

Voices from the Field

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INTRODUCTION TO VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Welcome to a new feature in *INTESOL Journal: Voices from the Field*. The purpose of this new feature is to spotlight practitioners from the Indiana education community who are serving English learners of all ages and purposes. In addition to providing insights into current practices, challenges, and opportunities, this column will also create an archive or a time capsule in which we can capture snapshots of educators, promising practices, advocacy, and responses to policies over time.

Voices From the Field: A Conversation with Dr. Rachel Sever

In this inaugural article, we will begin by introducing a district leader from Central Indiana, Dr. Rachel Sever. Rachel currently serves as the ENL Coordinator for MSD Washington Township. During her travels in college, she became interested in the role of languages and culture in schools. During her graduate studies, she examined the ways power dynamics in society relate to how people use literacy in- and out-of-school. Her research (Sever, 2013) has focused on how young people, particularly multilingual learners, read the world and use literacies to transform their communities and generate liberation, as described by Paulo Freire (2000).

As a teacher, researcher, and administrator, Rachel seeks opportunities to collaboratively explore ways the educational system can be more inclusive and equitable. Being the ENL Coordinator in a diverse, urban school district provides the opportunity to work with her colleagues on the challenging, but rewarding, work of providing spaces for multilingual learners to engage in meaningful learning experiences that value their assets and challenge the status quo practices of tracking, excessive testing, and the pressure to teach to standardized tests.

I sat down recently with Rachel to find out more about her perspectives on her role and on current initiatives connected to multilingual K-12 learners and educators in MSD Washington Township. Our conversation ranged far and wide, but ultimately focused on the responses she provided to the questions posed below. The interview questions will be presented in **bold**, and Rachel's responses are presented in *italics*.

What opportunities are you discovering in your role? What has surprised you most about these opportunities? Where do these opportunities seem to be leading right now?

I experience opportunities every day where I am able to learn from people in our school community. I have learned from the resilience of our teachers, students, administrators, liaisons, and parents. I've had the opportunity to observe great diversity in the ways people have been able to thrive against all odds through the pandemic. For some people on some days, collaboration and connection has helped most, for others it's a quiet, reflective space.

Some teachers and students have found successful results following curriculum with fidelity while others are finding joy and growth when accelerating learning, slowing down, and/or integrating new technologies depending on the unique dynamics of their classroom. Some staff and students had found their niche in the hybrid learning environment, while others

are SO HAPPY to be back to a consistent in-person learning routine. These opportunities lead me to continue thinking about ways we can personalize teaching and learning experiences as well as cultivate a sense of belonging for all students and staff. From the role of district administration, my observation of the vast array of “what works” is challenging me to mull over the balance of system-wide expectations and opportunities for agency in our schools, grade levels, content areas, and classrooms.

What challenges are you discovering in your role? What are the implications of these challenges for students, teachers and families in your district?

For as long as I have been an educator, I’ve witnessed initiative fatigue, but it seems to be more of a challenge than ever before. Various federal, state, and local initiatives (such as multi-tiered system of supports, professional learning communities, social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, identification of priority standards, equitable grading practices) connect, but they can sometimes compete, and many teachers are tired of balancing all the things. In addition to the K-12 initiatives listed, at the elementary level, many schools are refining early intervention practices and dyslexia screening; meanwhile many secondary schools are broadening Career and Technical Education programs, work-based learning opportunities, and more. These initiatives provide opportunities, but also challenges related to communication, alignment and capacity.

From the lens of serving multilingual learners, many of these initiatives were developed without much, if any, consideration of the research or expertise from the fields of second language acquisition or teaching for biliteracy. Practically every aspect of our educational system, including the vast array of current initiatives, has been built from a monolingualistic

perspective. Many state departments of education are unsure where EL fits, so DOE EL staff can be marginalized, which shows up in state policy and guidance, which trickles all the way down to the marginalization of multilingual kids in classrooms. Multilingual educator teams are often managing all the initiatives as well as carrying the weight of explaining how the initiatives can fit the students we serve, even though they were not built with our students in mind.

What trends or patterns in ELL enrollment have you observed in MSDWT in the past six months?

Approximately 30% of the current multilingual student population continues to consist of students born in the United States. In the past year as a result of political and economic upheaval in the world, MSD Washington has experienced an increase in students arriving from Venezuela, Mexico, Honduras, Haiti, and Afghanistan. There are some similarities among the needs we are seeing of the current influx of students and the influx of Burmese refugees that our community welcomed in 2007 and 2008.

We are seeing an increased need for our ENL teachers to collaborate with our student support services teams to meet students' and families' basic needs related to safety, social-emotional well-being, food security, housing stability, transportation, internet access, health care, and more. Although our schools can provide some resources, our student support teams also coordinate newcomer student and family support with our community partners. These new populations have prompted us to revisit our system of support for newcomer students, particularly our high school age students with limited or interrupted formal education. We are developing new opportunities for our high school newcomer students to learn English and earn the credits needed for graduation.

What are some promising practices you have observed, championed, or brought about in MSDWT? What makes these promising practices so promising?

Three promising practices that are emerging in MSDWT related to multilingual learners are: the growth of our Dual Language Immersion (DLI) program, implementation of specialized programming for students who have not exited the ENL program within five years, and capacity building among our instructional coaching team.

Our district's DLI program opened in August of the 2019-20 school year at Willow Lake Elementary with two kindergarten classrooms. We have added two classes in subsequent grades each year. The language allocation plan for these classrooms follows an 80/20 model (80% of instruction occurs in Spanish and 20% occurs in English). The classrooms are comprised of a balance between native English and Spanish speakers. The DLI program is especially promising because it disrupts historical privileges and creates a space that values the heritage language and cultures of our Heritage Spanish speakers. Thus far, our students in the DLI program are outperforming students in monolingual classrooms district wide on math and reading assessments. Additionally, administrators throughout the district have benefited from observing the ways in which our DLI teachers have created a language-rich environment that embraces translanguaging, interdisciplinary learning, and multiple ways of knowing and understanding the content and concepts being studied.

In the fall of 2019, our fastest growing EL population was students who had been in U.S. schooling for five or more years, many of whom were born here in Indianapolis. Our ENL team recognized a need to flip the negative trajectory and deficit-based systems impacting this group of students. Our middle school EL teachers examined the research on long-term English

learners and reviewed achievement and graduation rate data of these students, which resulted in a new, asset based EL elective course for 7th and 8th graders that launched in the fall of 2020. The course, AVID Excel, is a branch of the AVID framework and is focused on accelerating academic language development and leveraging linguistic giftedness to address the opportunity gaps in our system (<https://www.avid.org/avid-excel>). Since we launched the course in the middle of the pandemic, we are still evaluating its impact and outcomes. We have seen an increase in the number of multilingual learners enrolled in our high school AVID elective courses, which have a long-standing tradition of supporting high levels of academic achievement as well as college and career readiness.

We are also excited about the opportunity we launched in the fall of 2021, wherein our instructional coaches can earn their EL license through a paid tuition cohort partnership with local universities. The graduate school coursework required for coaches to earn their EL license has led them to a deeper understanding of English language development instruction to effectively serve our increasingly diverse student body. Over 10 of our instructional coaches have participated in our licensure cohort so far and they have begun integrating their new knowledge and understanding into their everyday collaboration with teachers.

At the district level and within many schools, we are seeing more collaboration between our EL staff and our instructional coaching teams as well as a higher level of awareness related to considerations for multilingual learners in our coaches' learning facilitation, co-planning sessions, peer coaching, and co-teaching.

What state and/or federal policies are uppermost on your mind these days? Why? What do you wish policymakers knew about the impact of these policies on families, teachers and students?

Funding is an ongoing challenge. Federal funds allocated to supplemental programming for English learners have decreased every year since I joined MSDWT in 2019. Our main source of funding from the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) is the Non-English-Speaking Program (NESP) grant, which is approved every two years. Currently in the Fall of 2022, we do not know how much funding will be provided for the 2023-2024 school year. This creates tremendous challenges for timely program planning and for hiring. Although the IDOE recommendation of 30-1 English Learner to Teacher of Record ratio is a great idea, to this point IDOE has not yet provided adequate funds for districts to make this vision a reality.

What is something happening in MSDWT of which you are particularly proud that connects to your role as a district leader?

I am proud of our district's dedication to ongoing improvement and being more willing in our reflections to name practices and policies which need to be changed. In my role as a district leader, I own the responsibility to develop my personal competencies related to brave engagement in critical conversations about race and inequitable opportunities provided to Black and Brown students. In my role as district ENL Coordinator, I try to make the conscious decision every day to show love for students, staff, and families, even if it means I am personally marginalized for creating a disequilibrium. I am inspired by my colleague, Dr. Buchanan-Rivera's (2022) scholarship on identity-affirming classrooms. I apply her work to find ways to use my position to create relational ties that result in greater human solidarity in our schools

and community. I am still learning how to skillfully navigate the tensions which arise when I attempt to disrupt oppressive, entrenched systems while I also seek to cultivate unity in our district.

What is MSDWT learning about refugees at this time? What opportunities and challenges do these students and families bring to the district? What success stories can you tell?

Receiving new refugee populations is certainly not to MSDWT, but we still have work to do in supporting newcomer students, particularly at the high school level, with navigating American schooling, learning English, getting acclimated in the community, staying “on track” for graduation, and more. Learning from the Minnesota Department of Human Services’ support system for their refugee students and families, we partnered with the University of Minnesota to provide professional development to our EL Coaches and Liaisons on a version of the “Check and Connect” mentorship program to better serve our newcomers as well as other multilingual learners who were identified by their ENL teacher or their schools’ student support team. We are entering year 2 of these mentoring partnerships and we’ve found that in some cases, mentoring relationships have improved student attendance, self-advocacy, and access to community and school resources.

What DEI initiatives in the district are making positive changes for ELLs in MSDWT?

Under the direction of Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera, our Director of Equity and Inclusion, each school in the district has a resiliency team working to elevate learning and practices that center equity. These teams facilitate learning that intersects culturally responsive teaching practices, educational neuroscience, ABAR (anti-bias and antiracist work), and social emotional

learning. Each team is responsible for supporting school improvement goals and utilizing the 'systems work' plan as a strategy to address the barriers that hinder progress.

*All resiliency members work in a leadership role to engage in the transformative work of creating equitable systems that support all learners. This work is making a positive difference for multilingual learners through the analysis of English learner subgroup data and through teachers' and administrators' focus on critical consciousness to make changes in their personal practices as well as their school's practices. Through our work with *Courageous Conversations about Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2006) and *Interrupting Racism for Children* (Child Advocates, Indianapolis), we understand that racism and white privilege are obstacles to overcoming marginalization of multilingual learners. In many cases, what is commonly referred to as a "language barrier" is really systemic racism.*

If you could wave a magic wand, what would you wish for MSDWT ELLs?

*I wish that all of our multilingual learners could have the opportunity to participate in a language development program that honored their heritage language(s) and culture as well as the brilliance of their multilingual brain. Ideally all of our students would be able to achieve our DLI program goals, which are based on the *Teaching for Biliteracy* (Beeman & Urow, 2013) framework, which include sociocultural competency, a high degree of bilingualism and biliteracy, high academic achievement, and the long-term benefits of being better prepared to participate in the global workforce and better able to navigate cross-cultural relationships in our community.*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Susan R. Adams, PhD., is Faculty Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Associate Professor for the College of Education, Butler University. A former ESL teacher and instructional coach, her work is featured in such publications as *Theory into Practice*, *English Journal*, *The New Educator*, and the *Currere Exchange Journal*.

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