Equity for Multilingual Learners:
A Global Network Response to the Pandemic

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Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has been complex and challenging for educators, students and families worldwide. One could argue that education has changed as much in the past two years as it has in the past two centuries. By necessity, we have unbolted learning from the physical space of the classroom and accelerated the evolution of education: from Horace Mann's factory schools of the industrial era to personalized and digitized ecosystems of the twenty-first century. On one hand, this shift has highlighted inequities for multilingual learners and their families. On the other hand, the pandemic has redefined schools as a valuable point of connection for the entire community. At the intersection of innovation and exhaustion, educators worldwide have faced an entirely new reality: how to continue serving diverse school communities while responding to the pandemic. Teachers taught themselves not just new skills but entirely new digital learning platforms, literally overnight, to keep students engaged online. This article explains how, in an increasingly interdependent world, a global network of schools and scholars co-created a powerful community to both learn from and contribute to dialogue about equity for multilingual learners during the pandemic.

Probletunities in the Coronaverse
As an unexpected catalyst, COVID-19 forced innovation by requiring a shift to hybrid/virtual teaching followed by continual transitions between in-person and online learning. In a prescient pre-pandemic view of technology and education, Collins and Halverson (2018) observed that in order to adapt to a rapidly changing world, schools should leverage learning opportunities offered by new technology. To develop 21st century skills and ensure students are future-ready, Collins and Halverson asserted that learning should be uncoupled from school, allowing a greater variety of input and increased engagement. Over the past two years, the pandemic has both reflected and accelerated some of these trends as classroom experiences have been by necessity hybrid, with students learning in and out of school, community and home environments. School was no longer a place but a process, requiring teachers, students and families to collaborate in new ways.

Amid the collective necessity to pivot towards new technologies for teaching and learning during the pandemic, many educators expressed the need to ensure equity for multilingual learners. When online learning relies exclusively on English as the medium of instruction, students and families who navigate school in multiple languages can be excluded. We know that English proficiency "cannot be seen as a prerequisite to meaningful participation in school because this limits engagement" (Nordmeyer et al, 2021, p. 60). Instead, language must be viewed as something that is developed *in the process of learning* when students are supported and have access to the richest curriculum our

schools have to offer (NASEM, 2018). During the pandemic, a focus on the intersection of multilingualism and equity catalyzed connections across the worldwide community of teachers. Over the past two years, global networks such as the WIDA International School Consortium, provided an opportunity for educators to connect with, share, and learn from each other as a community of practice.

The WIDA International School Consortium
Located at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, WIDA supports schools around the world in using WIDA standards and assessments by disseminating research, facilitating professional learning and developing instructional resources to serve multilingual learners. The WIDA International School Consortium was created in 2013 and currently serves more than 500 PreK-12 international schools across 100 countries committed to developing inclusive programs that build on the assets of multilingual learners. The WIDA asset-based approach entails a shift in teachers' dispositions to focus on what students *can do* rather than what they *cannot do*. Shifting from a deficit-based to an asset-based view of multilingualism is one of the core principles of the WIDA standards and assessments, and the term "multilingual learner" is used intentionally rather than "English Language Learner" to decenter English and focus on students' entire linguistic repertoires.

For many schools in the post-colonial era of globalization, English persists as the medium of instruction; however, the rapid growth of the WIDA International School Consortium indicates a desire by many international schools to no longer view multilingual students as deficient and instead focus on what multilingual students can do. Over time, the global WIDA network has evolved from a focus on English language standards and assessments to providing opportunities for reciprocal learning around language and equity, connecting educators and facilitating collaboration across schools worldwide (Bettney & Nordmeyer, 2021). This larger conversation has recognized that using English as the *medium of instruction* does not necessitate English as the *medium of learning*, fostering approaches such as translanguaging to build on student assets.

A Network Response to the Pandemic
In response to the pandemic, educators and scholars in the WIDA International School Consortium engaged in transnational collaboration by leveraging the existing learning network to connect, co-create and re-imagine school together. In the first half of 2020, the WIDA global network partnered with a variety of international educators to better understand how to support multilingual learners, their teachers and their schools in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators committed to equity for multilingual learners were concerned that the rapidly changing educational landscape might not be serving some students and families.

Using Flipgrid, an online video creation and sharing platform, WIDA encouraged educators around the world to share some of their challenges and questions about supporting multilingual learners online teaching. Since then, the Flipgrid video-share has received over 10,000 views and 185 hours of engagement. These virtual interactions served as the foundation for a reciprocal learning community comprised of international educators centered on the intersection of three subdomains: PreK-12 teaching, education of multilingual learners and teaching online.

The WIDA Global Community of Practice
As WIDA engaged with its online community, educators expressed the desire for a more extended professional learning experience for international educators which prompted

the creation of a more formalized WIDA Global Community of Practice. To begin, Flipgrid video contributors, authors of WIDA newsletter articles, co-presenters from conferences, and other influencers and activists within the WIDA global network were invited to join this new community. In order to build on practical wisdom of experienced teachers and identify promising practices for online professional learning, international teacher leaders were involved in co-creating and co-facilitating this new space. This model was based on the concept of a community of practice, or a group of people "who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Communities of practice also involve interplay between novices and experts and help to create a professional identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Incorporating the experiences of WIDA facilitators, researchers and practitioners, the WIDA Global Community of Practice was designed to provide innovative reciprocal professional learning by amplifying the voices of global educators and engaging school-based teams in a collaborative online year-long guided research and design experience. The WIDA Global Community of Practice was launched in October 2021 to sustain collaboration during and beyond the pandemic in shared inquiry about how to create equitable systems to serve multilingual learners in today's schools.

As a shared community of practice where educators can co-construct or critique new ideas and approaches, the global WIDA network both catalyzes and disseminates innovation from individual educators and groups of practitioners at member schools. Ideas flow, mutate and evolve as they are shared among independent school, a process described by Sannino and Nocon (2008): "sustainability of innovations does not refer only to local continuity, but also to diffusion and adaptations in other settings" (p. 326). This networked transmission of innovation builds on the spread and sustainability of new ideas while allowing for local control. External influence is offered in the form of a guided inquiry into a problem of practice, engagement with relevant curated research and facilitated dialogue about educational innovation.

Over the past six months, school-based teams have actively engaged with problems of practice focused on how to reduce opportunity gaps for multilingual learners and how to dismantle systems that perpetuate privilege based on language or nationality. While these difficult questions may not be fully resolved during this year-long professional learning experience, teams have engaged in a guided design cycle to develop prototypes to begin to address these questions within their specific context. The WIDA Global Community of Practice culminated in a capstone celebration at the end of the 2021-2022 academic year, providing participating teams the opportunity to share what they have learned from their prototypes with the larger WIDA community. A new cohort of international educators will be inducted into this process later this year to sustain the work and identify and engage with new problems of practice.

While the WIDA Global Community of Practice provided a structured affinity space (Gee, 2005) for the exchange of ideas, the wider global WIDA network can also be viewed through the lens of innovation, providing an opportunity to disseminate new practices and tools among member schools. This innovation migration relies on peer dialogue and the opportunity to share, iterate and adapt: "since educational innovations are local and specific, they tend to spread differently from educational reforms. Rather than being adopted at once by a whole educational system, they spread and diffuse through interpersonal interactions" (Sannino & Nocon, 2008, p. 326). For educators in independent international schools who may feel isolated as they generally do not belong to a particular school district, this type of network is essential.

While the pandemic has indelibly altered the education landscape, it has also opened doors for important global dialogue about equity and inclusion. And over the past two years, educators have discovered they needed each other more than ever to reflect on and to make sense of the rapidly changing world. Across the WIDA global community, teachers have begun to co-construct a new reality: creating more equitable schools and ensuring that multilingual learners have meaningful opportunities for learning.

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