Hello! Bonjour! Namaste! Kon-nichiwa! Hola! I’m Professor Gail Prasad – I’m an assistant professor at York University in Toronto. While I recognize that you may be watching this video from many different locations, I want to start off by reading York’s land acknowledgement statement:

York University recognizes that many Indigenous Nations have longstanding relationships with the territories upon which York University campuses are located that precede the establishment of York University. York University acknowledges its presence on the traditional territory of many Indigenous Nations. The area known as Tkaronto has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat. It is now home to many First Nation, Inuit and Métis communities. We acknowledge the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. This territory is subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.

I recently moved back to Canada into my position at York University as an assistant professor in multilingual education. As you can tell as I read York’s land acknowledgement, I’m still working on and working out how I not only honour the land on which I work and live today but also how I reconcile as a Canadian-born immigrant teaching in and training teachers to teach in and through Canada’s colonial languages - English and French. Language is always about power.

I’m honoured to be invited by Jeff and Meike to this important conversation about Centering Multilingual Learners in Canadian Teacher Education and am really looking forward to our discussions together later in January.

We have been asked to describe what our faculty of Education programs do to prepare future teachers to work with multilingual learners.

The two-year Bachelor of education program at York doesn’t have any stand alone course requirement related to preparing future teachers to work with multilingual learners. Instead, we have tried to address instruction for English learners across required Foundations courses such as Literacy, Math and Equity and Inclusion. In addition, teacher candidates can choose to take an elective course entitled, Teaching English Language Learners in Mainstream Classrooms.

This year, I’ve been the course director for two sections of this course one offered in the fall and one in the current winter session.
I’ve designed the course with a particular focus on Critical Multilingual Language Awareness because we can’t center multilingual learners without addressing power relations between majoritarian language speakers – Anglophones in Ontario and minoritized multilingual language speakers.

With regards to a key issue for theorizing and doing this work, I would say that supporting Multilingual learners in schools today depends not only on helping them develop proficiency in the official language of instruction but also in supporting English dominant speakers to develop their capacity as multilingual listeners. I see schools today as language-rich environments that offer privileged spaces in which children and youth can learn by design how to engage in I’ve described with Prof. Marie-Paule Lory at UTM as linguistic and cultural collaboration. Teachers can play a powerful role in designing instruction to purposefully bring students from different cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds to work together on projects that leverage their intersectional identities and resources to accomplish together what they could never do alone. I see designing for critical collaboration as way of disrupting normative monolingual pedagogies.

So a key issue for centering Multilingual Learners in Canadian Teacher Education, for me, begins with teacher candidates first becoming language-aware themselves and understanding how their own linguistic cultural and social identities shape their languaging practices. Developing Critical multilingual language awareness requires a tremendous, often uncomfortable shift on the part of many future teachers (and teacher educators), particularly if they identify themselves as monolingual Anglophones because it requires that we confront linguistic privilege. To adopt a plurilingual paradigm necessitates that future teachers and teacher educators acknowledge not only that critical awareness matters but also that growth is required. A plurilingual educator is continually developing their dynamic communicative repertoire over the scope of their lives for different purposes and across different contexts.

Every teacher is a language teacher – so all teachers need to know about language – in particular, teachers need to understand how languages work so that they can support multilingual learners in using their communicative repertoires in powerful ways, as well as, helping their English dominant students engage as multilingual listeners and allies in the classroom.

Teacher education programs can better prepare classroom teachers to work with multilingual learners by helping teachers develop a life-long approach to becoming language learners and inquirers themselves, becoming students of their students’ languaging practices. Moving beyond just an inclusive perspective that supports the minoritized English learner to developing English as an academic language at school to a truly expansive approach that helps all classroom community members to become multilingual speakers and listeners.

In my previous work in the US, I had teacher candidates who were pursuing an ESL certification shadow a multilingual learner throughout one school day – their observations showed that
their multilingual students not only were producing very little language (in any language) during class, but in the hallways, cafeterias, etc., these students were largely invisible to their peers.

If we are practically and powerfully going to support multilingual learners in our schools, we need an all hands on deck approach, where by both teachers and students learn how to engage in conversations and critical collaborative work that leverages students’ multilingualism as a resource not for learning English but for building social understanding of difference and expanding ALL students’ communicative repertoires.

In teacher education, we need to be equipping teacher candidates to make visible students’ communicative repertoires, as well as indigenous languages for ALL. Across Canada, there have been some really powerful partnerships between university and school boards to develop multilingual and plurilingual pedagogies that need to find their way into teacher education so that beginning teachers can teach through what I’ve described as prism of children’s plurilingualism. We’re at a point in our understanding through empirical and theoretical research in Canada and internationally that we know far more than we do. Isn’t it time for us to start systematically translating into practice what we know? I look forward to planning towards this end together through our discussions in a couple weeks.