Thank you for inviting me to this panel on Centering Multilingual Learners in Teacher Education. My name is Burcu Yaman Ntelioglou. I am an Associate Professor and the Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, in the Faculty of Education at Brandon University in Manitoba. I respectfully acknowledge that I live and work on Treaty 1 and Treaty 2 lands, traditional homelands of the Dakota, Anishanabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dene and Métis people.

The question of ‘What are some ways Canadian Teacher Education programs are preparing all teacher candidates to support multilingual learners?’ is an important question. When we examine educational policies and curriculum documents with respect to the teaching of multilingual students, we can observe how views of multilingual students, and how we should support them in schools have shifted over time. Recent policies have significantly changed some of the limiting deficit-based beliefs about multilingual students. One development is the view of ‘multilingualism as an asset’. In line with research in the field, educational policy documents are beginning to encourage the development of home languages as well as English explaining that schools should use students’ languages as assets and should use home languages to bridge prior knowledge to new knowledge. Another important change in many current educational policy documents and K-12 curriculum documents is the recognition that it shouldn’t only be the job of the ESL/EAL specialists/teachers to support the language and academic development of multilingual students. Since multilingual students are often directly integrated into mainstream K-12 classrooms, all content area teachers from math to science to ELA, are teachers of multilingual students and should be collaboratively supporting the education of multilingual learners.

With this recognition in the K-12 policy and curriculum, as well as research, many Faculties of Education have started offering courses that focus on pedagogical practices that support these multilingual learners. This is a great development. For example, at Brandon University, we have one B.Ed. course that I have been teaching since I joined the faculty in 2014 through which teacher candidates explore contemporary theoretical and pedagogical approaches to support the education of multilingual students in K-12 classrooms. One of the central tenets of the course is to partner with the local school division classrooms which gives teacher candidates an opportunity to work with multilingual students and their teachers. Through this school-based experience, through critical reflection, and exposure to literature in this area, the teacher candidates expand their knowledge of theory and practice to support multilingual students in K to 12 classrooms. There is great interest every year from Early Years, Middle Years and Senior Years teacher candidates taking this course. Our cap for our B.Ed. courses is 35. There is often a waiting list for this course. I share this because this points to our teacher candidates’ commitment and willingness to learn more about how to support multilingual learners. What are some limitations? One obvious limitation is that we only have one term to examine this big and important topic/field. Another, bigger, limitation is that it is only offered an elective course and not a mandatory course.

When we look at the fact that even in third-tier Canadian cities like Brandon or in smaller rural communities, we have many multilingual students, and the numbers are continuing to grow, it is clear that it’s vital for all of our teacher candidates to be prepared to support these multilingual students. This is why I believe that it is important for faculties of education to raise awareness about the importance of needing to create mandatory courses in this area for all teacher candidates. The other reason why a mandatory teacher education course is needed is that in many rural and remote communities, there are no EAL specialist. We have Phys. Ed. teachers, library teachers or principals in small community schools working quarter time as an EAL/ESL teacher; and many of these educators share that they have never had the opportunity to be trained in supporting multilingual students. In some schools and divisions also
there is a big knowledge gap about best pedagogical instructions and assessment practices that better support multilingual students. Therefore, this knowledge-base is needed for all teachers, administrators, and specialists such as guidance counselors. Therefore, offering a mandatory course to support multilingual students in teacher education programs is valuable to our teacher candidates as well as all educators in our K-12 school communities.

I would like to also briefly discuss here the need for exploring some potential avenues for collaboration in research and practice across Canada. These collaborations could take place at the university-level, in between Faculties of Education across Canada to raise awareness. Collaborations between large urban/metropolitan centers, and smaller cities/rural and remote communities are also important. This is because there are many valuable lessons that can be learned from Faculties of Education in small cities or school communities in rural areas as we examine collaborative, compassionate, multi-level classroom teaching practices. Similarly, large metropolitan educational contexts can share expertise or resources, for example, with respect multilingual assessment practices which might not yet take place in smaller communities. Remote communities often don’t have the diversity of education staff speaking multiple languages that urban centers might have. Can there be an online platform where these different strengths, expertise, people resources, and other resources could be shared? COVID-19 pandemic has, in a way, taught us that many productive online collaborations are possible, if we are willing to approach current practices differently. Solidarity is important to argue for offering mandatory courses in Faculties of Education across Canada on supporting multilingual students. This certainly is an urgent need at many universities.

This mandatory course should be designed with the context and community in mind. It is important for Faculties of Education not to create one generic/standard course that gets taught across Canada. It is vital to stress the need for school-community-university collaborations in course design, based on the diverse needs of the local communities and educational contexts.

Thank you for listening.