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A Needs Analysis of Teacher Experiences and Literacy Practices in Supporting Multilingual Learners in Borderland Schools

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Abstract. The purpose of this research was to examine teacher experiences and instructional practices in borderland schools to determine the conditions shaping multilingual literacy instruction and how these experiences differ according to teacher characteristics. This study was a pilot study with a sample of 16 teachers who completed a survey measuring structural barriers, cultural responsiveness, instructional practices, and professional learning and collaboration. Descriptive findings indicated perceptions of moderate institutional support, including funding, technology access, and a vision for multilingual education, although teachers reported limited access to bilingual materials and specialist support. Teachers demonstrated confidence in integrating students' cultural identities into literacy instruction yet noted limited institutional encouragement for translanguaging and home language use. While differentiated instructional practices were widely implemented, attention to contextual factors such as mixed-status families and geographic isolation varied. Mann-Whitney U analyses revealed that Hispanic teachers and those with multicultural training perceived greater structural barriers; bilingual teachers reported stronger differentiation and cultural integration practices; and Hispanic teachers perceived less institutional value placed on bilingualism. Overall, teachers showed strong commitments to culturally and linguistically responsive instruction; however, systemic support was inconsistent. Therefore, it is recommended that schools

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strengthen institutional alignment through expanded bilingual resources, targeted professional learning, and policies that affirm bilingualism. These actions will better support teachers' instructional practices and improve multilingual literacy outcomes in borderland contexts.

Keywords: borderlands; culturally responsive pedagogy; literacy; multilingualism; needs analysis; teacher experiences.

1. Introduction

Early literacy development is the cornerstone of academic success. Foundational abilities in reading, writing, and oral communication strongly predict long-term educational achievement and well-being (Lervåg et al., 2018; Savolainen et al., 2008). For children learning to read in more than one language, literacy acquisition involves complex interactions between linguistic, cognitive, and social factors (Verhoeven, 2011).

Research has consistently demonstrated that bilingual children can transfer skills such as phonological awareness, morphological knowledge, and vocabulary across languages, and that these capacities support literacy development in both the home language and the additional language of instruction (Comeau et al., 1999; Goodrich & Lonigan, 2017; Pasquarella et al., 2015; Proctor et al., 2006). Despite this evidence, early literacy instruction in the United States (US) is frequently framed as a scripted and neutral process that privileges English proficiency, often overlooking multilingual and culturally grounded approaches to literacy learning (Carlton, 2024).

Recent scholarship has called for early literacy instruction that is culturally sustaining and responsive to the lived experiences of multilingual learners (Paris & Alim, 2017; Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2021). Culture-based literacy practices – including translanguaging, community storytelling, and the integration of students' linguistic repertoires – have been shown to enhance engagement, identity affirmation, and comprehension in early grades (Daniel & Pacheco, 2022). However, such approaches are implemented unevenly, particularly in communities shaped by poverty, migration, and linguistic marginalization.

This tension is especially evident in California's US-Mexico border region of Imperial County, where more than eighty percent of students identify as Hispanic and over twenty percent live below the poverty line (Education Data Partnership, 2025). Students frequently navigate transnational mobility, binational schooling experiences, and culturally hybrid identities that require instructional approaches grounded in community knowledge and linguistic assets (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; Gándara, 2020; Gutiérrez-Pérez, 2016). Despite growing recognition of culturally sustaining pedagogy, the urgency of culture-based literacy learning in transborder contexts has not been adequately addressed in early literacy research.

Although border communities exist worldwide, this study centers on the Calexico-Mexicali region, where educators serve student populations facing complex academic, social, and economic demands that influence multilingual

literacy instruction (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2016). Many families experience the effects of migration, transnational mobility, or deportation, and children often navigate educational systems shaped by English-dominant instructional models (Robertson, 2013). While existing research has examined bilingual literacy development broadly (i.e., Bitetti & Hammer, 2016; Kremin et al., 2019; Silverman et al., 2015), limited empirical work has been conducted which focuses on needs analyses of early literacy instruction in borderland contexts, particularly from the perspective of teachers implementing cultural and linguistically responsive practices. Consequently, there is an insufficient understanding of how institutional support, structural barriers, and local sociocultural resources shape early literacy instruction in transborder classrooms. Addressing this gap is critical for designing instruction that aligns with the linguistic, cultural, and transnational realities of young bilingual learners.

This study focuses on early literacy instruction in transborder classrooms to better understand how teachers support multilingual literacy development under these complex conditions. While acknowledging the multiple factors that mediate children's literacy learning, this study centers on educators' instructional practices, their experiences with institutional support and structural barriers, and the ways they draw on students' linguistic and cultural resources in early literacy teaching. Guided by this aim, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do teachers in borderland schools navigate structural conditions and enact culturally and linguistically responsive early literacy instruction? and (2) In what ways do multilingual status, race, and professional preparation shape instructional decision-making in these settings?

To address these questions, the objectives of the study were to examine the needs of teachers in transborder classrooms by analyzing how they navigate structural conditions, enact culturally and linguistically responsive early literacy instruction, and draw on students' linguistic and cultural resources. By offering a context-specific needs analysis of early literacy in a transborder region, this study provides empirical insight to inform culturally sustaining policy, teacher preparation, and classroom practice in multilingual border communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Underpinnings

Borderland schools urgently require a context-specific analysis of culture-based language learning. Teachers in these regions work in a context of intensified linguistic, cultural, and political pressures shaped by immigration policy, accountability mandates, and English-dominant reform (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Menken, 2013). Despite serving predominantly bilingual communities, schools often implement curricula that marginalize students' cultural and linguistic resources (Valenzuela, 2016). This misalignment creates immediate instructional challenges for teachers and limits equitable learning opportunities for students. Without a needs analysis, leadership decisions risk continuing to overlook the realities of border classrooms. This study therefore conducts a focused needs analysis to identify the actual necessities, professional constraints,

and institutional barriers teachers face when implementing culture-based language instruction in Imperial County. To guide this analysis, the study draws on Borderlands Theory (Anzaldúa, 1987), Translanguaging Theory (García & Wei, 2014), and Latinx Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Together, these frameworks offer analytical tools for examining how race, language, culture, and power shape teaching and learning in border contexts (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Borderlands Theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) conceptualizes the border not simply as a geopolitical boundary but as a sociocultural and psychological space characterized by hybridity, negotiation, and transformation. For teachers working in Imperial County, the borderlands represent a lived reality that influences professional identity formation, pedagogical beliefs, and instructional decision making. Educators routinely navigate overlapping cultural contexts as they reconcile English-dominant curricular expectations with the bilingual and bicultural experiences of their students. This process requires continuous adaptation of instructional practices in ways that honor community knowledge while responding to institutional demands. Viewed through the lens of Borderlands Theory, teacher experiences are deeply shaped by place and history, underscoring how teaching in border contexts involves ongoing negotiation across systems, values, and ways of knowing.

Translanguaging Theory (García & Wei, 2014) provides a complementary framework for examining how teachers experience and support bilingualism in borderland classrooms. This theory challenges traditional notions of language separation by emphasizing that multilingual individuals draw from an integrated linguistic repertoire to construct meaning. Teachers in Imperial County frequently observe students moving fluidly between Spanish and English during literacy instruction, classroom discourse, and social interaction. Educators who adopt a translanguaging stance interpret these practices as evidence of linguistic competence rather than confusion or deficiency. This framework highlights how teachers negotiate institutional pressures that prioritize English-only instruction but also find ways to intentionally leverage students' full linguistic resources to support comprehension, engagement, and academic confidence. Consequently, translanguaging emerges as both an instructional approach and an expression of the commitment of teachers to equitable and inclusive learning environments.

Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) extends Critical Race Theory by centering the intersections of race, language, culture, and immigration status in the lived experiences of Latinx communities. Within this study, LatCrit provides a framework for examining how teachers encounter and respond to structural inequities embedded in curricula, assessment practices, and language policies. Teachers in borderland schools often observe how deficit-oriented narratives position bilingualism and border identities as barriers to academic success. LatCrit emphasizes the importance of counter-storytelling and community voice, allowing teacher experiences to be understood as forms of resistance, advocacy, and professional agency. From this perspective, teachers are positioned as educators who actively challenge inequitable systems and work to

affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities through responsive and justice-oriented practices.

Collectively, these theoretical frameworks establish the conceptual foundation for examining teacher experiences in borderland schools in Imperial County. They position multilingualism as a resource rather than a limitation, foreground the influence of sociopolitical context, and highlight the central role of teachers in navigating and transforming educational spaces. By integrating Borderlands Theory, Translanguaging Theory, and Latinx Critical Race Theory, this study offers a comprehensive lens through which to understand how race, language, and place converge to shape teaching and learning in borderland settings.

2.2. Literacy Development in Borderland Communities

Research on early literacy in border regions reveals a complex interplay between opportunity and constraint. On the one hand, children in these communities often confront structural barriers that limit their access to high-quality instruction. Economic instability, school mobility, and immigration-related stressors can disrupt learning continuity and reduce participation in early education programs.

On the other hand, families maintain rich linguistic and cultural traditions that support language development and literacy. Ethnographic studies document how children acquire foundational literacy skills through participation in family and community practices long before entering school (Hernandez-Zamora, 2010; Schmidt, 2013; 2020). Activities such as storytelling, letter writing, and oral recitation cultivate vocabulary, narrative ability, and phonological sensitivity. In multilingual borderlands, these practices are inherently bilingual or even transnational. For example, children may communicate with relatives across the border through phone calls or digital messages, thereby developing comprehension and expressive skills in both languages.

Despite these strengths, formal schooling often overlooks or undervalues such experiences. English-only instruction and standardized assessments can fail to capture the linguistic richness of children's home environments. This mismatch may contribute to lower reading scores and reduced engagement among students whose mother tongue is not English. Scholars argue that literacy instruction in border regions should integrate local knowledge, home languages, and cultural narratives to create more equitable learning conditions (Campano et al., 2021; Robertson, 2013).

In addition, the sociopolitical environment of border communities influences literacy outcomes. Policies related to immigration enforcement and language education affect both teacher practices and family participation. Fear of deportation or discrimination can deter families from engaging with schools, while restrictive language policies may discourage bilingual instruction. Understanding these contextual factors is essential for designing effective early literacy interventions.

2.3. Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogies

Efforts to promote early literacy in multilingual and migrant-serving contexts increasingly emphasize culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy. This approach seeks to connect instruction with students' cultural identities, linguistic resources, and lived experiences (Holli, 2018; Hammond, 2021). It involves adapting curriculum materials, assessment methods, and classroom interactions to reflect the diversity of learners. Culturally responsive literacy instruction begins with recognizing that children's home languages and literacies are central to their cognitive and social emotional development (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2020).

Teachers who integrate students' linguistic backgrounds into classroom activities foster greater engagement and comprehension. Asset-based approaches to multilingualism position bilingualism as a strength rather than a deficit, supporting stronger literacy outcomes over time (Wong et al., 2025). In this context, reading bilingual books in the classroom, inviting family storytelling, and incorporating community topics into lessons can help students link new learning to familiar experiences. Research indicates that such practices strengthen vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation, particularly for multilingual learners (August et al., 2005; Proctor et al., 2007).

Teacher preparation and professional learning are critical components of this work. Educators must develop not only pedagogical skills but also sociolinguistic awareness and cultural humility. Professional development programs that focus on translanguaging strategies, community partnerships, and reflective practice have been shown to improve instructional quality in bilingual settings (Hammond, 2021). Collaboration among teachers, families, and community members also contributes to sustainable change. When educators co-design educational initiatives with parents and local organizations, they build trust and ensure that instruction reflects the values of the community (Beltrán-Grimm, 2024).

In borderland regions, culturally responsive pedagogy must also address the realities of transnational life. Children often move between educational systems, cultural frameworks, and linguistic codes (García & Wei, 2014). Teachers who understand these dynamics can design instruction that supports continuity and belonging. For instance, maintaining bilingual portfolios or communication journals allows students to document their learning across borders. Similarly, incorporating regional histories and narratives into reading materials validates students' identities and broadens their interpretive frameworks (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Although progress has been made in developing responsive pedagogies, challenges remain. Many teachers report limited training in bilingual education, insufficient materials in students' home languages, and competing policy mandates that prioritize standardized English assessments (García & Kleifgen, 2020). Addressing these barriers requires systemic commitment to equity-oriented reform. Schools must allocate resources for bilingual materials, invest in

teacher development, and revise accountability systems to value multilingual growth (Miller et al., 2025).

2.4. The Present Study

In the current study, which is a pilot study, we address a critical gap in early literacy scholarship by centering the experiences and instructional practices of teachers working in borderland schools along the US–Mexico border. While a substantial body of research has established the importance of culturally and linguistically responsive literacy instruction for multilingual learners (Paris & Alim, 2017) and examined bilingual education policy and program implementation (August et al., 2009; Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015), few studies have specifically examined how early grade teachers in border communities enact literacy instruction within contexts shaped by transnational movement and structural inequities.

By focusing on transitional kindergarten through Grade 2 classrooms in Imperial County, California, the present study investigated two primary research questions: (1) What are teacher experiences, needs and practices in borderland schools, including how they address structural barriers, cultural responsiveness, instructional practices, and professional learning and collaboration? and (2) How do factors such as multilingual status, race, and professional training relate to teacher experiences and practices in borderland schools? It was hypothesized that teachers in borderland schools would face structural inequities but demonstrate culturally responsive and collaborative practices to support multilingual learners, and that the multilingual status of teachers, racial identity, and professional training would be positively associated with the use of culturally and linguistically responsive literacy instruction.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This pilot study employed a survey design involving 16 teachers from eight schools across Imperial County, California. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (a) current employment in a borderland school serving bilingual and emergent bilingual students; and (b) direct instructional responsibility for bilingual learners. Data was collected during the months of October to December 2025. The survey was administered through Qualtrics on a secure university platform, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality. The needs analysis questionnaire was developed based on the principles of needs assessment outlined by Sleezer and colleagues (2014) and was designed to examine community demands, instructional challenges and available resources supporting bilingual students in borderland schools. Ethical approval was obtained from the University [Removed for Review] reference # [removed for review].

3.2. Participants

Participating teachers had, on average, over five years of teaching experience ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.99$). The majority of participants spoke English as their home language (87.5%), compared to Spanish (12.5%) and identified as Hispanic

(75.0%). In addition, more than half of the participants reported that they were multilingual (56.3%). Teachers also reported on their roles and experiences in the classroom (Table 1).

Table 1: Experiences in the Classroom: Role, Grade, and Percentage of Multilingual Students in the Class

Experience in the Classroom	<i>n</i> (%)
Role in the Classroom	
Classroom Teacher	13 (81.3)
Reading/Literacy Specialist	1 (6.3)
Academic/Instructional Coach	2 (12.3)
Grades	
TK	5 (31.3)
Kindergarten	2 (12.5)
Grade 1	5 (31.3)
Grade 2	1 (6.3)
Multiple Grades	3 (18.8)
% Multilingual Students in Class	
0-25%	5 (31.3)
26-50%	3 (18.8)
51-75%	7 (43.8)
76-100%	1 (6.3)
Language of Instruction: Spanish	1 (6.3)
Has Multilingual Training	4 (31.3)
Has Culturally Sensitive Training	5 (31.3)

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

Data was collected through a questionnaire developed based on an extensive review of the literature on the needs of teachers when supporting bilingual students. The instrument consisted of 20 items designed to explore teachers' structural, cultural, and instructional needs. Additionally, two open-ended questions were included to elicit deeper insights into teachers' experiences and the challenges they encounter. The first asked participants to describe the biggest challenge they face when teaching early literacy to multilingual learners in relation to school policy or administrative oversight and resources. The second asked them to describe the biggest challenge they face when teaching early literacy to multilingual learners in relation to the needs of children and families. Respondents were invited to share specific experiences, examples, or contributing factors for each.

3.4. Procedure

3.4.1. Data Collection

Surveys were distributed by email to teachers from elementary schools in the Imperial Valley which had expressed an interest in participating. An invitation to participate was first sent to school administrators, who were asked to share the

survey with teachers interested in supporting bilingual students. Once schools confirmed participation, the questionnaires were emailed directly to the teachers. Respondents completed the questionnaires individually and returned them electronically during a two-week period.

3.4.2 Measures

Based on an environmental scan of the broader literature on supporting bilingual students' literacy development, items examining structural barriers for teachers, cultural responsiveness, instructional practices, and professional development and collaboration were included.

- The structural barriers teachers faced in supporting literacy instruction for bilingual students was examined. Specifically, teachers were asked to rate seven items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) to understand their experiences with structural barriers in their school, including whether their school provided sufficient funding, whether they had bilingual materials available, alongside access to reading specialists or intervention staff, whether their schedules allowed more time for small-group literacy instruction, whether they had technological support for reading development, and whether their schools had a clear vision for multilingual education. This subscale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.72$).
- The practices surrounding cultural responsiveness teachers provide and face were examined. Specifically, teachers were asked to rate five items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) including whether they encourage students to use their home language, whether the curriculum and materials reflect students' cultural backgrounds, whether schools provide support to promote cultural responsiveness in early literacy instruction, their confidence integrating students' cultural identities into reading and writing, and whether translanguaging was supported at their school. This subscale demonstrated poor internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.40$) and therefore a cultural responsiveness scale was not computed; instead individual items were examined.
- The instructional practices teachers provide and are given were examined. Specifically, teachers were asked to rate five items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), including whether they adapt literacy instruction to support diverse student proficiency levels, whether they regularly assess literacy skills in English and students' home languages, whether their school differentiates support based on race, language, or immigration background, whether they felt equipped to support mixed-status families and whether students' geographic circumstances were considered in instructional planning. This subscale demonstrated poor internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.58$) and therefore an instructional practices scale was not computed; instead individual items were examined.
- Finally, the professional learning and collaboration opportunities teachers have were also examined. Specifically, teachers were asked to rate five items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), including whether they had received professional development for early

literacy and multilingual learners, whether they collaborate with colleagues to co-plan culturally and linguistically responsive literacy lessons, whether their school has a clear vision for supporting multilingual students' literacy development, and whether they had leadership that valued bilingualism and biliteracy. This subscale demonstrated poor internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.470$) and therefore an instructional practices scale was not computed; instead individual items were examined.

Open-ended questions were also included in the survey. Specifically, teachers were asked to describe distinct challenges they faced regarding administration and other school-related barriers. We also asked teachers to describe child- and family-related barriers to supporting early literacy among multilingual learners.

3.4.3 Data Analysis

To address the first research question— What are teacher experiences, needs and practices in borderland schools, including how they address structural barriers, cultural responsiveness, instructional practices, and professional learning and collaboration? – descriptive statistics were computed to summarize teacher responses across all items. Teachers were also asked to describe their biggest challenges through an open-ended response question. A qualitative descriptive synthesis was conducted to provide a high-level summary of teacher perspectives. The lead author reviewed all the responses in full to become familiar with the range and nature of the data. Because the purpose of this analysis was exploratory and intended to summarize overall trends rather than to develop a formal coding scheme, the synthesis focused on identifying and describing common themes across responses. These categories were used to generate a concise overview of the key issues raised by participants.

Prior to addressing the second research question, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each of the four domains to evaluate internal consistency and inform the analytical approach. When reliability coefficients met conventional standards ($\alpha \geq .70$), as in the case of the Structural Barriers domain ($\alpha = 0.72$), items were aggregated into a composite score to represent the construct more reliably. However, when alpha values were below this threshold, as was the case for Cultural Responsiveness ($\alpha = 0.40$), Instructional Practices ($\alpha = 0.58$), and Professional Learning and Collaboration ($\alpha = 0.47$), the items were analyzed individually. This approach allowed for a more precise interpretation of variability across the different components of teacher practice and perception, ensuring that measurement limitations did not obscure important patterns in the data.

To address the second research question—How do factors such as multilingual status, race, and training relate to teacher experiences and practices in borderland schools? – a series of Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to examine group differences across the four domains. Non-parametric tests were selected due to the small sample size and the non-normal distribution of several variables. Analyses compared teachers' responses based on their multilingual status (monolingual vs multilingual), racial identity (Hispanic vs non-Hispanic), and

whether they had received training in multilingual instruction or culturally responsive pedagogy. This analytical approach made it possible to explore whether and how teachers' identities and professional backgrounds shaped their experiences, perceptions, and instructional practices in borderland school contexts.

4. Findings

4.1 Teacher Experiences and Practices

Descriptive statistics for structural barriers were calculated and can be found in Figure 1. Teachers reported moderate agreement that their schools provided sufficient funding to support literacy instruction for all learners. They also reported lower agreement that the availability of bilingual materials met the needs of their classrooms, and lower agreement that they had consistent access to reading specialists or intervention staff for multilingual students.

In contrast, teachers reported higher agreement that their schedules allowed for time dedicated to small-group literacy instruction and moderate agreement that they had access to technology to support early reading development. Teachers also reported moderate agreement that their schools had a clear vision for multilingual education. This subscale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.72$), indicating that the items measured a common underlying construct.

Descriptives for cultural responsiveness were examined and teachers reported lower agreement that students were encouraged to use their home languages during instruction. They reported moderate agreement that the curriculum included texts and materials reflecting students' cultural backgrounds and that schools provided support to promote cultural responsiveness in early literacy instruction. Teachers reported higher agreement that they felt confident integrating students' cultural identities into reading and writing lessons and moderate agreement that translanguaging practices were supported at their schools. The internal consistency of this subscale was low ($\alpha = 0.40$), indicating that the items may not be strongly interrelated and may capture multiple distinct aspects of cultural and linguistic responsiveness rather than a single construct.

Figure 1.





















Barriers		Mean	SD	Min	Max
Structural Barriers ($\alpha = 0.718$)					
Literacy Funding		2.94	1.34	1	4
Bilingual Materials		2.31	1.01	1	4
Specialist Access		2.50	1.03	1	4
Small Group		3.69	0.70	2	5
Technology Support		3.37	1.41	1	5
Multilingual Vision		2.94	0.68	2	5
Cultural Responsiveness ($\alpha = 0.395$)					
Cultural Language Use		2.69	1.08	1	4
Cultural Curriculum Materials		3.13	0.96	1	4
Cultural Identity Integration		3.75	0.45	3	4
Cultural Support		2.88	0.62	2	4
Translanguaging Support		3.00	0.89	1	4
Instructional Practices ($\alpha = 0.580$)					
Bilingual Assessment		3.50	0.89	2	5
Differentiated Instruction		4.13	0.62	3	5
Equity Support		3.13	0.62	2	4
Mixed Status Families		3.19	1.05	1	5
Geographic Planning		3.00	0.89	1	4
Professional Learning and Collaboration ($\alpha = 0.470$)					
Literacy Professional Development		2.88	0.89	2	5
Collaborative Planning		2.75	0.78	2	5
Strategy Co-Design		3.00	0.97	1	5
Value Bilingualism		3.25	0.93	2	5

Figure 1: Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Experiences and Practices

4.2 Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Experiences and Practices

Regarding instructional practices, teachers reported higher agreement that they adapted literacy instruction to support students at different proficiency levels. They reported moderate agreement that they regularly assessed literacy skills in both English and students' home languages and that their schools differentiated support based on race, language, or immigration background. Teachers reported moderate agreement that they felt prepared to address the literacy needs of students from mixed-status families and that students' geographic circumstances were considered in instructional planning. The internal consistency for this subscale was modest ($\alpha = 0.58$), suggesting that the items may not represent a single underlying construct and instead reflect several distinct aspects of instructional practices.

Finally, regarding professional learning and collaboration, teachers reported moderate agreement that they had received professional development specific to early literacy for multilingual learners and that they collaborated with colleagues to co-plan culturally and linguistically responsive literacy lessons. They also reported moderate agreement that their schools had a clear vision for supporting multilingual students' literacy development and that district leadership valued

bilingualism and biliteracy. The internal consistency of this subscale was low ($\alpha = 0.470$), indicating that the items may not be cohesive and instead represent multiple dimensions of professional learning and collaboration.

Teachers were also asked to describe distinct challenges when asked about (a) administration- and school-related barriers and (b) child- and family-related barriers to supporting early literacy among multilingual learners (Figure 2). When asked about administration and school-related challenges, respondents most frequently cited a lack of professional development opportunities ($N = 7$), insufficient funding ($N = 6$), and staff shortages ($N = 4$). Educators described limited access to expertise and targeted training, noting that “the biggest challenge faced when teaching early literacy to multilingual learners is having the resources”, and expressing a need for more support from specialists: “I would like someone that is knowledgeable in teaching ELs [English learners] to come and present different lessons for each subject.”

When asked about child and family-related challenges, educators identified limited parental engagement ($N = 9$) and language barriers ($N = 8$) as the most pressing issues. Several participants explained that “the families I work with do not have adults in the home that speak English”, and that parents “need help in understanding early literacy and their children’s needs, yet they are not available to get the help”. Misconceptions about bilingualism were also reported, such as beliefs that “reading in Spanish isn’t helpful, which is not the case”.

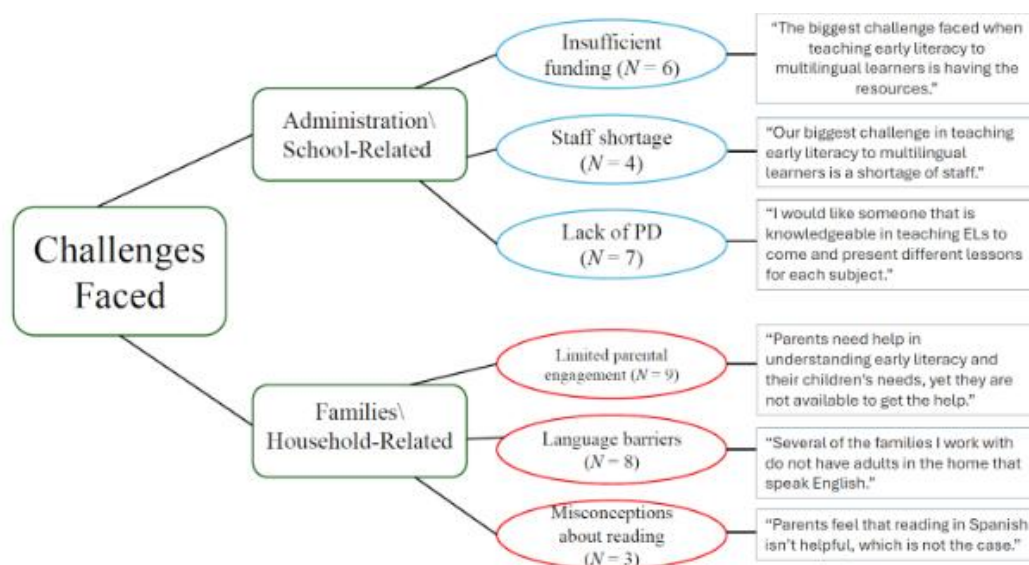


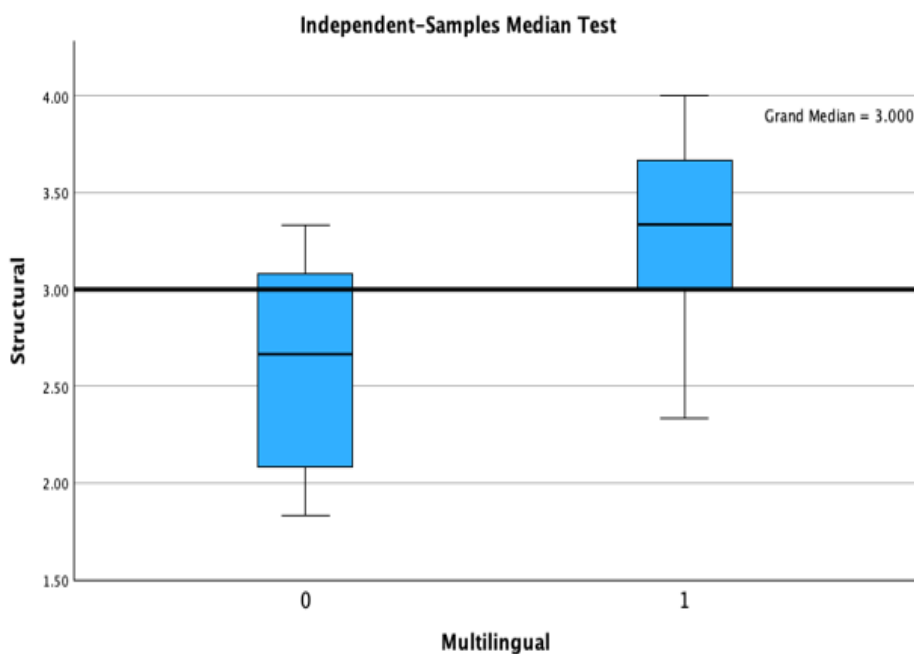
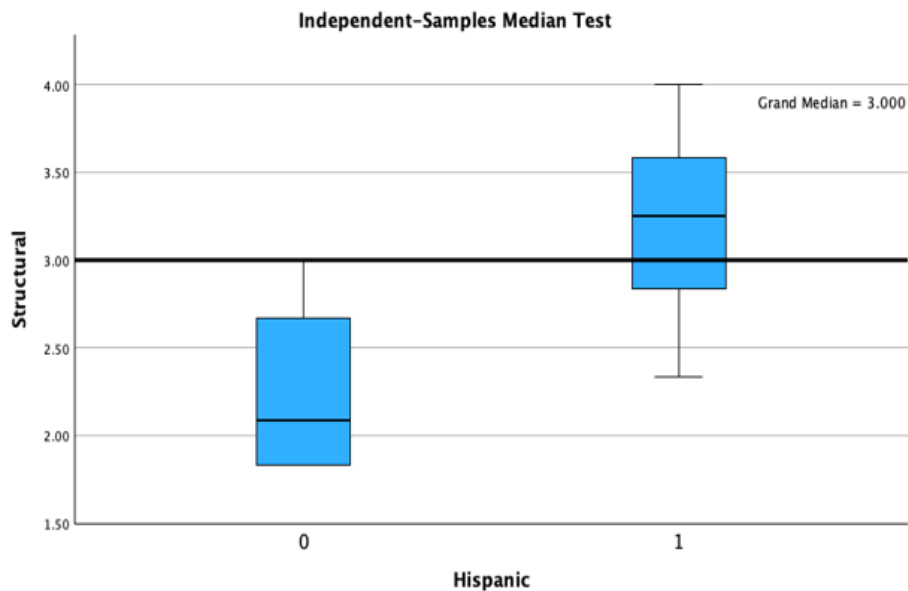
Figure 2: Teacher-Reported Challenges Faced Supporting Bilingual Students

Note: PD; professional development.

4.3 Differences Based on Multilingual Status, Racial Identity, and Training

A Mann Whitney U test was conducted to examine whether there were differences in structural barriers based on their characteristics – specifically, whether structural supports differed for teachers based on their multilingual status, racial identity and whether they had had training in either multilingual teaching or culturally sensitive training (see Figure 3). There was a significant

difference in structural barriers reported by teachers based on whether they were Hispanic $U(12, 4) = 43.00, p = .020$, in that Hispanic teachers reported greater structural barriers than non-Hispanic teachers. In addition, there was a significant difference in structural barriers based on whether a teacher had received multicultural training $U(11, 5) = 43.00, p = .040$, in that those who had received multicultural training reported greater structural barriers. In contrast, there were no significant differences in structural barriers reported by teachers based on whether they were multilingual $U(9, 7) = 48.50, p = .071$ or whether they had received multilingual training $U(12, 4) = 37.00, p = .278$.



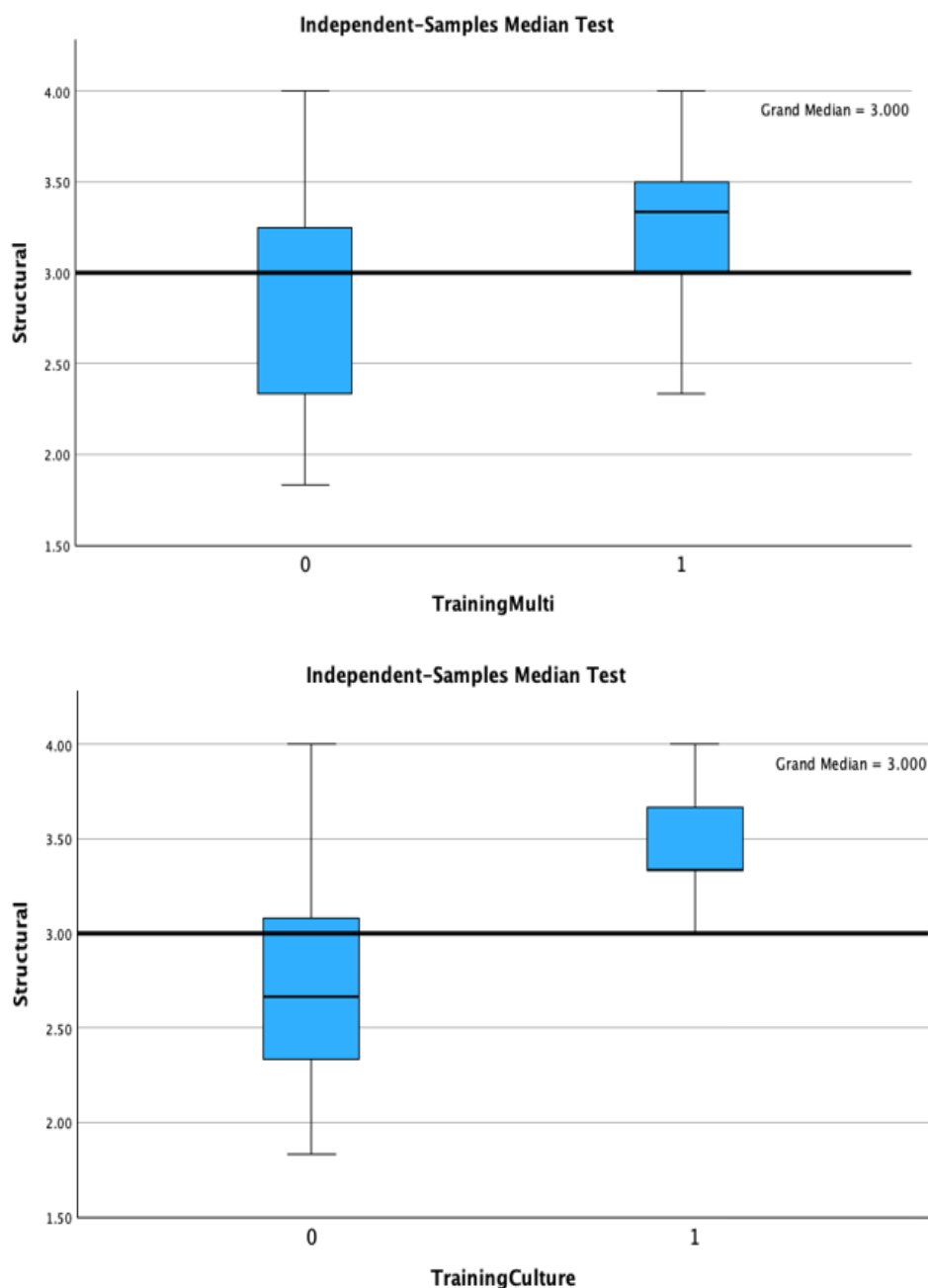


Figure 3: Race, Language, Geography, and Immigration Status Differences

Differences in items around cultural responsiveness based on their multilingual status, racial identity and whether they had had training in either multilingual teaching or culturally sensitive training (Table 2). Those who were multilingual felt more confident in integrating students' cultural identity into the curriculum, compared to those who were not multilingual.

Next, the study examined differences in items around instructional practices based on participants' multilingual status, racial identity and whether they had had training in either multilingual teaching or culturally sensitive training. There was a significant difference in whether teachers reported that their school

differentiates support for students based on race, language, or immigration background, between those who were and those who were not bilingual. More specifically, bilingual teachers reported that their schools provided greater differentiated support than teachers who were not bilingual.

Finally, the study examined differences in items around professional learning and collaboration based on teachers' multilingual status, racial identity and whether they had had training in either multilingual teaching or culturally sensitive training. There was a significant difference in terms of whether teachers reported that they felt that the district leadership values bilingualism and biliteracy based on whether or not participants' identified as Hispanic. More specifically, teachers who identified as Hispanic reported lower agreement that their districts value bilingualism and biliteracy. However, following a Holm–Bonferroni correct test of multiple analyses, none of the associations remained significant.

Table 2: Multilingualism, Race, and Training Differences in Teacher Experiences and Practices

	Multilingual	Hispanic	Training Multicultural	Training Cultural
Cultural Responsiveness				
Curriculum Materials	24.00	28.00	28.00	38.00
Identity Integration	49.50*	24.00	37.50	37.50
Support	38.50	20.00	37.50	37.50
Translanguaging	41.00	26.00	32.00	32.00
Instructional Practices				
Bilingual Assessment	34.50	14.00	34.50	20.50
Differentiated Instruction	43.50	34.00	36.50	36.50
Equity Support	50.50*	28.00	36.50	29.50
Mixed-Status Families	20.00	28.50	34.00	30.00
Geographic Planning	27.00	14.00	30.00	30.00
Professional Learning and Collaboration				
Literacy PD	29.50	24.50	39.00	43.50
Collaborative Planning	29.00	14.00	30.00	30.00
Strategy Co-Design	42.50	24.00	40.50	31.00
Value Bilingualism	22.50	1.00**	22.50	17.00

Note: Values indicate Mann-Whitney U, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

5. Discussion

This pilot study includes the perspectives of sixteen teachers working in borderland schools; it examines how they navigate the complex realities of multilingual literacy instruction in contexts shaped by linguistic diversity, mobility, and structural inequality. The research explores their experiences and practices across four key domains (structural barriers, cultural responsiveness, instructional practices, and professional learning and collaboration), providing a nuanced understanding of how educators work within and respond to the layered challenges of borderland education. Importantly, this work contributes uniquely to the literature by centering teacher voices in a context that is often discussed in

policy and demographic terms but less frequently examined from the perspective of those implementing instruction on the ground (Campano et al., 2021; Gándara & Jensen, 2021).

In examining these issues, the study addresses two interconnected questions: first, it considers how teachers conceptualize and enact literacy instruction in settings where structural conditions, cultural diversity, and institutional priorities intersect; second, it explores how broader contextual factors, such as race, language, and training, shape these practices and experiences. Across domains, the findings indicate a consistent pattern: teachers demonstrate strong commitment to culturally and linguistically responsive literacy instruction, yet systemic supports for bilingualism and translanguaging remain inconsistent, limiting the sustainability and coherence of these practices (García & Wei, 2014; Menken, 2013; Paris & Alim, 2017).

The findings offer valuable insights into the ways educators negotiate limited resources, shifting student demographics, and evolving policy landscapes, revealing both the opportunities and constraints inherent in teaching at the intersection of linguistic diversity and borderland dynamics. By illuminating these processes, the study extends the existing scholarship on multilingual and equitable literacy instruction and underscores the need for systemic approaches that align teacher capacity, institutional support, and sociopolitical context (Cummins, 2013; García & Wei, 2014).

5.1 Uneven Structural Supports and Systemic Constraints

Findings from this study reveal that teachers operate within a structural landscape that offers some foundational support for multilingual literacy instruction but falls short in several critical areas. Teachers reported moderate agreement that their schools provided sufficient funding to support early literacy instruction and that there was an institutional vision for multilingual education. However, the availability of bilingual materials and consistent access to specialist staff, both essential for targeted language support, were areas of lower agreement.

These findings suggest that while schools may articulate broad commitments to multilingualism, they do not consistently provide the necessary resources to enact these commitments in practice. This pattern reflects a broader concern raised in bilingual education research: schools may adopt public-facing commitments to multilingualism while maintaining infrastructures that continue to privilege English-dominant instructional pathways (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Menken, 2013). In borderland contexts, where students often navigate transnational mobility and everyday bilingual practices, insufficient access to bilingual materials and specialist expertise can further limit opportunities to build on students' full linguistic repertoires as resources for literacy learning (Gándara, 2020; Robertson, 2013).

Time allocation and access to technology emerged as relative strengths, with teachers indicating that their schedules generally allowed for small-group literacy instruction and that classroom technologies were available to support early

reading. These structural elements form an important foundation for responsive instruction, particularly given evidence that early literacy development benefits from targeted instruction and frequent opportunities for practice and feedback (Lervåg et al., 2018; Savolainen et al., 2008). However, without complementary investments in specialized personnel and linguistically diverse materials, their impact may be limited, especially for bilingual learners who benefit from instruction that intentionally supports cross-language transfer and builds literacy in both languages (Comeau et al., 1999; Pasquarella et al., 2015; Proctor et al., 2006). The internal consistency of this domain was acceptable, suggesting that these items collectively capture a coherent dimension of the institutional conditions shaping multilingual literacy practice.

5.2 Discrepancies Between Teacher Practice and Institutional Support

Across the remaining domains, cultural responsiveness, instructional practices, and professional learning, the results reveal a consistent pattern: teachers are implementing certain practices frequently, particularly those within their direct control, while other critical aspects of multilingual literacy instruction remain less developed due to limited systemic support. This tension is consistent with the scholarship which emphasizes that teachers often act as the primary drivers of culturally responsive practice even when institutional conditions do not fully align with equity-oriented goals (Hammond, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Within the domain of cultural and linguistic responsiveness, teachers expressed strong confidence in their ability to integrate students' cultural identities into literacy instruction. They also reported moderate use of culturally relevant materials and some institutional support for culturally responsive approaches. However, practices that require broader school-level commitments such as encouraging the use of home languages and supporting translanguaging were less commonly reported. This discrepancy underscores the persistence of monolingual norms in literacy instruction and points to a need for policies, curricula, and resources that more fully embrace linguistic diversity as a pedagogical asset (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Teachers' instructional practices reflect a similar dynamic. Differentiating instruction to support students at different proficiency levels emerged as one of the most common practices, suggesting a strong commitment to adapting teaching to meet learner needs (Robertson, 2013). However, practices that extend beyond the immediate classroom, such as systematically considering students' geographic circumstances, addressing the needs of mixed-status families, and ensuring differentiated supports based on language, race, or immigration background, were less consistently enacted. These findings align with prior research showing that educators in borderland schools often face competing institutional mandates that prioritize standardized assessments and English proficiency over multilingual development (Gándara & Jensen, 2021).

Finally, findings from the professional learning and collaboration domain reveal a persistent gap between teachers' instructional needs and the institutional support provided. Educators reported having limited access to professional

development focused on multilingual literacy, as well as infrequent opportunities for collaborative planning with colleagues. While many teachers noted that district leadership expresses a commitment to bilingualism and biliteracy, the lack of coordinated professional learning structures indicates that systemic investments in educator capacity remain inadequate.

5.3 The Role of Teacher Identity and Training in Shaping Practice

The findings highlight the importance of teacher identity, particularly in relation to multilingualism and racial background, in shaping how educators perceive and enact culturally responsive and equity-oriented practices in borderland schools. Differences in responses across multiple domains suggest that teachers' lived experiences and training meaningfully inform both their confidence in implementing inclusive practices and their perceptions of institutional support. One of the clearest patterns to emerge was that teacher who identified as multilingual reported significantly greater confidence in integrating students' cultural identities into the curriculum.

This may reflect the ways in which multilingual individuals often navigate and embody multiple cultural identities themselves, potentially giving them deeper insight into the importance of identity affirmation in the classroom (Anzaldúa, 1987). Their personal experience of negotiating multiple linguistic and cultural contexts may heighten their awareness of how cultural identity shapes students' learning experiences and may make them more attuned to opportunities to weave students' cultural knowledge, practices, and perspectives into instruction (García & Wei, 2014). It is also possible that multilingual teachers, by virtue of their own experiences, view language and culture as pedagogical resources rather than as barriers to be overcome, leading to more intentional efforts to create culturally sustaining learning environments (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

Another plausible explanation is that multilingual teachers may be more likely to work in school contexts that prioritize or support culturally responsive teaching practices. For example, schools that serve student populations with high levels of linguistic diversity may offer more professional development opportunities related to multilingual pedagogy or provide more robust structures—such as differentiated instruction models, culturally relevant materials, or translation support services—that enable teachers to implement inclusive practices more effectively (Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015). In this way, the association between teacher multilingualism and higher confidence may reflect not only individual capacity but also the institutional ecosystems in which these educators are situated.

A similar pattern was observed in the domain of instructional practices, where multilingual teachers were more likely than their monolingual peers to report that their schools differentiated support for students based on race, language, or immigration background. This finding suggests that teacher identity may shape how educators perceive their school's commitment to equity, potentially because multilingual teachers are more aware of subtle forms of differentiation or are more likely to recognize institutional practices aimed at addressing linguistic

diversity (Campano et al., 2021). It may also reflect real differences in the types of schools or districts where multilingual educators are employed—schools that actively recruit multilingual staff may also be those that are more invested in equity-oriented approaches.

The findings related to racial identity offer a contrasting perspective, revealing that Hispanic teachers reported lower agreement that their district leadership valued bilingualism and biliteracy. This perception gap may point to a disconnect between institutional rhetoric and lived experience, where educators from historically marginalized linguistic or cultural groups remain skeptical of institutional commitments to linguistic diversity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). It may also reflect a heightened sensitivity to systemic inequities; educators from minoritized backgrounds may be more attuned to gaps in policy implementation, resource allocation, or leadership priorities than their non-Hispanic peers. This finding underscores the importance of attending to teacher perspectives not only as reflections of practice but also as indicators of institutional climate and alignment between policy and practice.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how teacher identity and training intersect with broader institutional contexts to shape both perceptions and practices related to cultural responsiveness, instructional equity, and leadership priorities. They suggest that multilingualism and cultural background are not merely demographic characteristics but are deeply tied to how educators understand and navigate the work of teaching in linguistically and culturally diverse borderland settings (Anzaldúa, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). These patterns also point to the potential value of targeted professional learning that builds all teachers' capacity to engage with students' linguistic and cultural identities and emphasizes the structural dimensions of equity work—ensuring that inclusive practices are not contingent on who the teacher is but rather are embedded across the system (García & Kleifgen, 2020; Wong et al., 2025).

6. Measurement Considerations

The variability in internal consistency across the four domains underscores the complexity of capturing the multifaceted nature of multilingual literacy instruction. The Structural Barriers construct demonstrated acceptable reliability, suggesting that key institutional supports—such as funding, time allocation, access to resources, and broader institutional vision—represent a relatively cohesive dimension in the literacy environment.

In contrast, the lower internal consistency of the Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, Instructional Practices, and Professional Learning and Collaboration subscales suggest that these domains are more heterogeneous and may encompass several interrelated but distinct constructs (Proctor et al., 2006). Rather than reflecting a single underlying factor, they appear to represent clusters of practices, beliefs, and contextual conditions that do not necessarily co-occur. This highlights both the conceptual complexity of these domains and the need for continued refinement of measurement tools to better capture their multidimensional nature.

7. Practical Implications

In considering the implications of the research, this study indicates that while teachers in borderland schools demonstrate a strong commitment to cultural and linguistically responsive literacy practices, their efforts are limited by insufficient institutional support, access to bilingual materials, and sustained professional learning. Strengthening alignment between teacher expertise and systemic priorities is essential for improving multilingual literacy instruction. Schools and districts should invest in professional development centered on translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy, expand access to bilingual instructional resources, and create collaborative structures that value the perspectives of multilingual and Hispanic educators. By bridging policy and practice, educational systems can foster more equitable, identity-affirming literacy experiences that reflect the linguistic and cultural realities of borderland communities.

8. Limitations

Several limitations can be identified when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample size was small ($n = 16$), which limits the statistical power of the research and reduces the ability to generalize the findings to broader populations. The small sample also affects the stability of statistical estimates and limits the reliability of subgroup comparisons. This issue was further compounded by the number of analyses conducted due to the lack of internal consistency across measures. Although the Holm–Bonferroni correction indicated that none of the analyses reached statistical significance, this may reflect limited statistical power associated with the small sample rather than the absence of meaningful effects.

Furthermore, we were unable to examine potential differences based on key instructional and contextual variables, such as the percentage of multilingual students in a classroom, the proportion of instructional time dedicated to language or literacy instruction, or the grade levels taught. Another limitation is that the study involved multiple statistical comparisons, which increases the risk of Type I errors. Given the exploratory nature of this pilot study, these analyses were intended to identify potential patterns rather than establish definitive relationships. Future studies with larger samples will be better positioned to apply more robust statistical procedures and confirm whether the observed patterns are replicated.

Some subscales demonstrated internal consistency estimates below the commonly recommended threshold of $\alpha = .70$. To address this limitation, analyses were conducted at the item level rather than the scale level for these domains to avoid drawing conclusions from unreliable composite scores. This approach allowed for a more cautious interpretation of the data while acknowledging that further psychometric refinement of the instrument is needed. Future research with larger samples will allow for more robust evaluation of the factor structure and reliability of the instruments. In addition, the qualitative synthesis of open-ended responses was conducted by the lead author and intended to provide a high-level descriptive summary of participant perspectives. While this approach allowed for an initial overview of common themes, future research could incorporate multiple

coders and formal reliability procedures to strengthen the rigor of qualitative analysis.

Another limitation is that the data are cross-sectional and exploratory, which limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships across teacher characteristics, practices, and perceptions. The findings should therefore be interpreted as descriptive patterns rather than definitive evidence of underlying mechanisms. A further limitation includes participation bias, as those who chose to participate may have had stronger opinions or greater interest than those who did not. While mandatory participation could reduce this bias, it may not be feasible or ethical, thus the findings should be interpreted accordingly.

9. Conclusion and Future Research

The findings from the needs analysis in this study suggest that teachers are highly engaged in practices that are pedagogical in nature and directly under their control, such as differentiation, cultural integration, and the use of instructional strategies tailored to language proficiency. However, they report greater challenges in areas that rely on systemic infrastructure, including access to bilingual materials, consistent specialist support, institutional backing for translanguaging, and policies that address the complex realities of immigration, mobility, and family context.

This misalignment between teacher practice and institutional support has important implications: without coordinated school- and system-level action, teachers' efforts to provide equitable, culturally and linguistically responsive literacy instruction will remain constrained. Conclusions drawn from this teacher needs analysis therefore underscore the need to strengthen institutional support, improve resource access, and develop coherent policy frameworks that directly respond to teachers identified needs in order to sustain equitable and culturally responsive literacy instruction.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples that allow for more granular analyses and subgroup comparisons. Expanding sample sizes would also make it possible to control potential confounding variables and to use more advanced statistical modeling techniques, thereby deepening our understanding of how teacher identity, training, and contextual factors shape instructional practices and institutional support in multilingual, borderland education settings.

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