What a wild start to the new year it has already been.

I want to start with University of Toronto’s official land acknowledgement statement. You’ll see that I am reading from notes to help me speak more slowly so that the real-time captions that Zoom has have a chance to keep up!

I wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

And I want to underscore that land acknowledgements must be about action not just words. Let’s consider the ongoing blockade happening just an hour’s drive SW of Toronto, on the border between Caledonia and the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve. At issue is another attempt to claim Six Nations’ land and develop it into suburban housing. The blockade against the developer began on July 19, 2020 and continues today. Land acknowledgements, if they are to have any meaning, need to go hand-in-hand with land-based action, such as showing solidarity in word and deed with sovereignty struggles like the 1492 Land Back Lane blockade happening now. The script that accompanies this video has links to more information about this sovereignty effort.

I will return to the question of Indigenous sovereignty in a moment, but for now I want to take up the questions that panelists were asked to address. The first is what our teacher-education programs do and don’t do with respect to preparing all teacher candidates to work with multilingual learners. One difference for us in Ontario as compared with other jurisdictions in Canada is that, since 2015 the provincial body that accredits teacher education has required programs to address this very topic in their pre-service curriculum. I am the PI on a SSHRC Insight Grant, working with my colleagues and co-PIs Antoinette Gagné and Julie Kerekes and a stellar team of doctoral students, studying how our own program, and others in Ontario, have taken up this policy mandate. Some of my comments are connected to the results of this research.

At OISE, our program responded to this policy mandate by creating a stand-alone required course called “Supporting English Language Learners.” It is a 36 hour, semester-long course that candidates take in the 3rd, 4th, or 5th term of a 5-term, 2 year Master of Teaching program. The course has evolved greatly since it was first taught in May 2016, in part in response to our research (Prof. Gagné has also served as the lead instructor overseeing this course) as well as to real-world events, such as the arrival of Syrian refugees to Canada, the growth of a more confident and aggressive nationalist and right-wing movements like
Jordan Peterson’s acolytes, the Proud Boys, etc., as well as renewed activism around Indigenous sovereignty and anti-Black racism.

Common across all 15 sections of the course we teach each year are three assignments: candidates recount their own linguistic profiles in what we call “my plurilingual journey” -- indeed the majority of our candidates is multilingual, speaking over 50 minoritized and racialized languages, although during the course of our study, no candidates spoke languages indigenous to what is now Canada; they work one-on-one with an English Learner to conduct a case study of the student; and they work in groups to create a final unit plan to demonstrate how they would include multilingual learners and support them in their future classroom. These common assignments signal the basic stances of our course:

● to connect course topics to candidates’ own lived experiences with multilingualism;
● to connect course topics to the lived experiences of real multilingual students; and
● to focus course topics on future teaching practice, rather than mastery of this or that theoretical proposition.

I think these are the right stances. But alone, we have found, they do not guarantee the kind of learning that many of us in this webinar want from a course such as this. One issue here is the silo approach in our program to thinking about linguistic and racial difference. There are separate courses dealing with anti-discriminatory education, with Indigneous-settler relations, and with linguistic diversity. While these dedicated courses might provide instructors more time to dig into the respective topics, they also reflect a deeply divided theorization of linguistic and racial difference, and of the place of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum - but also in the academy with our respective disciplines largely isolated from each other. Nevertheless, many of us have come to understand how settler-colonialism, racism, and linguicism are intertwined in the co-constitution of global capitalism and of specific White settler nation states such as Canada. And yet in practice, too often we address these topics with our future teachers if at all then in isolation from each other.

When we separate our theoretical and political understanding of colonialism and racism from language and language learning, it is easier to get stuck with the long-standing, but I think insufficient euphemisms used to frame “supporting English Language Learners.” For one, the promise of “asset-based thinking” too often limits us to treating multilingualism merely as a resource for learning English; the allure of “promising practices” too often limits us in practice to just accommodating and modifying our instruction for multilingual learners. This reinforces the dominance of English and French at, and at best aims to create inroads to it for multilingual learners. As opposed to putting multilingual learners and their whole selves as the heart of school.

What I am not suggesting, however, is just to throw every kind of multilingualism together and treat it as a homogenous phenomenon. As the 1492 Land Back Lane occupation might
suggest, Indigenous language resurgence is a question of sovereignty and self-determination, not simply one among many other kinds of multilingualism in the Canadian state. Likewise, there are both historical and contemporary reasons why Franco-Ontarians as a language minority in Ontario have demanded the right to manage their own schools systems. Both for reasons of individual and community identity construction, as well as for language learning, there real historical and contemporary reasons why d/Deaf and hard of hearing students can benefit from congregating in Deaf schools that use ASL or LSQ as the medium of instruction, versus ‘mainstreaming’ into English- or French-dominant schools. In other words, when thinking about multilingual learners and Canadian teacher education, we have to pay careful attention to sovereignty and self-determination on the one hand, and solidarity and coalition on the other, as distinct, if also mutually supporting strategies for fostering language and content learning.

From applied linguistic perspectives, we already know a lot about what is required to foster age-appropriate and grade-level appropriate multilingual proficiency. Centering multilingual learners in Canadian teacher education is not primarily or even substantially a question of evidence - that is, of teaching candidates to use this or that research-based teaching practice to foster multilingualism. Rather, it is a question of politics. How do we help teacher candidates understand the differences and connections between sovereignty and self-determination on the one hand, and on solidarity and coalition on the other? How do we support teacher candidates in applying this thinking to their teaching? I still think we can engage candidates more effectively by making these theoretical arguments personal, that is, tying them to candidates’ own lives and the lives of their future students, as well as making them practical, in terms of what really does or should happen in the classroom.

But it seems to me the central question facing us as teacher educators is how to help candidates think through the specificity of the many multilingualisms that exist in the Canadian state and learn to make practical pedagogical decisions that support the speakers of minoritized, racialized, and colonized language, in short, to support multilingual learners to develop their language repertoire as they best see fit.