

**“Build on Students’ Cultural and Linguistic Assets”:
Multilingualism, Access, and Power in Somerville Public Schools**

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Abstract

As multilingual learners (MLs) and their families navigate school systems shaped by linguistic and cultural diversity, understanding how districts structure support is increasingly important. This study examines how Somerville Public Schools (SPS) defines and implements support for MLs and their families through publicly available district documents. Using a qualitative case study and inductive document analysis, the study finds that SPS presents a coherent, equity-oriented system that frames multilingualism as an asset, embeds language access into communication, and structures opportunities for family engagement. These systems expand access to information, affirm multilingual identities, and create entry points for participation. At the same time, families' participation remains largely shaped by institutionally defined channels. As a result, district efforts simultaneously challenge and reproduce dominant norms of language, authority, and engagement. This study highlights the importance of critically examining how support is structured and whose voices are considered and seen when shaping educational systems.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
Systems of Support for Multilingual Learners and Families.....	5
The Current Study.....	9
Positionality Statement.....	10
Literature Review.....	11
Theoretical Foundations.....	12
Critical Multilingualism and Raciolinguistic Perspectives.....	12
Sociocultural Learning and Third Space Theory.....	14
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.....	15
Developmental Systems and Ecological Perspectives.....	16
National Context for Multilingual Learners.....	18
Family-School Engagement and Partnership Frameworks.....	19
Gaps in the Existing Literature.....	20
Methods.....	22
Research Design.....	22
Case Selection: Somerville, Massachusetts.....	22
Data Sources.....	23
Analysis Plan.....	24
Results.....	26

Multilingualism as a Community Asset.....	26
Language Access as Institutional Infrastructure.....	28
Family Engagement as Structured Partnership.....	29
Community Context and Institutional Responsiveness.....	31
Discussion.....	33
Interpreting the Findings Through Existing Literature.....	36
Answering the Research Questions.....	40
Limitations.....	41
Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research.....	42
Recommendations.....	45
Conclusions.....	48
Appendix A.....	50
A1. Document Corpus.....	50
A2. Coding Process and Sample Excerpts.....	51
A3. Codebook.....	52
A4. Analytic Memos.....	52
A5. Development of Themes.....	53
References.....	54

Systems of Support for Multilingual Learners and Families

In classrooms across the United States, children bring with them diverse languages, experiences, and cultural backgrounds that shape how they learn. Within these environments, multilingual learners (MLs) navigate multiple linguistic and cultural systems each day. The U.S. Department of Education's National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA, n.d.) defines MLs as students "acquiring English proficiency while speaking or understanding one or more other languages." The Institute of Education Sciences (*English Learners* | *IES*, 2025) further describes MLs as "students from households where a language other than English is regularly spoken and whose educational experiences involve developing proficiency in multiple languages," emphasizing the linguistic diversity students bring to schools. These definitions collectively reflect a broader conceptual shift from deficit-based language (e.g., Limited English Proficient) toward recognizing multilingualism as a developmental and cultural asset (WIDA, 2020). As one of the fastest-growing student populations in the United States, MLs now comprise more than 10 percent of all K–12 enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023) and collectively speak over 400 home languages (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). These demographic shifts reflect broader patterns of migration and globalization that continue to reshape the cultural and linguistic landscapes of American communities (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Sugarman, 2022).

These changes are unfolding within a sociopolitical climate in which immigrant communities often face heightened scrutiny, uncertainty, and structural vulnerability. Over the past several decades, debates surrounding immigration policy and national identity have intensified across the United States, frequently accompanied by rhetoric that frames linguistic and cultural difference as threats to social cohesion rather than as sources of cultural and

intellectual richness (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Santa Ana, 2002). Researchers have documented how such discourse contributes to environments in which immigrant communities experience marginalization within social institutions, including schools (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Gonzales, 2016). For many immigrant families, their everyday lives involve navigating systems that demand participation, while they are simultaneously questioning their own belonging.

Schools occupy an especially significant position within these dynamics. Educational institutions often represent the primary point of interaction between immigrant families and public institutions in the United States (Valdés, 1996; López, 2001). As a result, schools frequently become sites where broader societal debates about language, culture, and citizenship are reflected in everyday interactions between families and institutional systems. How schools structure communication, define participation, and provide access to information can significantly shape whether families experience schools as either welcoming environments or as spaces of exclusion. For MLs and their families, schooling involves navigating multiple linguistic and cultural systems simultaneously. Language plays a central role in shaping how families access information, communicate with educators, participate in school communities, and develop trust with educational institutions. For families navigating unfamiliar systems across linguistic and cultural differences, accessible and meaningful communication becomes essential to establishing relationships grounded in trust, respect, and mutual understanding. When schools lack institutional infrastructure to support cross-linguistic communication, linguistic differences can become barriers to participation rather than opportunities for collaboration (Turney & Kao, 2009; Good et al., 2010). In many cases, multilingual families must rely on informal strategies, such as children serving as language brokers, to navigate communication with schools and other institutions (Orellana, 2009; Tse, 1995). Although these practices demonstrate remarkable

resilience and resourcefulness, they also reflect structural gaps in institutions that were not designed to support communication across linguistic communities. As a result, the practices often place an unreasonable burden on children and families to mediate these interactions. These dynamics may constrain open channels of communication, limiting opportunities for schools to truly understand and learn from the perspectives of the communities in the district.

These challenges are embedded within broader historical patterns in which linguistic hierarchies intersect with racialized and nationalized ideas about belonging. Prior research in raciolinguistics has demonstrated that language practices are often interpreted through racialized expectations of who is considered a legitimate speaker (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Within educational settings, these ideologies can shape how multilingual students' language practices are evaluated and how school personnel interpret families' participation (Alim et al., 2016). Even when institutions formally recognize linguistic diversity, policies and practices may continue to operate according to norms that privilege monolingual English communication (García & Kleifgen, 2018).

Meanwhile, schools remain one of the most influential institutions shaping children's developmental experiences. Much of the literature across developmental psychology and educational sociology consistently demonstrates that strong family-school partnerships support children's academic achievement, socioemotional development, and long-term educational trajectories (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Jeynes, 2005; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). When families and educators are able to communicate effectively and collaborate on students' learning, children are better able to make use of consistent resources and support across home and school environments (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). While this dynamic can be challenging for all family-school partnerships, it becomes especially complex in multilingual contexts. Studies

have shown that language barriers, unfamiliar institutional expectations, and limited access to translation services can constrain communication between families and schools (Turney & Kao, 2009; López et al., 2013). In addition, deficit-oriented assumptions about immigrant families' involvement in schooling can shape educators' interpretations of parents' engagement, often overlooking how families may support learning through culturally grounded practices outside of school contexts (Valdés, 1996; Ishimaru et al., 2016).

In response to these challenges, many school districts have developed initiatives designed to improve communication with multilingual families, including translation and interpretation services, family liaison positions, and community outreach programs. While these initiatives represent important steps toward inclusion, much of the literature suggests that they typically operate as isolated programs rather than components of coordinated systems (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Good et al., 2010). Without integrated infrastructures that support sustained communication and collaboration, efforts to engage multilingual families may remain limited in scope or impact.

In sum, understanding how educational institutions organize systemic support for MLs and their families is an urgent area of inquiry. District-level policies governing language access, family engagement, and multilingual education are crucial in defining how schools conceptualize their responsibilities toward linguistically diverse communities. Examining these institutional systems is especially important in districts serving highly diverse populations. As multilingual communities continue to grow across the United States, school districts are urged to develop infrastructures capable of supporting communication and collaboration across linguistic and cultural barriers. How these districts design and communicate these systems typically influences

how families access educational resources, as well as whether MLs and their families experience schools as spaces of inclusion.

The Current Study

This study aims to investigate how district-level policies define and implement systems of support for multilingual learners (MLs) and their families within Somerville Public Schools (SPS). Rather than focusing on classroom instruction or individual student outcomes, the study examines broader systems of influence, such as how institutional policies construct the conditions under which multilingual families interact with schools. Public policy documents play a critical role in shaping how educational institutions communicate their commitments to equity, language access, and family engagement. These documents describe programs and services, but they also articulate institutional assumptions about language, culture, and participation within school communities (Levinson et al., 2009). Guided by insights from Critical Multilingual Studies, sociocritical perspectives on family-school interaction, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and developmental systems theory, this study seeks to illuminate patterns of practice within SPS that foster equitable participation for multilingual community members. Specifically, I addressed the question:

- How do district policies define and implement supports for multilingual learners (MLs) and their families?

This question was examined through two subquestions:

1. In what ways do these policies promote equitable access, cultural inclusion, and meaningful partnership?
2. In what ways do these policies challenge or reproduce dominant racialized and linguistic notions of legitimate family engagement?

Positionality Statement

My interest in multilingual learners (MLs) and family-school partnerships is rooted in my lived experience as the eldest daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, who witnessed how educational systems are experienced by multilingual families navigating them. I remember sitting in school meetings where information was shared rapidly in English, leaving my mother nodding along despite not fully understanding what was just said or what the next steps were. These moments reflected a lack of access – not only to language, but to clarity, context, and meaningful engagement. I quickly came to understand that support is not simply about whether a meeting occurs, but more so whether families leave that meeting feeling informed, confident, and able to advocate for their children.

Within these interactions, the weight of bridging my family and the school system landed on me. Growing up, I often served as a translator and advocate for my family in educational settings that placed linguistically diverse families on the margins. Acting as a language broker made me very aware of the barriers immigrant families face when navigating systems built around English-dominant norms. Tasks that many families take for granted – communicating with teachers, understanding school policies, completing administrative forms – often require translation, interpretation, and negotiation across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Simultaneously, I came to recognize that many educators were also navigating uncertainty, often without a clear understanding of families' linguistic, cultural, and lived contexts. This misalignment between families and schools could create moments of miscommunication disrupting both sides from understanding how to best support the child. These experiences shaped both my personal values and my future goals to help create educational environments that

affirm linguistic diversity, cultivate belonging, and recognize families as integral partners in children's learning.

At the same time, my current position as a graduate student studying human development situates me differently from many of the families whose experiences inform this research. My academic training provides theoretical frameworks and analytic tools for examining educational systems, but it also reflects a position within institutions that have historically held power in shaping educational policy and research agendas. Recognizing this dual positionality, as both someone who has experienced linguistic marginalization and someone now studying these systems from within academia, I approach this work with a commitment to reflexivity and humility. I also am mindful that multilingual communities are diverse and heterogeneous; no single experience can represent the full range of perspectives within these communities. Throughout this project, I aim to approach this work with empathy, curiosity, and rigor – amplifying the systemic practices that best support MLs and their families while remaining attentive to the complexity and diversity of those families' lived experiences.

Literature Review

As schools across the United States serve increasing linguistically diverse student populations, researchers seek to understand how educational institutions respond to this diversity and how these responses influence educational equity. Existing research on multilingual education spans multiple areas of inquiry, including classroom instruction, language acquisition, family engagement, and educational policy. However, these strands of research are often examined in isolation, limiting our understanding of how institutional systems operate as integrated developmental contexts for MLs and their families.

Drawing on insights from Critical multilingual studies (García & Kleifgen, 2018), sociocritical perspectives on learning (Gutiérrez, 2008), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), and developmental systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Overton, 2015), the following review of the literature will examine how educational systems shape relationships between schools and multilingual communities. The review will begin by situating MLs within the broader demographic and policy landscape of U.S. education. It then examines the literature on family-school partnerships in multilingual contexts, highlighting both the opportunities and barriers multilingual families encounter when engaging with educational institutions. Finally, the review explores critical perspectives on language policy and institutional power, emphasizing how raciolinguistic ideologies and sociocultural dynamics influence the ways schools construct systems of support for MLs and their families. Altogether, the literature review will provide a conceptual foundation for examining how district-level policies organize educational systems in ways that can either facilitate or constrain equitable participation for multilingual communities.

Theoretical Foundations

Critical Multilingualism and Raciolinguistic Perspectives

At the time of this study, recent works in multilingual education have increasingly drawn attention to the ways language is intertwined with power, race, and institutions. Rather than treating linguistic difference as a neutral educational variable, critical multilingual perspectives emphasize that linguistic hierarchies are socially constructed and often reflect broader systems of racial, cultural, and political inequality (Flores & Rosa, 2015; García & Wei, 2014). Within this framework, language practices are seen as more than just tools for communication, as they are

also embedded within historical and institutional contexts that shape how linguistic repertoires are recognized, valued, or marginalized in educational spaces.

A key concept within this literature is *raciolinguistic ideology*, which refers to the ways language practices are interpreted through racialized expectations about who is considered a legitimate speaker of particular languages (Flores & Rosa, 2015). *Raciolinguistic perspectives* argue that multilingual students, particularly those from immigrant and minoritized communities, are frequently evaluated according to deficit-oriented assumptions about language proficiency, even when they demonstrate complex and sophisticated linguistic repertoires (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Alim et al., 2016). These ideological frameworks shape how educators interpret students' language use, how schools define language “proficiency,” and how educational systems design policies intended to support MLs.

Within schools, *raciolinguistic ideologies* often manifest through practices that privilege monolingual English norms while marginalizing other linguistic practices. Even when policies formally recognize multilingualism as an asset, institutional structures frequently continue to position languages other than English as temporary or transitional tools rather than as enduring resources for intellectual development, cultural identity, and community participation (García & Kleifgen, 2018; Menken & García, 2010). Researchers have documented how these tensions reflect broader historical patterns in U.S. education, where bilingual education policies have oscillated between support and restriction depending on shifting political priorities and national attitudes toward immigration and linguistic diversity (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Menken & García, 2010).

Critical multilingual perspectives, therefore, emphasize the importance of examining the institutional systems that shape how linguistic diversity is recognized and valued within schools.

From this perspective, equitable multilingual education requires more than effective instructional strategies; it also requires examining how policies, communication structures, and institutional practices construct narratives about language, belonging, and legitimacy within educational spaces. Understanding these dynamics is essential for identifying how schools can move toward more just systems that affirm multilingualism as a central dimension of students' identities rather than as a barrier to academic participation.

Sociocultural Learning and Third Space Theory

Complementing critical multilingual perspectives, sociocultural theories of learning provide insight into how language, culture, and social interaction shape educational development. Rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1978), sociocultural theory conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated process that occurs through interaction with others and through engagement with cultural tools such as language. Within this framework, language functions as the primary medium through which individuals construct, negotiate, and communicate knowledge. Thus, learning emerges through both individual cognitive processes and participation in socially organized activities and relationships (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

MLs' educational experiences involve navigating multiple linguistic and cultural systems that shape how meaning is constructed within both classroom and community contexts. Sociocultural perspectives bring to light that these linguistic and cultural resources are not obstacles to MLs' learning. Rather, these resources constitute important intellectual assets that can support deeper forms of understanding and engagement (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Moll et al., 1992). When educational environments recognize and build upon these resources, students' cultural knowledge and linguistic repertoires can become powerful foundations for learning.

Building on these sociocultural foundations, researchers have emphasized the importance of examining how educational institutions create spaces where diverse cultural and linguistic practices can intersect productively. Gutiérrez (2008) describes these environments as third spaces: hybrid learning environments where the cultural practices of home and school interact to generate new forms of knowledge, participation, and collaboration. Third spaces challenge traditional assumptions that learning must occur within rigid institutional boundaries. Instead, they highlight the potential for educational environments that recognize and build upon the cultural resources that students and families bring with them. Within multilingual education, third space theory suggests that family-school partnerships can function as important sites of collaborative learning. Rather than positioning families as passive recipients of information, schools can create opportunities for families' knowledge, linguistic practices, and lived experiences to shape educational processes and community decision-making (Gutiérrez, 2008; Ishimaru et al., 2016). When institutions cultivate these forms of collaboration, they move beyond assimilationist models toward more reciprocal relationships that recognize multilingual families as active contributors.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Extending these sociocultural perspectives, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) provides a framework for understanding how educational institutions can actively nurture and sustain the linguistic and cultural practices of diverse communities. Paris (2012) introduced CSP to argue that schools must move beyond simply acknowledging cultural diversity toward sustaining and revitalizing the cultural and linguistic practices of historically marginalized communities. Instead of viewing these practices as obstacles to academic success, CSP positions them as central components of educational equity and justice (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Within multilingual education, CSP emphasizes the importance of affirming students' multilingual identities and supporting the continued development of their home languages alongside English. Researchers argue that sustaining multilingualism contributes to students' sense of identity, belonging, and connection to their communities (Paris & Alim, 2017; García & Wei, 2014). Importantly, culturally sustaining approaches extend beyond classroom instruction to include the broader institutional environments that shape students' educational experiences. At the systemic level, CSP challenges schools and districts to design policies and practices that recognize multilingual families as co-educators and cultural knowledge holders. This perspective calls for institutional structures that support multilingual communication, collaborative decision-making, and meaningful participation by families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds may differ from dominant school norms. For instance, policies that institutionalize translation/interpretation services and create multilingual councils reflect attempts to sustain the linguistic and cultural practices of diverse communities.

Integrating CSP within discussions of multilingual education, therefore, highlights the institutional dimensions of equity. While sociocultural theory explains how learning emerges through interaction and participation, CSP articulates the commitment that schools should hold to sustain the cultural and linguistic vitality of the communities they serve. In this sense, culturally sustaining approaches align with the goals of critical multilingualism by their emphasis on linguistic justice and recognition of multilingual families in educational systems.

Developmental Systems and Ecological Perspectives

Although critical multilingual, sociocultural, and culturally sustaining frameworks provide important insights into language, culture, and power, developmental systems theory offers an additional lens for understanding how institutional structures shape children's

experiences across multiple contexts. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model conceptualizes development as occurring within nested systems of interaction that extend from immediate interpersonal relationships to broader societal structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These systems include the microsystem, such as classrooms and peer relationships; the mesosystem, which encompasses connections between settings such as home and school; and the exosystem and macrosystem, which include institutional policies, social norms, and cultural ideologies. Within this framework, family-school partnerships represent a critical mesosystem connection linking two of the most influential developmental contexts in children's lives. The strength and accessibility of this connection can significantly shape children's academic engagement, sense of belonging, and learning opportunities. For multilingual families, however, the quality of this mesosystem connection is often dependent on the policies and communication structures that determine whether families are able to access information, participate in decision-making, and build relationships with educators.

Literature on developmental systems further emphasizes that development does not occur through isolated influences but through dynamic, reciprocal relations between individuals and their contexts. Overton (2015) describes this perspective as a relational developmental systems metatheory, in which individuals and environments are understood as mutually constitutive rather than separate forces acting upon one another. Applying this relational perspective to multilingual education highlights that students' language development, identity formation, and sense of belonging are shaped through continuous interactions between children, families, schools, and broader sociopolitical contexts. Institutional policies, communication infrastructures, and family engagement initiatives, therefore, become part of the developmental systems in which MLs grow and learn. From a developmental perspective, equitable support for

MLs requires attention to the institutional systems that organize relationships among educators, families, and communities.

National Context for Multilingual Learners

The past two decades have seen profound shifts in the linguistic landscape of U.S. public schools. Multilingual learners (MLs) now make up a substantial and steadily increasing portion of the national K–12 population, representing more than 400 home languages and an expanding presence across both urban and rural communities (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). While Spanish remains the predominant language, the growing numbers of Arabic-, Chinese-, Vietnamese-, and Somali-speaking students reflect a diversification that redefines education systems nationwide. This multilingual growth also reaches districts beyond traditional immigrant gateway states and into newer destination areas (Gándara & Escamilla, 2017; Sugarman, 2022). These demographic transformations challenge systems historically oriented toward monolingual norms, and compel schools to reconsider how they structure communication, allocate resources, and conceptualize belonging for multilingual families.

Federal legislation has long attempted to ensure equitable educational access for students developing English proficiency. Early policies such as the Bilingual Education Act (1968) and *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) established the right to meaningful participation and affirmed the federal government's responsibility to support language development. However, policy priorities evolved. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), reoriented bilingual education toward accountability and performance outcomes, emphasizing English-language proficiency testing and standardized measures of academic success (Hopkins et al. 2015; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). This shift reflected a broader

federal trend toward measurable benchmarks and compliance reports, often narrowing the policy focus away from holistic language development and family engagement. While these statutes established baseline supports for MLs, they left much discretion to states and local education agencies, resulting in considerable variation in implementation (Menken & García, 2010).

Family-School Engagement and Partnership Frameworks

Decades of research have established that family engagement is a powerful predictor of children's academic success and socio-emotional development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Jeynes, 2005). Models such as Epstein's (1995) six-dimensional framework, encompassing parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration, have shaped both policy and practice. Later research extended this framework to multilingual and immigrant contexts, highlighting the centrality of communication and trust (Arias & Milagros, 2008; Olivos et al., 2011). However, scholars have also critiqued traditional engagement models for implicitly centering school-defined norms of participation, which may not fully account for the cultural and linguistic practices of multilingual families (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Valdés, 1996). When schools invest in bilingual communication channels, cultural mediation, and family liaison roles, participation for multilingual families increases (Good et al., 2010; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Mapp and Kuttner's (2013) Dual Capacity-Building Framework formalized these findings into a systemic model in which effective partnerships arise when both educators and families have the knowledge, confidence, and institutional supports to collaborate. Central to this framework is the concept of relational trust: the belief that teachers, administrators, and families share a mutual commitment to children's growth, which has been linked to improved attendance, higher academic performance, and more positive school climates (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Despite these promising models, researchers have raised questions about the extent to which these frameworks fully address issues of power, language, and institutional control in family-school relationships.

National analyses by the Migration Policy Institute (Batalova et al., 2021) reveal that nearly 40% of school districts face challenges providing translation or interpretation across all major home languages. Cultural expectations about teacher authority, communication norms, and parental roles can further complicate collaboration (Lopez, 2001), while deficit-oriented assumptions about immigrant and multilingual families persist (Valdés, 1996). Programs that intentionally position families as cultural partners, such as family storytelling initiatives, co-developed curricula, or parent-led bilingual nights, demonstrate greater potential to sustain engagement and foster mutual learning (Ishimaru et al., 2016). Importantly, these models begin to shift engagement from participation within school-defined structures toward more reciprocal and co-constructed forms of partnership.

Overall, this body of research suggests that engagement flourishes when structures move beyond compliance frameworks toward reciprocal partnership with multilingual families. However, it also highlights a critical gap between the ideals of partnership and the realities of institutional practice. While frameworks such as Epstein (1995) and Mapp and Kuttner (2013) provide important models for understanding effective engagement, this analysis considers whether district-defined structures for engagement promote meaningful partnership or continue to reflect school-centered norms that shape how, and on whose terms, families participate.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Despite increasing attention to multilingual education, several gaps persist in the literature. First, most studies examine classroom instruction or family experiences but rarely

analyze how district-level policies and leadership structures create opportunities for engagement (Honig, 2023; Hopkins et al., 2015). While this work has significantly advanced understanding of effective classroom instruction, it often overlooks the broader institutional systems that shape how schools organize support for MLs and their families. Second, studies of family engagement frequently center on the experiences and perspectives of parents and educators without examining the policy infrastructures that outline these interactions. Although research has documented barriers multilingual families encounter when engaging with schools, such as language access, cultural misunderstandings, and institutional expectations regarding parental involvement (Turney & Kao, 2009; Valdés, 1996), less attention has been directed toward how district-level policies construct the conditions under which these interactions occur. Third, few studies examine district policy documents themselves as objects of analysis. Policy documents function as organizational texts that communicate institutional priorities, shape decision-making, and influence how educators and families understand their roles within educational systems (Ball, 1993; Levinson et al., 2009). Analyzing these texts can therefore provide insight into how school districts publicly frame their commitments to MLs and how they conceptualize relationships with linguistically diverse families. Finally, although critical literature in multilingual education has increasingly highlighted the role of raciolinguistic ideologies in shaping educational systems (Flores & Rosa, 2015), this perspective has rarely been applied to the analysis of district-level family engagement policies. Examining how policies reflect and reproduce broader societal ideologies about language and belonging can deepen understanding of how institutions influence the experiences of MLs and their families.

To address these gaps, the study moves beyond classroom practice to examine how institutional policies construct systems of support for multilingual communities. By analyzing

district policy documents through critical and sociocultural frameworks, the current study seeks to illuminate how educational institutions define their responsibilities toward MLs and their families, and how these definitions shape opportunities for equity in schools.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine how one school district conceptualizes and communicates systemic support for multilingual learners (MLs) and their families. Case study methodology is well-suited for examining complex institutional circumstances situated within real-world contexts, especially when the boundaries between policy, practice, and community context are closely intertwined (Yin, 2018). The case selected for this study is Somerville Public Schools (SPS) in Somerville, Massachusetts. A single-case design allows for an in-depth examination of how institutional policies, public communications, and strategic frameworks collectively define the district's approach to multilingual education and family engagement.

In this study, document analysis serves as the primary methodological approach. Document analysis involves systematic examination and interpretation of textual materials in order to understand how institutions construct meaning, define priorities, and communicate expectations (Bowen, 2009). Analyzing these materials, therefore, provides insight into how districts conceptualize support for MLs and how they publicly define relationships between schools and linguistically diverse families.

Case Selection: Somerville, Massachusetts

Somerville is a densely populated urban district in the Greater Boston area, recognized for its long history of immigration and cultural diversity. Approximately 60% of students in SPS

speak a language other than English at home, representing more than 50 languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and French (Somerville Public Schools, 2024; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017). The city's immigrant population continues to grow, with nearly one-third of residents born outside the United States (Vera Institute of Justice, 2024; World Population Review, 2025).

The district's Multilingual Learner Education (MLE) Department oversees transitional bilingual and dual-language programs and publishes annual English Learner Education (ELE) Reports and Family Engagement Plans (Somerville Public Schools, 2024). The Somerville Family Learning Collaborative (SFLC) serves as a center for family engagement, offering English classes for caregivers, translation and interpretation services, and multilingual family liaisons at every school. Community partnerships, such as The Welcome Project's English for Parents program, further support caregivers in navigating the U.S. school system. SPS also sustains a Multilingual Learner Parent Advisory Council (MLPAC), providing families a platform to contribute to decision-making and advocate for their children's needs. Collectively, these initiatives illustrate how Somerville integrates family-school partnerships into its district-wide infrastructure.

Somerville represents an especially valuable case for examining systems supporting MLs because the district is deeply committed to linguistic equity, and has developed multiple institutional structures intended to support multilingual families. Assessing how these commitments are articulated within district documents provides insight into how educational systems conceptualize their responsibilities toward linguistically diverse communities.

Data Sources

This study draws on publicly available institutional documents produced by SPS and related state agencies. A complete list of documents, including titles and sources, is provided in Appendix A. All documents were drawn from official district and state websites. The analysis includes multiple forms of documentation to capture district, state, and community-level perspectives. Specifically, the analysis reviewed:

- District-level documents: including MLE Department reports, memos, and strategic plans related to multilingual education and family engagement
- Public communications: district webpages, multilingual family resource portals, and public-facing materials describing services and programs
- State and contextual data: Massachusetts DESE guidance and demographic data related to Somerville's linguistic and immigrant populations

Analysis Plan

Data was analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), allowing patterns and themes to emerge directly from the documents. This approach aligns with the study's exploratory focus on how educational systems support inclusion of MLs and their families. The analysis remained open to new and unexpected insights while being informed by existing literature, allowing for interpretation of how district policies reflect or depart from practices identified as fostering equitable, culturally responsive family-school partnerships. Documents included in the analysis are detailed in Appendix A, which also provides the coding framework and analytic materials used to support this process.

The analysis began with repeated readings of each document in order to develop familiarity with the materials and to identify preliminary patterns related to language access,

family engagement, and institutional commitments to multilingual education. During this stage, analytic notes were recorded to capture emerging ideas and potential thematic categories.

Following this initial review, key excerpts from each document were systematically coded to capture concepts relevant to the study's research questions. Coding focused on how district documents defined MLs and multilingualism, described communication practices with families, articulated translation and interpretation services, and outlined mechanisms for family participation in school decision-making processes. Codes were organized and tracked using Google Sheets, which served as a centralized workspace for documenting excerpts, analytic notes, and emerging thematic patterns. Through an iterative process of review and comparison, related codes were grouped into broader themes that captured recurring patterns across documents. These themes were examined in relation to the study's research questions, with particular attention to how district policies and communications defined supports for MLs.

Finally, the identified themes were interpreted through the study's theoretical framework, which integrates perspectives from critical multilingualism, sociocultural theory, CSP, and ecological developmental systems theory. Interpreting the findings through these lenses allowed the analysis to move beyond descriptive accounts of district policy toward a deeper understanding of how institutional structures shape opportunities for communication, participation, and belonging for multilingual families. To enhance analytic rigor, interpretations were grounded in explicit textual evidence drawn from multiple types of district documents. Analytic memos were maintained throughout the coding process to document emerging interpretations and ensure transparency in analytic decisions.

Results

This analysis examined how Somerville Public Schools (SPS) conceptualizes and communicates district-level support for multilingual learners (MLs) and their families through publicly available documents. Across these sources, four themes emerged: (1) multilingualism as an institutional asset tied to program design, (2) language access as embedded communication infrastructure, (3) family engagement as formalized and program-mediated participation, and (4) demographic responsiveness as a basis for district planning and prioritization. These themes collectively respond to the central questions of the study by showing how SPS conceptualizes support for MLs and families, how that support is structured at the district level, the extent to which these supports promote equitable access, cultural inclusion, and meaningful partnership, and how district practices challenge and reproduce dominant racialized and linguistic norms of family engagement.

Multilingualism as a Community Asset

Across SPS documents, multilingualism is treated as more than a student characteristic requiring accommodation. Instead, it is repeatedly framed as a valued dimension of the district and as a basis for institutional responsibility. Public-facing SPS materials describe the district as representing “more than 50 different languages” (SPS Multilingual Learner Education webpage, n.d.) while the MLE Department memo states that MLs should have access to “meaningful and rigorous learning opportunities” that “build on their cultural and linguistic assets” (SPS MLE Department Memo, 2024). The same memo further states that all educators share responsibility for MLs’ success and that the department’s work includes “effective, research-based programming, curriculum, instruction, and assessment designed to build on students’ assets” (SPS MLE Department Memo, 2024). These recurring statements indicate that SPS

conceptualizes multilingualism through an asset and strength-based framework, rather than the historic pattern of deficit-based frameworks for MLs. This directly addresses the first research question by showing that district support goes beyond remediation or compliance and actively affirms students' languages, cultures, and long-term academic belonging, thereby promoting cultural inclusion within district policy and practice.

Importantly, this asset framing appears across documents. It is visible in district diversity language, in MLE planning language, and in broader district planning documents that commit SPS to “maintaining a multicultural, multilingual, and inclusive school community” (SPS District Strategic Plan, n.d.). That cross-document repetition suggests a coherent institutional discourse, not a one-off rhetorical flourish. In other words, the district's emphasis on multilingualism appears to function as a stable part of organizational identity. SPS repeatedly names multilingualism as something to be supported through systems, staffing, and programming, reinforcing an institutional commitment to inclusion that is embedded across policy contexts.

The MLE memo is especially concrete in linking the asset frame to structural decisions such as increased ESL specialist staffing, co-teaching support, newcomer transition processes, and programmatic updates aligned to DESE guidance. SPS goes above and beyond acknowledging that multilingualism matters; they tie that claim to staffing models, program revision, and inclusion in general education settings. On the other hand, the public documents say less about whether multilingual families themselves shape curriculum, assessment policy, or district governance priorities. Thus, the findings suggest that SPS has moved beyond symbolic recognition toward structural response, and that the most visible evidence is concentrated in programming and service design, rather than in redistributed institutional power. While SPS

challenges deficit-based and exclusionary narratives of MLs, it may still reproduce dominant institutional norms in which decision-making authority remains centralized.

Language Access as Institutional Infrastructure

A second clear pattern across documents is that SPS treats translation and interpretation as part of its regular communication infrastructure, as opposed to an occasional accommodation. The district's diversity page states that SPS "offers translation and interpretation services to improve home-school communication" (SPS Diversity/Equity webpage, n.d.). The Multilingual Services page also explains that interpretation is available for parent-teacher conferences, 504 meetings, and school- or district-wide events, while translation supports families' access to important written information (SPS Multilingual Services webpage, n.d.). District materials also highlight the presence of school-based family and community liaisons who serve as key points of contact between schools and multilingual families (SPS Multilingual Services webpage, n.d.), underscoring that multilingual communication is prioritized and supported through an organized human infrastructure. This pattern appears across several sources, supporting that SPS has adopted a centralized language-access commitment at the systems level.

This theme directly answers the research question about how support is structured. The documents show that SPS has not left multilingual communication to individual schools or teachers. Instead, families are directed to school-based family and community liaisons, staff is routed through a centralized request process, and a multilingual services structure is publicly described and systemically maintained (SPS Multilingual Services webpage, n.d.; SPS Family Engagement resources, n.d.). The presence of a standard request pathway, multilingual staffing, and district webpages devoted specifically to translation/interpretation suggests that language access is built into district operations and indicates a move from reactive accommodation toward

routine institutionalization. Language access is therefore functioning as a structural support system that helps make district information legible to families across diverse contexts, and promotes equitable access to information and participation in school systems.

On the other hand, the documents also reveal the limits of this system. Across the language-access materials, the dominant emphasis is on helping families access information, rather than on creating multilingual channels through which families can share their perspectives. Even where the district's broader strategic language emphasizes collaboration, transparency, and shared accountability, the operational multilingual communication pages are framed mainly around the delivery of information and the coordination of services. Additionally, while the district highlights the presence of multilingual liaisons, the documents provide less information about how languages are selected for representation or how liaison support is distributed across the district. This raises important questions about whose linguistic communities are most consistently supported within these structures, and how decisions about language representation may shape whose voices are most visible or accessible within school systems. This suggests that SPS has built a strong model of access-oriented infrastructure, but that the public documents provide less evidence of reciprocal multilingual governance. These results highlight how district practices may unintentionally reproduce dominant linguistic norms in which English remains the primary language of institutional authority and decision-making.

Family Engagement as Structured Partnership

Across the SPS materials, family engagement for multilingual communities is described through identifiable, recurring district structures. Two contributions appear especially consistently: the Somerville Family Learning Collaborative (SFLC) and the Multilingual Learner Parent Advisor Council (MLPAC). SFLC is described as “the department of family and

community engagement” of SPS, and its mission is to “enhance the capacity of families and schools to support children’s learning and wellbeing” (SPS SFLC webpage, n.d.). On the MLE family page, MLPAC is described as a body made up of parents and legal guardians of MLs to discuss the “academic and social issues” those students face (SPS MLE Family webpage, n.d.). A separate MLPAC event page states that the council meets monthly to “share ideas on ways we can improve your child’s learning experience” (SPS MLPAC webpage, n.d.). Since these descriptions appear across multiple family-oriented SPS pages, this finding reflects a consistent district-wide approach in which these programs function as core channels of multilingual family engagement.

This finding directly addresses the question regarding how support for families is structured. The documents suggest that SPS does not conceptualize family partnership as merely relational or aspirational. Instead, it organizes family engagement through district-sponsored programs, advisory groups, liaisons, classes, and resource hubs. The SFLC page and related family materials point to English classes for caregivers, workshops, school liaisons, multilingual services, and broader community-resource navigation (SPS SFLC webpage, n.d.; SPS Family Engagement resources, n.d.). That constellation of supports indicates a model of engagement that combines capacity building, resource brokerage, and institutional access. It also suggests that SPS recognizes that support for multilingual families extends beyond classroom communication and includes navigation of schools, services, and community systems, which supports conditions for meaningful partnership between families and schools.

The SPS document on SFLC during COVID strengthens this interpretation by showing how those structures were mobilized in practice: the multilingual SFLC team “created a system of delivery of services” (SPS SFLC COVID response materials, n.d.) to meet urgent family

needs, and the district emphasized that long-standing trust with immigrant families allowed schools and city partners to learn directly from families about critical needs during the pandemic. This finding provides evidence that SFLC has historically coordinated responsive support, suggesting that family engagement in Somerville is best understood as institutionally organized and sustained participation.

The documents also show that this engagement remains program-mediated. Families are invited into councils, classes, liaison relationships, and workshops that are designed and facilitated by the district. This organization is a meaningful strength because it creates stable entry points into the school system. However, it also means that participation is largely structured within district-defined forums. The public documents more clearly demonstrate invited participation and advisory input than shared decision-making authority. Thus, SPS appears to have built a strong and recurring family-engagement infrastructure, but the documents leave more ambiguity about the extent to which multilingual families co-design structures. This finding suggests that, while SPS promotes partnership, it may also reproduce dominant models of family engagement in which schools retain control over the terms of participation.

Community Context and Institutional Responsiveness

A fourth pattern across the documents is that SPS repeatedly situates multilingual support within the broader demographic and social reality of Somerville. Public district materials reference the district's linguistic diversity, immigrant communities, and multilingual school population as more than just context, but as reasons for building district support. The MLE memo presents multilingual support as districtwide work, while broader SPS planning documents state that the district aims to strengthen supports for MLs (SPS MLE Department Memo, 2024; SPS Strategic Plan, n.d.). The strategic report also notes staff concerns about

access barriers for MLs and the need to “increase engagement and amplify the voice of multilingual, diverse, and/or underrepresented families,” with some families reporting invisibility in their school community and a need for improved communication at school and district levels (SPS Strategic Report, n.d.). These recurring references show that SPS documents understand multilingual education as a system-level response to community composition and needs.

This theme shows how SPS talks about MLs and families, as well as why the supports appear organized in the way they do. Translation systems, MLPAC, SFLC, liaisons, and multilingual programming are positioned as appropriate responses to the linguistic and social realities of Somerville. In this sense, the district’s support system appears to follow a logic of demographic responsiveness; because multilingualism is a significant and visible feature of the community, support must be structured at the district level and distributed across departments, programs, and communication channels. This finding aligns district practices with principles of equity and cultural responsiveness.

These sources also point to unfinished work. The strategic report mentions that staff want to amplify the voices of multilingual and underrepresented families, and that some families are not truly seen, suggesting that demographic responsiveness does not automatically translate into equitable experience or shared influence. In other words, SPS documents present a district that is clearly aware of who its community is and has built structures in response, but that is still confronting gaps in voice, visibility, and communication quality on a larger scale. The themes here highlight how systemic inequities and dominant norms may persist even within otherwise responsive and inclusive policy frameworks.

Overall, these findings suggest that SPS has developed a multi-layered, district-level system of support for MLs that is consistently represented across documents. Across themes,

there was a high degree of internal consistency in how SPS documents conceptualized and represented support for MLs and their families. The themes appeared repeatedly across multiple document types, suggesting a coherent and stable institutional narrative rather than isolated or contradictory messaging. SPS conceptualizes support through an asset-based and equity-oriented framework, and structures that support MLs and families through centralized departments, communication infrastructure, and formal engagement programs. A consistent pattern across themes reveals an important boundary in how support is enacted. SPS has built a robust and coherent system focused on accessibility, responsiveness, and support, while the expansion of shared governance and co-construction with multilingual communities remains a less visible component of the district's documented practices. These findings reveal how district policies advance equity and inclusion while simultaneously reproducing elements of dominant racialized and linguistic norms of institutional authority and family engagement.

Discussion

This study examined how Somerville Public Schools (SPS) defines and implements support for multilingual learners (MLs) and their families through publicly available district documents. More specifically, it asked how district policies promote equitable access, cultural inclusion, and meaningful partnership, and how they may simultaneously challenge or reproduce dominant racialized and linguistic notions of legitimate family engagement. Through document analysis, the findings suggest that SPS has developed a relatively rich district-level system of support that is grounded in asset-based language, centralized language-access systems, formal family engagement structures, and responsiveness to community demographics. At the same time, the findings also indicate that these supports are more fully developed in expanding access,

participation, and responsiveness than in redistributing decision-making power to multilingual families and communities.

These results position SPS as a district that has moved beyond compliance-oriented approaches to integrative multilingual education, an approach in which support for MLs is embedded in the education system, including in the curriculum, communication, family engagement, and institutional policy, and grounded in relationships between families, educators, and the broader community. This vision of integrative multilingual education creates opportunities for families and educators to come together to build relationships, share perspectives, and contribute to the educational experiences of children. Such an approach positions families, teachers, and administrators as having shared roles and responsibilities in shaping inclusive learning environments, where cultural and linguistic diversity is acknowledged and actively engaged. Over time, these interactions can support the development of trust, creating conditions in which families feel more comfortable participating, sharing input, and engaging in ongoing dialogue with schools. In this sense, integrative multilingual education centers on facilitating spaces where multiple voices are heard, priorities can be shaped collaboratively, and all members of the school community play a role in creating equitable and responsive educational systems for children.

Across documents, SPS repeatedly frames multilingualism as a strength, embeds translation and interpretation into district communication systems, and provides formal avenues for family engagement through structures such as the SFLC and the MLPAC. These findings suggest that SPS defines support as a broader institutional responsibility involving communication, family engagement, and community responsiveness. In other words, SPS's

policy language reflects an understanding that support for MLs is inseparable from support for multilingual families, and therefore inseparable from support for the district.

Although SPS documents articulate inclusion, access, and partnership as priorities, they more clearly document systems that help families navigate the district, rather than systems that give families a voice in reshaping district priorities. SPS policies appear to promote equitable access and cultural inclusion in meaningful ways, but they also reveal how institutional support can remain bounded by dominant norms of schooling, especially when participation is organized through district-defined channels and multilingual communication remains primarily one-directional. Thus, the discussion of SPS is not simply whether the district is supportive or not, but rather what kind of support is being enacted, on whose terms, and with what implications for power.

Most importantly, these power dynamics are not unique to SPS, but are inherent to relationships between educational institutions and multilingual, immigrant, and historically marginalized families. Schools function as gatekeepers of information, resources, and opportunities, often controlling what information is shared, and how and when families can access it. In the current sociopolitical context, particularly amid heightened immigration enforcement and fear surrounding agencies such as ICE, these dynamics may be further intensified. Families may feel reluctant to engage, be visible, or share information with schools due to concerns about safety, surveillance, or documentation status. As a result, even when districts expand access and invite participation, some multilingual families may experience engagement spaces as risky or inaccessible. This highlights that participation is shaped, not only by schools, but also by broader conditions of trust, safety, and perceived risk.

Interpreting the Findings Through Existing Literature

The first finding, SPS consistently frames multilingualism as an institutional asset, aligns with literature calling for asset-based and culturally sustaining approaches to multilingual education. García and Kleifgen (2018) and García and Wei (2014) argue that MLs should be understood through the richness of their full linguistic repertoires rather than through deficit-based constructions that position them as lacking English. In this study, SPS documents repeatedly emphasized students' cultural and linguistic assets, as well as district responsibility for providing meaningful and rigorous opportunities that build on those assets. This suggests that SPS has adopted a discourse that is aligned with contemporary multilingual education research and has embedded that language across multiple policy and communication contexts.

This finding is especially important in relation to the first subquestion concerning cultural inclusion. The district's repeated recognition of multilingualism as a valued part of community identity suggests that SPS policies go beyond simply acknowledging linguistic differences, and instead position it as belonging within the educational environment. In this sense, SPS challenges more traditional deficit-oriented frameworks that treat multilingualism as a problem to be managed or remediated. The policy language indicates an effort to normalize multilingualism as part of district identity and to frame MLs as integral to the school community.

However, literature on critical multilingualism and raciolinguistics pushes this interpretation further by asking whether affirming language necessarily transforms the deeper institutional logics of schooling. Flores and Rosa (2015) argue that language is understood through racialized frameworks that shape which speech practices are recognized as legitimate, educated, or worthy of institutional authority. From this perspective, an asset-based approach can coexist with structures that continue to privilege English-dominant norms and institutionally

sanctioned forms of participation. The findings from SPS reflect the tension Flores and Rosa (2015) acknowledge. While the district clearly challenges deficit narratives in how it talks about MLs, the documents provide less evidence that multilingual families and communities are positioned as collaborators of district priorities. This finding suggests that inclusive dialogue, while meaningful, does not automatically translate into a fairer distribution of power.

The second finding, SPS has institutionalized translation and interpretation as part of district infrastructure, strongly addresses the subquestion regarding equitable access. Much of the existing literature has demonstrated that language barriers can constrain immigrant and multilingual families' access to information, school services, and opportunities for participation (Turney & Kao, 2009; López et al., 2013). In that context, SPS's centralized multilingual services, interpretation structures, and translated family resources represent a significant policy response. Rather than relying on individual educators or schools to navigate multilingual communication informally, SPS built routineized systems that make access to information more consistent and district-wide. This theme suggests that equitable access is conceptualized largely as access to institutional communication and navigation. Families are provided with translated materials, interpretation at meetings, and access points through liaisons and multilingual services. These supports matter because they reduce barriers that have historically excluded multilingual families from school systems or left them in the margins. Therefore, this finding indicates that the district recognizes language access as an institutional obligation instead of a private burden for families to solve on their own.

On the other hand, the findings also indicate that these systems remain primarily focused on helping families receive information, as opposed to them collaboratively shaping it. From a culturally sustaining perspective, meaningful support requires more than making existing

institutional messages legible in multiple languages; it requires creating conditions in which multilingual communities can influence the terms of communication itself (Paris & Alim, 2017). While the Somerville district appears to challenge exclusion by making communication more accessible, it may still reproduce dominant linguistic norms by leaving English as the default language of agenda-setting, authority, and institutional authorship.

The third finding, family engagement is structured through formalized programs such as SFLC and MLPAC, offers perhaps the clearest response to the subquestion about meaningful partnership. SPS documents do not portray family engagement as incidental, optional, or purely relational. SPS presents it as something organized through district structures, advisory supports, liaisons, classes, and resource hubs. This structure suggests that the district has institutionalized support for multilingual families, whereas other districts may relegate engagement to individual schools or isolated outreach efforts. In this sense, SPS appears to recognize that meaningful family support extends beyond classroom communication and includes helping families navigate educational systems, community services, and advocacy spaces.

This finding resonates with sociocultural theories of learning and participation, which emphasize that learning and development occur through relationships, interaction, and participation in shared social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). The family engagement structures described in the documents can be understood as institutional attempts to build those relational contexts by creating recurring spaces where families and educators meet, exchange information, and develop shared understandings. SFLC and MLPAC can be related to Gutiérrez's (2008) concept of third spaces, as these programs can be seen as attempts to create settings where home and school worlds come into contact, and where family knowledge might inform educational conversations.

The documents also show that participation is often organized through district-designed programs, meetings, and advisory formats. Families are invited in, but within structures whose terms are largely set by the district. This reflects a familiar tension in the family engagement literature: schools may create opportunities for participation while still defining what counts as appropriate engagement, who may speak, and how input is taken up. In that sense, SPS policies appear to promote partnership, but primarily within a model of invited engagement rather than shared governance. This distinction further supports the finding that, while SPS challenges exclusionary models that ignore multilingual families, it may still reproduce dominant notions of legitimate family engagement by privileging institutionally mediated, school-sanctioned forms of involvement.

The fourth theme, SPS repeatedly situates support for MLs within the demographic realities of Somerville, reinforces the district's responsiveness to community context. Across documents, multilingual programming, language access systems, and family engagement structures are justified in relation to the city's linguistic diversity and immigrant communities. Therefore, support is framed as an organizational response to who the district actually serves. In that sense, SPS policies appear aligned with principles of equity and cultural responsiveness because they are shaped by the characteristics of the local community, instead of a one-size-fits-all model of schooling.

Relational developmental systems theory offers a helpful lens for interpreting this responsiveness. Overton (2015) emphasizes that development emerges through dynamic relations between individuals and contexts, rather than from isolated characteristics of either. Within this framework, district policies related to communication, multilingual programming, and family engagement can be understood as contextual conditions that shape how children and

families experience schooling. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model similarly highlights the importance of mesosystem connections between home and school. When school systems are linguistically accessible and structurally responsive to families, they strengthen those mesosystem connections and support children's belonging and development across contexts.

However, the findings also show that responsiveness to community demographics does not automatically produce equity in practice. SPS documents themselves acknowledge ongoing concerns about invisibility, communication gaps, and the need to amplify the voices of multilingual and underrepresented families. This acknowledgement prevents a simplistic interpretation of responsiveness as equivalent to justice. A district may recognize demographic change and build support systems in response, while still operating within broader institutional arrangements that unevenly distribute visibility, legitimacy, and influence. Thus, the findings suggest that SPS is responsive, but that responsiveness remains incomplete when multilingual communities are more visible as populations to be served instead of meaningful voices with influence in the decisions.

Answering the Research Questions

Overall, the findings suggest that SPS defines and implements support for multilingual learners (MLs) and their families through a combination of asset-based discourse (i.e. the ways institutions describe MLs and their families as having valuable cultural and linguistic resources that contribute to the school community), centralized communication systems, formal engagement structures, and demographic responsiveness. These policies promote equitable access by expanding multilingual communication and reducing information barriers; they promote cultural inclusion by repeatedly affirming multilingualism as a valued and constitutive

feature of the district; and they promote meaningful partnerships that create stable and visible pathways for multilingual families to access programs, resources, and advisory spaces.

At the same time, the findings also suggest that these same policies may reproduce dominant racialized and linguistic notions of legitimate family engagement. Communication is more clearly structured to transmit information to families than to support multilingual co-construction of policy or messaging. Engagement opportunities are more clearly documented as advisory and invited than as shared governance. Institutional authority remains more visible than community authority. In this sense, SPS policies both challenge and reproduce dominant norms: they challenge exclusion by making multilingual families more visible, more supported, and more institutionally recognized, but they reproduce institutional hierarchies by retaining control over the structures through which participation occurs. This dual finding shows that school district policies do not fall neatly into categories of equitable or inequitable, inclusive or exclusive. Instead, they often contain contradictory elements. That tension is not evidence of failure, but rather the complexity of pursuing equity within historically English-dominant and racially stratified educational systems.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this study relied exclusively on publicly available district documents and communications. These materials are useful for understanding how SPS publicly defines its commitments, priorities, and structures of support, but they do not provide direct evidence of implementation quality or everyday experience. Public-facing documents may emphasize coherence and success while minimizing tensions, inconsistencies, or informal practices.

Second, the study focused on a single district. Somerville is a distinctive community with a long history of immigration, linguistic diversity, and district-level investment in multilingual programming. The goal of the study was not broad generalizability, but rather an in-depth case study of how one district conceptualizes and structures support. Even so, findings may not transfer neatly to districts with different demographic, political, or resource conditions.

Finally, because the study centered on institutional texts, it could not directly examine how multilingual families, students, or educators interpret these policies. This limitation is particularly important given the study's concern with meaningful partnership and dominant norms of engagement. Policies may appear inclusive on paper while being experienced very differently in practice.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

Despite these limitations, the study offers several important implications for the future. First, it highlights the importance of district-level infrastructure in supporting MLs and families. Translation and interpretation services, multilingual staffing, family liaisons, and engagement structures can reduce barriers that multilingual families have historically faced. Other districts may learn from SPS's coordinated approach to language access and family support.

Second, the findings suggest that future policy efforts should move beyond access alone toward more concrete and sustained forms of multilingual participation and shared governance. While making information available in multiple languages is necessary, it is not sufficient for meaningful partnership. Moving beyond access requires shifting from systems that primarily deliver information to families toward systems that enable sustained participation and shared influence. In practice, this includes creating structures through which multilingual families can shape communication, contribute to program development, and participate in decision-making

processes over time with visible incorporation of that feedback. For instance, the districts might establish multilingual feedback systems that are regularly reviewed and integrated into planning, involve families in co-designing communication materials or engagement initiatives, or expand the role of advisory councils to include participatory agenda-setting and follow-through.

Sustained participation is not defined by one-time involvement, but rather, ongoing opportunities for families to play a part in the structures that shape their children's educational experiences.

Schools could also involve multilingual families in co-designing communication materials, ensuring that not only the language, but the framing and priorities, also reflect community perspectives. Additionally, expanding opportunities for participatory agenda-setting, such as allowing families to shape the topics discussed in advisory councils like MLPAC, could shift engagement from consultation toward shared influence.

Additionally, collaborative partnership must also account for accessibility and trust. Offering flexible modes of participation, such as virtual meetings, asynchronous feedback options, or community-based gatherings, may better accommodate families who face scheduling constraints, transportation barriers, or concerns about visibility. Online and hybrid engagement formats, when thoughtfully implemented, can create additional entry points for families who may feel more comfortable participating from familiar or private spaces. However, these approaches must be paired with intentional relationship-building efforts to ensure that participation is meaningful and valued.

Third, the study underscores the need to rethink what counts as legitimate family engagement. Within this study, legitimate family engagement is understood as forms of involvement that value more than simply participation, and instead, activities that are recognized by institutions as meaningful and influential. In many school contexts, legitimate engagement is

implicitly defined through visible, school-centered behaviors such as scheduled meetings, volunteering in classrooms, or participating in advisory councils. While these forms of engagement are important, they do not fully capture the ways multilingual families support their children's learning through culturally grounded practices, such as community-based learning or informal networks of care and information-sharing. As a result, families whose engagement does not align with institutional norms may be perceived as less involved, even when they are actively supporting their children's development. If schools continue to privilege district-defined, institutionally mediated forms of participation, then even well-intentioned policies may reproduce the very hierarchies they seek to challenge. Policies that more fully value community expertise, cultural knowledge, and multilingual modes of participation may better align with culturally sustaining and equity-oriented frameworks. Rather than positioning this as a deficit on the part of schools, this finding points to an opportunity for growth to expand how engagement is recognized and supported, which can open more inclusive pathways for collaboration. Creating spaces where families and educators can come together to share perspectives, define priorities, and shape participation more collectively may help bridge gaps between institutional expectations and community practices. In this sense, strengthening family engagement is about more fully reflecting the diverse ways families already contribute to their children's learning.

Finally, the study points to the value of future research that brings institutional analysis into conversation with lived experience. Document analysis can reveal how a district presents itself and structures support, but interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic work are needed to understand whether those supports are experienced as accessible, meaningful, and transformative by the families they are intended to serve.

Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that SPS has developed a robust infrastructure for supporting multilingual learners (MLs) and their families, including centralized language access services, multilingual staffing, and formalized family engagement structures such as the Somerville Family Learning Collaborative (SFLC) and the Multilingual Learner Parent Advisory Council (MLPAC). These systems represent meaningful progress in addressing longstanding barriers to participation. At the same time, the analysis suggests that opportunities remain to deepen how multilingual families access *and* shape these structures. Building on these findings, an important next step for districts such as Somerville Public Schools (SPS) is to extend existing systems of support beyond access-oriented inclusion toward more relational, co-constructed forms of partnership with multilingual families. Strengthening this dimension of support requires attending not only to communication and participation, but also to the relational and structural conditions under which families engage with schools.

One pathway forward involves intentionally cultivating spaces within existing district structures where family and institutional knowledge can be brought into more reciprocal relationship. Drawing on sociocultural and third space theory (Gutiérrez, 2008), districts might consider how established programs such as SFLC and MLPAC can function not only as sites of information-sharing or advisory input, but also as spaces of collaborative meaning-making and design. For example, multilingual family engagement initiatives could incorporate opportunities for families, educators, and administrators to jointly reflect on school communication practices, identify areas for improvement, and co-develop materials or strategies that better align with community priorities. These efforts would not require large-scale structural changes, but rather a reorientation of existing spaces toward more reciprocal communication. In doing so, districts can

move closer to models of truly equitable partnership that recognize multilingual families as contributors to institutional knowledge, rather than solely as recipients of services.

Similarly, strengthening family-school partnerships requires greater attention to how family voice is incorporated into ongoing decision-making processes. While advisory councils and engagement programs create important entry points for participation, the extent to which family input shapes institutional priorities is often less visible. Districts might therefore consider developing more transparent and consistent systems for demonstrating how multilingual family perspectives inform policy and practice. For instance, summarizing and sharing how family feedback is reflected in subsequent decisions, programming changes, or communication strategies can help make participation more meaningful and visible. These practices contribute to a broader shift from consultation toward shared influence, while remaining grounded in feasible adjustments to existing systems.

In addition to structural considerations, relational dynamics between families and school systems remain central to meaningful engagement. Educational institutions often operate through layers of hierarchy that can create distance between families and decision-makers, particularly for multilingual and immigrant communities navigating unfamiliar systems. Increasing opportunities for direct, informal, and sustained interaction between families and school or district leaders may help mitigate these power dynamics. For example, regular administrator presence at family-facing events, multilingual engagement spaces, or community gatherings can contribute to greater familiarity, accessibility, and trust. These forms of visibility can play an important role in reshaping how families experience institutional relationships and in strengthening the mesosystem connections emphasized within ecological and developmental frameworks (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

At the level of professional practice, these findings also suggest the importance of continued investment in educator training related to multilingual family communication. While SPS demonstrates strong commitment to multilingual support, sustaining this work requires that all educators develop the capacity to engage with multilingual families in ways that are culturally responsive, linguistically inclusive, and critically aware of broader sociocultural dynamics. Professional development that supports educators in reflecting on their assumptions about family engagement, working effectively with interpreters and liaisons, and recognizing diverse forms of family involvement may strengthen these efforts. Such work aligns with culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), which calls for educational systems to move beyond acknowledgement, and instead actively sustain the cultural and linguistic practices of their communities.

Beyond family engagement structures, districts might also consider how asset-based understandings of multilingualism are reflected within curriculum and classroom practice. While SPS documents consistently frame multilingualism as a strength at the policy level, extending this framing into students' everyday learning experiences represents an important dimension of systemic support. This could include integrating multilingual texts, family stories, cultural traditions, and knowledge rooted in students' home and community experiences into existing curricula, as well as creating opportunities for students and families to contribute their linguistic and cultural resources within classroom spaces. These efforts reinforce the idea that multilingualism is meaningfully integrated into educational experiences, supporting both academic engagement and identity development.

Finally, these recommendations must be understood within the broader sociopolitical contexts that shape multilingual families' experiences with institutions. Participation in school

systems is influenced, not only by the availability of resources or programs, but also by families' perceptions of safety, trust, and belonging. In contexts where immigrant and multilingual communities may experience uncertainty or vulnerability, schools have the potential to play a critical role as sites of safety, stability, and support. Strengthening partnerships with local organizations, ensuring that family engagement spaces are accessible and responsive, and fostering environments in which families feel respected and protected are essential components of equitable support. From a relational developmental systems perspective (Overton, 2015), these conditions shape how families and schools interact over time, influencing both immediate participation and longer-term educational trajectories.

Collectively, these recommendations build on SPS's existing strengths while identifying opportunities to further develop systems of support that are relational, reciprocal, and responsive to community voice. Moving toward these forms of engagement could deepen current structures in ways that more fully align with the district's stated commitments to equity, inclusion, and multilingualism as an asset.

Conclusions

This study examined how Somerville Public Schools (SPS) conceptualizes and structures support for multilingual learners (MLs) and their families through district documents and communications. The findings suggest that SPS has developed a multi-layered support system grounded in asset-based understandings of multilingualism, institutionalized language-access practices, formal family engagement structures, and responsiveness to community demographics. These policies appear to expand access, affirm multilingual identities, and create important pathways for family participation. SPS documents also demonstrate how the district increases accessibility and organizes participation, but does not co-construct policy with multilingual

families and communities. As a result, the district's policies can be understood as advancing equity and inclusion while simultaneously reproducing elements of dominant racialized and linguistic norms of institutional authority and family engagement. Recognizing that tension, this study highlights how extensive support in one district can remain structured by broader inequalities even when framed through the language of equity, belonging, and inclusion.

At its core, this study underscores that support for MLs and families is about more than services or policy language; it is about building school systems where families' contributions are recognized as meaningful within the school community, languages are treated as strengths, and students can experience belonging while staying true to their background. In this sense, SPS offers a compelling example of how district policy can begin to move beyond narrow compliance models toward more expansive, equity-oriented visions of support. While this work remains ongoing, the structures and commitments reflected in SPS's approach suggest that multilingual education can become a powerful model for what more humane, inclusive, and community-rooted schooling can look like.

Appendix A

SPS Document Corpus, Coding Framework, and Analytic Process

This appendix provides supplemental materials to support the analytic process described in the Methods section, such as the document corpus, sample coding excerpts, and analytic memos used to develop themes. These materials are presented to enhance transparency and illustrate how interpretations were generated across multiple institutional documents.

A1. Document Corpus

The analysis drew on a range of publicly available documents to capture district-level policy, communication, and family engagement practices. Documents were selected to reflect institutional priorities and public representations of support.

Table A1

Document Corpus

Document Type	Source	Description
Multilingual Learner Education (MLE) Department Memo (2024)	SPS School Committee	Internal-facing document outlining program priorities and district commitments
SPS Multilingual Learner Education (MLE) Webpages	SPS Website	Public-facing descriptions of multilingual learner programs and services
Multilingual Services Pages	SPS Website	Information on translation and interpretation services
Family Resource Pages	SPS Website	Materials supporting families navigating SPS systems
Somerville Family Learning Collaborative (SFLC) Pages	SPS Website	Family engagement programs, workshops, and services
Multilingual Learner Parent Advisory Council (MLPAC) Pages	SPS Website	Parent advisory structures and participation opportunities

District Strategic and Diversity Documents	SPS Reports	District-wide priorities related to equity and inclusion
Massachusetts DESE Guidance	State Website	Policy context for multilingual education
School Committee Reports and Public Meeting Materials	SPS School Committee	Public records reflecting district decision-making
COVID-era District Communications (SFLC / Family Support Updates)	SPS / City Communications	Documentation of SPS response to multilingual family needs

A2. Coding Process and Sample Excerpts

Coding focused on how institutional language constructs support for multilingual learners (MLs) and families, with attention to how documents frame multilingualism, structure communication, and define participation.

Table A2

Sample Coding Excerpts

Document	Example Content	Code	Analytic Interpretation
MLE Memo (2024)	Emphasis on building instruction around students' cultural and linguistic strengths	Asset-Based Framing	Multilingualism is positioned as a strength rather than a deficit
Multilingual Services Page	Description of translation and interpretation services across school contexts	Language Access Infrastructure	Communication support is systematized at the district level
Family Resource Pages	Information about school-based family liaisons	Mediated Participation	Families access systems through designated institutional roles
MLPAC Page	Description of parent advisory meetings and feedback opportunities	Advisory Engagement	Participation is invited but structured within district-defined forums

Strategic/ Diversity Documents	Statements about increasing engagement and visibility of multilingual families	Demographic Responsiveness	District acknowledges ongoing inequities in participation
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Note. Excerpts represent synthesized examples drawn from analyzed documents to illustrate coding categories.

A3. Codebook

Codes were developed inductively and refined through comparison across documents.

Table A3

Codebook

Code	Definition
Asset-Based Framing	Language positioning multilingualism as a strength or resource
Language Access Infrastructure	Systems for translation, interpretation, and multilingual communication
Institutional Responsibility	Framing support for MLs as a district-wide obligation
Mediated Participation	Family engagement structured through programs, liaisons, or institutional roles
Access-Oriented Support	Emphasis on helping families receive information and services
Advisory Engagement	Opportunities for families to provide input within district-defined structures
Demographic Responsiveness	References to community diversity as a basis for policy
Limitations of Participation	Evidence of constraints on family voice or decision-making power

A4. Analytic Memos

Analytic memos were used to document emerging interpretations and support reflexive analysis throughout the coding process.

Memo	Description
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|---|--|
| 1: Asset Framing and Institutional Scope | Across documents, SPS consistently frames multilingualism as an asset. However, this framing appears most strongly in programmatic and instructional contexts rather than in decision-making structures. |
| 2: Language Access as Institutional Infrastructure | Translation and interpretation are presented as formalized district systems, indicating a shift from accommodation to institutional responsibility. At the same time, communication appears primarily oriented toward delivering information to families rather than supporting reciprocal exchange. |
| 3: Structured Participation and Its Limits | Family engagement is organized through recurring district structures such as SFLC and MLPAC. These provide meaningful access points for participation, but participation is largely mediated through institutional frameworks, suggesting limits in shared decision-making. |

A5. Development of Themes

Through comparison across documents, related codes were grouped into broader themes that captured recurring institutional patterns. Codes related to asset framing and institutional responsibility were combined into the theme of multilingualism as an institutional asset. Codes describing translation systems and communication practices informed the theme of language access as institutional infrastructure. Codes related to family engagement structures were grouped into family engagement as a structured partnership. Finally, codes reflecting demographic context and limitations in participation informed the theme of community responsiveness and institutional limits. These themes form the basis of the Results section.

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