance of planning for postsecondary educational, training, and work opportunities. Support students' aspirations by recognizing their multidirectional nature and the ways that language development can open up additional opportunities.
- 2) Consider building an alumni network to better understand the post-secondary plans of MHS graduates and how their education supported them in shaping and accessing opportunities. This alumni network can support direct interactions such as school visits to showcase varied postsecondary pathways, and/or could support current students as they approach future decisions. Future MHS-UM collaborations could further support investigation on this topic.
- 3) Though we did not interact with a large number of MHS alumni, it seems that placing emphasis on whether and how language resources are available in educational spaces outside of MHS can be useful. Some questions about higher education pertained to uncertainty about how to access language resources. Anticipating these questions can support current students in envisioning how language will play a role in their future aspirations, while emphasizing multilingualism as an advantage and not a barrier.



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