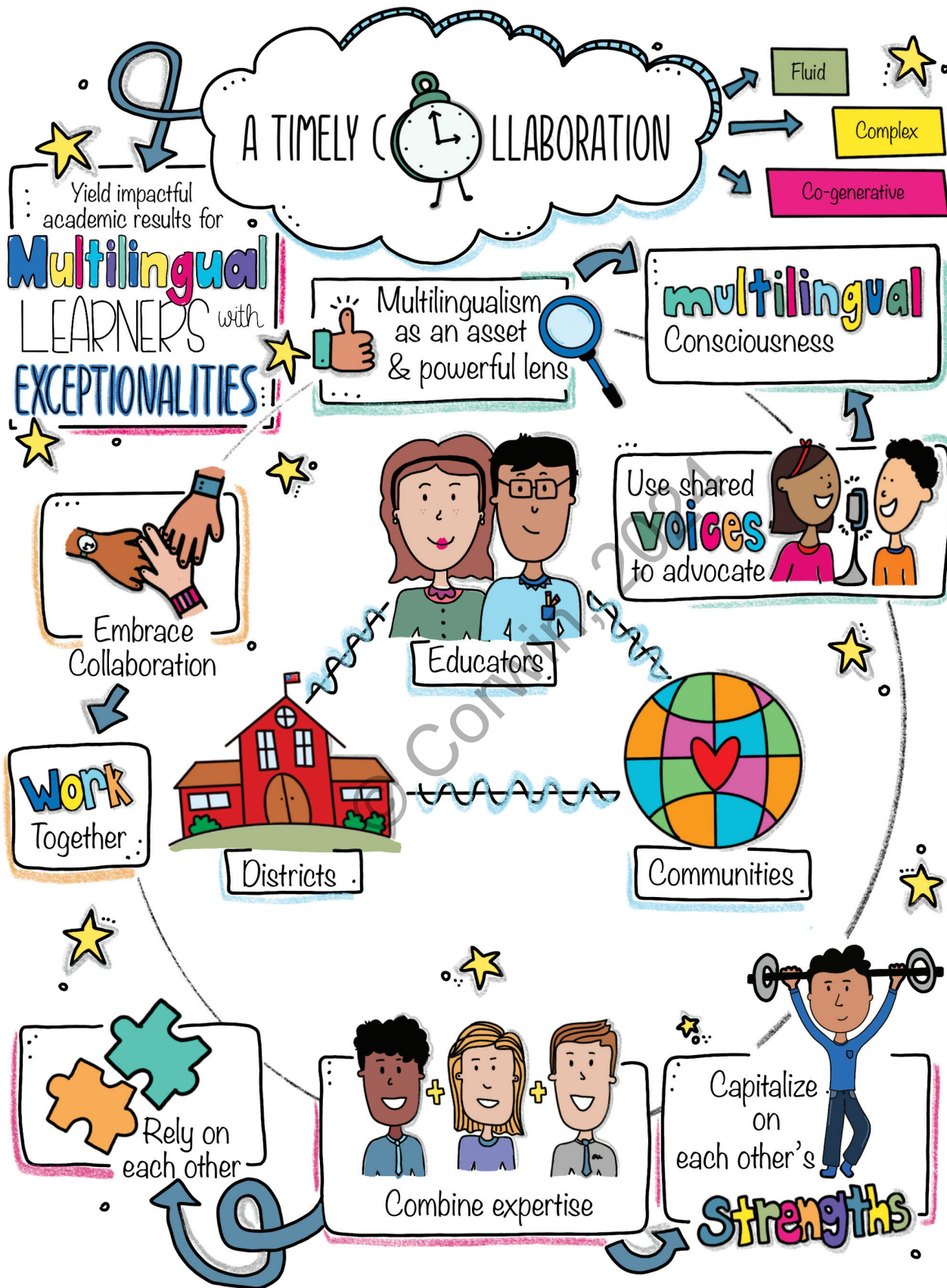


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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“In a daring leadership role, it’s time to lift up our teams and help them shine.”

—Brené Brown (2018, p. 132)

W elcome to Chapter 1! This book has long been in the making and we are excited—very excited—to share our thinking around collaborative practices on behalf of *multilingual learners with exceptionalities*. Right away, we are ready to introduce, reintroduce, or affirm a new term you will find throughout this book. We have worn many hats prior and during this manuscript development. Our combined experience and expertise in English language development (ELD) and special education have led to firsthand opportunities to work with students who previously were referred to as dually identified learners as well as their teachers, coaches, and administrators. As professors of preservice and inservice teacher education and coaches, we have helped many schools and districts recognize the talent and expertise of their educators in designing successful academic experiences for this unique student population. We wrote this book to champion asset-based perceptions of multilingual learners with exceptionalities and to cultivate an understanding of how a well-developed, collaboratively designed instructional focus—integrated with language and literacy development—can yield impactful academic, linguistic, and social-emotional outcomes. Our rationale for writing this book is rooted in our commitment and passion for helping educators fully embrace collaborative practices to bring an innovative focus to multilingual learners with exceptionalities. Let’s recognize that districts must not identify or designate students with disabilities merely because of their emerging language development. First and foremost, all students are general education students! Let’s get to work and break down silos!

START HERE

The theme of this book, *We Share the Students*, has been at the heart of much of our work, including teaching, research, coaching support, and advocacy, for the past twenty years. We have considered what strategies work best for multilingual learners as well as the most effective practices for both language and

literacy development. We have published resources on learning disabilities and considered the question of how to differentiate between typical language acquisition, language difficulties, and learning disabilities. Additionally, we have explored the most valuable ways to design instruction to meet the needs of multilingual learners with exceptionalities. This six-chapter book is an outgrowth of much of our field-based research and collective processing related to teacher collaboration. As authors and unapologetic advocates for this often-marginalized population, we embrace teacher collaboration as a powerful process and tool. Therefore, we invite you to use your own lens of collaborative experiences and possibilities to create a cohesive approach to program design, planning, instruction, and assessment in support of multilingual learners with exceptionalities as you read further. We believe that you will find the models, strategies, and real-life stories as guides to establish, affirm, or strengthen collaborative practices in your own context.

WHY IS THIS BOOK NEEDED?

While we intend for this book to offer practical ideas and instructional cycles for collaboration, we also feel strongly that teachers and administrators need to know the history of why cooperation, coordination of services, and impactful, intentional collaboration on behalf of multilingual learners with exceptionalities are so critical. We are inspired by Amanda Kibler (2023), who reminds us that our students deserve *rightful presence* (not merely inclusion) and *educational dignity* (not merely supports). We fully agree with her notion of creating the *most expansive learning environment* (not merely the least restrictive environment).

We believe the time has come for educators, districts, and communities to embrace collaboration, combine their professional expertise, and use shared voices to advocate for multilingual learners with exceptionalities. We further contend that this is a must-read guide for educators to support their collaborative efforts.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

In this book, we invite you to think about your students' learning opportunities and consider which of your students are exceptional learners who may require special education programming or related services or who need to be challenged. Keep in mind that multilingual learners with exceptionalities who require interventions or differentiation as learning supports may also benefit from gifted and talented curriculums as they may be considered twice exceptional. For teaching teams, this means working together to provide the best education possible without falling for what Kangas (2018b) refers to as the *specialization trap*. When working with students, consider this: Does one set of services take precedence over another set of services? If so, why? How can we collectively create a balanced, equitable approach to serve all students?

OVERALL CHALLENGES

María Cioè-Peña (2017) calls attention to a troubling phenomenon she refers to as the *intersectional gap*. She challenges inclusion programs since they are often unable to

adequately provide truly inclusive spaces for children who have more than one factor affecting their academic development [. . .] these inclusive spaces can often place bilingual students with disabilities alongside ‘peers’ who are typically developing, speak the same languages or receive special education services but never all three. (p. 913)

Similarly, Patricia Martínez-Álvarez (2022) raises a concern that “schools have failed to understand the complexities of children with multiple potential learning identities or the forms of oppression they experience” (pp. 3–4), which may lead to a disproportionate number of students becoming marginalized, misunderstood, and underserved.

What we have observed is that many of our multilingual students are at the intersection of diversity and exceptionalities, while the program models have not caught up with this intersectionality. Our education field continues to be siloed because of the challenges of meaningfully weaving all the dimensions of our students’ identities together and creating what Lee Ann Jung (2023) and earlier, Jung et al. (2019) refer to as *a universally welcoming environment*.

Educators who teach in inclusive settings (or shall we agree to start referring to such settings by the name they deserve: universally welcoming environments?) report that there are several additional phenomena that may need consideration when working with multilingual learners. These include

- Understanding of the stages of language acquisition and the processes by which children comprehend, process, and produce language
- Knowing the home and English language proficiency levels of each child and how long they have been educated in English
- Evaluating students’ prior schooling experiences, including limited or interrupted formal education
- Recognizing students’ multidimensional identities, including the multiple languages and dialogues their families share and the complex cultural traditions and experiences they bring from their homes and communities
- Evaluating child developmental and academic milestones and trajectories
- Understanding family backgrounds and the presence of adults
- Traumatic situations and living conditions (refugees, immigration policies, poverty, family separations, homelessness)

A common source of frustration among educators may be a lack of resources, lack of systemic support, or perhaps the lack of knowledge and experience with how to provide effective instruction for multilingual learners who are also exceptional. Many of the teachers we have worked with report that at times they felt underprepared to support learners with exceptionalities in their classrooms and that the path to achievement was clouded by systemic inequities as well as their limited tools to address the multitude of students' needs, be it academic, cultural, linguistic, or social.

When asked about the teacher collaborations that might support working with multilingual students, the answer was common: Teachers trained with a special education background might not be knowledgeable about language proficiency levels, typical stages of language acquisition, or best strategies for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFEs). The inverse seems true as well. Teachers prepared for working with student populations learning English as a second language—or even a third or fourth language—may not have been introduced to strategies to be used with the broad spectrum of diverse learners, many who are classified within the special education continuums (See Chapter 2 for more on this).

FIRST THINGS FIRST

We recommend that you start with a conversation: You can begin your collaboration about language acquisition, diversity, intersectionality, and program choices by engaging in student-centered collaborative discussions that allow each educator to better understand the unique perspectives and expertise colleagues bring to the table as well as to better understand the intersections of student experiences. For example, it is important to know that language acquisition is typically described as a natural development across several predictable stages. Depending on the state you live in and the ELD standards that are used, there might be some variations on how these stages are described or even how many of them there are (four, five, or six). For our purposes, we are going to briefly review the five levels of language proficiency presented by TESOL, an international advocacy organization, as follows (See www.tesol.org for more):

1. *Starting*: being exposed to English while language production is just beginning to appear
2. *Emerging*: demonstrating receptive and emerging productive language skills
3. *Developing*: employing basic oral and written language skills with predictable patterns
4. *Expanding*: employing more advanced oral and written language skills with fewer errors
5. *Bridging*: having a comprehensive command of English

There are shared characteristics of learners at each level, while there are also unique variations among students. Inspired by Sara Kangas’s work (2018a, 2018b), we also suggest starting an open dialogue, asking lots of questions, learning from each other, and reflecting on your own practice. The conversation is even more relevant when you focus on a single student as in Figure 1.1.

FIGURE 1.1 • Questions to Ask About Students

WHAT TO ASK ELD/BILINGUAL TEACHERS	WHAT TO ASK SPECIAL EDUCATORS
<p>What is the English proficiency level of my student? What was it last year? How much growth has been noted? How much growth is expected to happen in a year across the languages and the language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing? Which language domain is a strength for the student? Which needs more enrichment and support? What are the most impactful strategies that support language and literacy development? What can this student do academically during their stage of language development?</p>	<p>Are there any specific aspects of the student’s development to be aware of? (This may include health, hearing, vision, fine and gross motor skills, social-emotional behaviors.) How is the student able to best communicate with teachers and peers? How does the student’s disability or disabilities impact learning? What are some strategies to support this student across content areas? Are there any specific instructional routines that you recommend? What does the IEP include? What are the student’s strengths? What are some unique ways the student is successful in your classroom?</p>
WHAT TO ASK CLASSROOM TEACHERS	WHAT TO CONSIDER TO OPTIMIZE INSTRUCTIONAL SUCCESS
<p>What aspects of the content lesson may be difficult for this student? Is there any background knowledge that is needed for the student to understand the lesson(s)? Does the student have any prior knowledge that would support the current lesson? Is there any vocabulary that needs to be pre-taught? How can the lesson(s) be more accessible and meaningful for student success? What opportunities does this student have to truly shine in the classroom?</p>	<p>How can I continue to learn about this student? How can I adjust or modify my instruction to meet the needs of this student? What areas of academic performance may need modified instruction? Does the size of the learning group impact success? Are there areas of academic performance that seem to resist typical instructional practices and need extra review? Might assessments need to be modified, and if so, how to allow for learning targets to be met? What modifications or adaptations will make the lessons accessible? Does the student benefit from modifications other than those stated on the IEP? Are there times during instruction that the student seems over-stimulated or under-stimulated, and how might the learning environment be adapted?</p>
<p>How will the student benefit from collaborative planning?</p>	

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SYSTEMIC SUPPORT

Many of us in the field of education have been thinking about this question for many years: *How do we best support our multilingual students who are also under the umbrella of special education services?* To answer this question, schools need to take a systemic approach, such as the structured, consistent frameworks RTI (Response to Intervention) or MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support) offer. Both of these approaches aim to accomplish something similar: They are designed to provide a consistent, systemic alignment of a vision for equity with ongoing assessments and differentiated instructional practices to advance all students' growth and development. Historically, RTI has focused on academic interventions, whereas MTSS is designed to take students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs into consideration. McCart and Miller (2020) present four components that are considered essential for the MTSS system to be successful. These include “teaming structures; data for decision-making; evidence-based curriculum, instruction, and support materials; as well as continuous improvement practices” (p. 10)—also highlighting the need for collaboration!

It is beyond the scope of this book to fully unpack RTI or MTSS (see for example, Haas & Brown, 2019). Instead, our goal is to show the common thread across both approaches as well as other possible practices—such as PLCs (Professional Learning Communities): Their successful implementation is contingent upon sustained teacher collaboration! So we are here to help you create a sustainable school environment that embraces cultural acceptance, offers meaningful choices in assessments, and acknowledges contributions from students with diverse backgrounds. Rachel Mun et al. (2020) remind us to focus on building systemic capacity, which refers to the shared ability of all parts of an organization to work together in unison toward a common goal.

Both RTI and MTSS are heavily dependent on collaborative practices. As educators, we, too, advocate for achieving success with multilingual learners with exceptionalities through teacher collaboration. Therefore, if you can use your lens of teacher collaboration as you read further, we believe that you will find the models, strategies, and real-life stories can be a guide for your own best practices.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHER COLLABORATION

The idea of teacher collaboration may not be new; however, our invitation to all teachers (PreK–12 classroom teachers, special educators, ELD teachers, bilingual educators, and special service providers) to embrace opportunities for and make a commitment to sustained collaboration for *the sake of multilingual learners with exceptionalities* may be new in many contexts. Inclusive pedagogy is based on the premise that educators recognize and respond to all students' needs and extend what is available to some students and make it accessible to all:

Inclusive education is not merely about inclusion of students with disabilities. Inclusive education is a means to enable all students to create meaning and develop passions for lifelong learning and creativity. It acknowledges human diversity and seeks to understand and appreciate differences between individuals to maximize each individual's talent potential. (Dawson, 2022, p. 217)

While the notion of inclusive pedagogy is closely tied to instructional practices in the PreK–12 special education context, it provides a helpful framework for working with multilingual learners with or without exceptionalities in a collaborative, integrated program as well. At the core of successful inclusive pedagogy is systemic collaboration between and among educators, administrators, and family members. When instruction is designed, delivered, and assessed collaboratively while being centered on multilingual learners with exceptionalities, all students benefit.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR JOINT REFLECTION AND SHARED PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

When we look holistically at students, we are acknowledging those who are neurodiverse; who represent different linguistic groups; who identify with different racial, ethnic, or cultural groups; or who represent varied talents and academic readiness levels. When we closely examine students' complex cultural, linguistic, and academic identities and their related academic achievement, we often notice glaring inequities. The achievement disparities for multilingual learners and students with disabilities signal that in the past, students might have experienced lower expectations, different levels of support, and limited access to challenging educational opportunities.

As a starting point, think about the diversity that exists in your classroom or a classroom that you recently visited. Did you recognize the wide range of academic abilities and interests of the students? Were you aware of the many cultural and linguistic backgrounds represented in the class? If so, you are noticing the complex cultural, linguistic, and academic identities represented within that group of students (Honigsfeld et al., 2022). This is your asset-based lens. Now go one step further:

- Are you intentionally using an asset-based lens?
- What are some critical understandings around typical language acquisition and appropriate placements for multilingual learners with exceptional needs?

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

To provide exceptional multilingual learners with the appropriate educational placements and services, we must think of families as part of the team as well (Cohan et al., 2020a, 2020b). When we include them and give respect to parents and caregivers, we choose to recognize the whole child

and the value of a family unit. This is imperative because parents have the insider view of their child to share, especially in the pre-referral phase. They know about their children’s access to language beyond school; likes and dislikes; patterns of social, academic, and linguistic behaviors; talents and creativity; and individual needs. Parents are bridges to school-based education and must be invited to advocate for their child (Oregon Department of Education, 2021). Having parents or guardians as partners contributes to asset-based thinking and cultivates communication between the home and school. Urtubey (2020) states it clearly, “Most school systems aren’t fully equipped to gauge the complexities of multilayered identities, such as first- or second-generation English language learners who may also have learning disabilities” (p. 40). Including families and caregivers in all levels of educational decision-making not only builds a school community but ensures active engagement in the special education processes. Some parents might have exhibited mistrust of special education placements; others might deeply worry about the stigma of various classes. But beyond the legal requirements of parental participation are the positive dynamics of collaborative interaction and shared decision-making in the best interest of the child.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK?

In this publication, we intend to address multiple themes of exceptionality with a distinct focus on the multilingual learner. As a backdrop, we have the continuums of special education services that have been embedded in schools, and we will consider the variations in placements most often available to students. This volume is not a handbook, and we do not review clinical differences—as in the DSM, which classifies students as special learners. There are numerous excellent publications accomplishing a detailed look at neurodiversity, and those publications may complement this book. In addition, we recognize twice-exceptional learners, as well as gifted and talented students, who are also developing competence across multiple languages and literacies. Rather, we take a broad-brush approach with the goal of making the book accessible for all educators. Our goal is to ensure that our readers embrace teacher collaboration in support of multilingual learners with exceptionalities, work as teams to combine their expertise, and to best service students together.

HOW IS THIS BOOK ORGANIZED?

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The introductory chapter sets the tone for the entire book. It articulates the context and defines the goal for writing this book: We identify the purpose and the rationale for this work and establish its unique focus on exceptional multilingual learners. We clearly articulate what is in this book and how it will be a must-read guide for educators to support their collaborative efforts for multilingual learners with exceptionalities.

CHAPTER 2: MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS WITH EXCEPTIONALITIES AND PROGRAM MODELS TO SERVE THEM

Through multiple asset-based lenses—for example, intersectionality, equity, culturally and linguistically responsive instructional and assessment practices—we paint a comprehensive picture of multilingual learners with exceptionalities and showcase several stories and portraits of neurodiversity. We consider commonly used frameworks and take them one step further by systematically and intentionally infusing tools and strategies for sustained collaboration. Furthermore, we engage in a critical exploration of various instructional and program models and make a strong case for collaborative approaches to serving these students.

CHAPTER 3: COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO IDENTIFICATION AND ON-GOING ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

In this chapter, we begin to take a comprehensive look at the expertise teachers, ELD specialists, bilingual educators, special educators, and support personnel offer. We highlight the knowledge and experience each group of professionals contribute to the collaborative efforts of identification and placement of multilingual learners with exceptional needs. We will discuss how taking multiple perspectives into consideration will help avoid under- and over-representation as well as misidentification. When many educators “share the students” and work together with clear goals and purpose, their students benefit from not only the creative synergy and collective efficacy that emerges in those partnerships but from the sustained efforts to monitor students’ academic, linguistic, literacy, and social progress.

CHAPTER 4: ENGAGING IN COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

In this chapter, we present multiple approaches that educators can take to combine their expertise and successfully co-plan. Taking actionable steps to co-plan by using the strategies and routines in this chapter, readers will be prepared to create effective differentiated and appropriately scaffolded units and lessons that carefully consider the complex needs of multilingual learners with exceptionalities. We present field-tested collaborative tools and protocols that support the intentional and meaningful integration of content, language, literacy, and IEPs.

CHAPTER 5: CO-DELIVERING INSTRUCTION FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS WITH EXCEPTIONALITIES

This chapter builds upon the collaborative planning and assessment practices that are presented in Chapters 3 and 4. It is geared toward instructional contexts where two or more educators collaboratively deliver the

curriculum and support student learning within a shared classroom space or in an alternative learning environment. Co-teaching and coordinated teaching configurations will be explored and richly illustrated.

CHAPTER 6: CAPACITY BUILDING FOR SUSTAINED COLLABORATION

In this final chapter, we will address the importance of sustained collaboration and the complex ways to build capacity. We adapt the professional capital framework consisting of human capital, social capital, and decision-making capital and apply it to the types of collaborative practices that lead to enduring results for multilingual learners with exceptionalities.

RECURRING CHAPTER FEATURES

There are several major sections as well as recurring features in each chapter to provide continuity and a consistent learning experience for our readers. Keep in mind that this book is written with both the experienced educator as well as the novice teacher or teacher candidate in mind so we anticipate that you will find both affirmations and challenges presented on the pages of this book. Each chapter will follow a predictable format to help you navigate the content. To achieve that, you can count on the following sections to appear in every chapter in this order:

CHAPTER OPENING SKETCH NOTE

Each chapter begins with a sketch note masterfully developed by Carmen Nguyen offering a visual representation of the key ideas of the chapter. Carmen is the Officer of Professional Development for Multilingual Learners in the Office of Other Languages, Katy Independent School District, Texas, and a prolific sketch note artist, who works digitally and freehand to capture key ideas and to portray her inner positivity when working with multilingual learners.

QUOTE OR PROVERB

Following Carmen's splendid visual overview of the chapter, we offer a compelling quote that reflects the chapter's message as well as the experiences of many of our multilingual learners with exceptionalities.

ANCHOR QUESTIONS

Our goal with the anchor questions is to set the stage for the rest of the chapter. These carefully crafted questions also double as an invitation to collaborate with your teams. Perhaps you pause and set some goals for yourself based on these questions. Or perhaps you plan a meeting or initiate a shared document with your colleagues to record your responses before you read each chapter. While these questions are purposefully designed

to engage collaborative teams as they define the focus of the chapter content, you can try them out individually as a preassessment and reflection tool. Whether the questions serve as springboards to your dynamic and free-flowing discussions or help settle you for reading on your own, let's agree to stay focused on recognizing and affirming the assets and strengths of learners and their educators!

START HERE

As the *Start Here* heading suggests, these introductory sections in each chapter invite you to launch your exploration of the topic with some key information. We want you to center your thinking around some essential concepts and shared practices before going deeper into the topic. Some of you may have already “been there and done that,” and if so, these sections will reaffirm and validate your current practices as well as offer you talking points to bring to your colleagues.

COLLABORATIVE TEAM PORTRAIT

We introduce you to a three-way collaborative partnership and weave their story across all the chapters. These composite vignettes depict realistic scenarios with fictitious names and locations. The inspirations for the story have come from our own experiences as teachers, researchers, coaches, and advocates. We believe that this type of portraiture will contain student and teacher experiences as well as elements of collaborative teaching and learning that many of you recognize and easily relate to. In fact, we are going to introduce the team later in this chapter.

DIG DEEPER

The next key feature in each chapter helps you deepen your thinking around multilingual learners with exceptionalities. The ideas presented here have been field-tested in many schools and districts as well as backed by research. The *Dig Deeper* sections are designed to critically engage you with the material as we challenge you to consider differences of opinions or perspectives about collaborative practices.

ESSENTIAL TOOLS AND PROTOCOLS

In the *Essential Tools and Protocols* section, we present equitable classroom-based approaches and powerful multimodal resources related to the topic of the chapter. Throughout the book, we highlight Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Jung, 2023; Novak, 2016; Stein, 2023) as a framework for creating inclusive, collaborative learning environments and developing consistent instructional practices for multilingual learners with exceptionalities and their peers in collaborative, integrated classes. A word of caution is in order: Protocols and tools are not set in stone—they are intended to be refined and adapted to your local context so consider them as further opportunities and invitations for collaboration.

CELEBRATIONS

While we showcase many examples of collaborations and acknowledge educators throughout the chapters, we include more detailed stories called *Celebrations*, which are first-person accounts written by the contributing educators. You may want to try some of the initiatives, or you may simply appreciate the innovations and inspirations that teachers of multilingual learners with exceptionalities have developed over time. These authentic stories from around the country portray collaborative practices with successful outcomes. The names of the students have been changed, but the educators themselves are excited to share their best collaborative strategies and so their professional names, schools, and districts are identified. Some of the featured educators are well-established teachers or administrators, and some are novice teachers who are ready to make an impact on the students that they are privileged to teach.

SCHOOL AND DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS' CORNER

As we wrap up each chapter, we make some leadership-specific recommendations to school or district administrative team members. Instructional leadership as well as strong commitment and vision for collaboration are essential to the success of the type of initiative we are advocating for multilingual learners with exceptionalities—or for all students in your care!

END-OF-CHAPTER REFLECTION QUESTIONS

We incorporated reflection questions at the end of each chapter to invite you to stop and process all that was presented before moving on to the next chapter. Although we decided against a designated chapter on collaborative reflection, we recognize the importance of engaging in reflective practices as part of the collaborative instructional cycle and have woven reflections throughout the book in multiple ways. These questions may be shared with your team members, co-teachers, or instructional leaders to further your collaboration and to continue to build your collective efficacy (Hattie, 2018). We have found that by using reflection questions and discussion prompts, we can validate existing practices, share successes and unpack challenges, elicit new ideas and solutions as well as enhance overall team communication. These questions are designed to both keep you in the chapter a little longer as well as to stretch your thinking and imagination beyond the content of the chapter.

GO BEYOND THE CHAPTER

The *Go Beyond the Chapter* section includes additional resources to best meet the needs of your students. Think of these resources as professional learning opportunities to extend and elaborate on your collaborative practices.

BUT WAIT, THERE IS MORE . . .

In addition to this consistent chapter organization, wherever deemed necessary, we have inserted some additional features throughout each chapter to further illustrate a key point we are making or to invite you to engage with the content in unique ways.

MINDFUL MOMENTS

As their names suggest, *Mindful Moments* are highlights you will find throughout the book. These features offer opportunities to slow down a bit and to pause and think about how to create rich collaborative opportunities in your context as well as how to bring linguistic, academic, social, and cultural experiences to the classroom or the team meetings. The *Mindful Moments* feature also serves the purpose of on-going reflection and provides the possibility for extended discourse with your colleagues.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Each chapter will include two pieces of artwork by Vermont-based painter-illustrator Colleen Wilcox to visually represent a key idea, sentence, or a quote. Other types of illustrations will include images that showcase examples of authentic teacher work samples from different contexts across varied grade levels, content areas, and instructional delivery models.

SUMMARY CHARTS AND FIGURES

Periodically we will synthesize key information or recommendations in some graphic format for easier access. We love one-pagers that succinctly organize and present essential material; we hope you do too!

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Under the heading *Voices from the Field*, you will find brief examples that may focus on a single strategy, a compelling personal story, or a shared professional experience. We wish to showcase authentic practices from PreK–12 classrooms and schools with you. One of our own takeaways from writing this book is that the desire to collaborate and build relationships with colleagues always yields powerful results. Here is our first example of this feature:

Kelly Cray, cultural and language support specialist at Burr and Burton Academy, Manchester, Vermont, shared her thoughts with us on every chapter during the manuscript development, so it is most fitting to showcase her persuasive message:

If we truly want to foster collaboration and promote inclusion, we need to speak as if the individuals or groups we discuss are present with us. This approach not only respects people with disabilities and neurodivergences, but it also helps prevent the reinforcement of implicit biases.

When advocates emphasize the use of neuroinclusive language and the importance of avoiding deficit-based language, they do so not only for the benefit of neurodivergent individuals but also for the betterment of society. Language holds immense significance because it shapes our perception of the world. Biases and prejudices will flourish if a particular group of people is consistently discussed regarding their limitations or what they cannot contribute to society. Similarly, when we talk about marginalized groups as if they are separate from us, we create a mental divide that hinders inclusion.

One phrase that resonates with me is “belonging is a type of access.” This concept applies to our classrooms and our professional communities. It becomes apparent that many people genuinely believe that disabilities and divergences are inherent disadvantages. If we view our students in this light, they will never experience a sense of belonging. If we view our colleagues in this light, genuine collaboration becomes unattainable.

Reflect on this brief quote: Do you agree with what Kelly says about the importance of language? How does what Kelly describes manifest itself in your context?

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