RedFame

Journal of Education and Training Studies
Vol. 14, No. 1; January 2026
ISSN 2324-805X E-ISSN 2324-8068
Published by Redfame Publishing
URL: http://jets.redfame.com

Fostering Critical Dialogue and Advocacy Through Online School-Based Teams: A Model for Multilingual Education Professional Development

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Received: July 2, 2025 Accepted: August 14, 2025 Online Published: August 19, 2025

doi:10.11114/jets.v14i1.7800 URL: https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v14i1.7800

Abstract

This case report examines TEAMS USA (Teaching English and Academics to Multilingual Students Using Strengths-based Approaches), a school-based professional development model designed to foster institutional change in multilingual education. Grounded in critical language teacher education, dialogic pedagogy, and collaborative advocacy, the program engaged cross-role school teams (which included administrators, classroom teachers, and ELD specialists) in a ten-month online learning experience structured around the Equity for Educating English Learners (3E) Inventory. Data sources included exit interviews, team-generated action plans, and program artifacts. Findings revealed two major areas of transformation: (1) the development of critical awareness through structured, evidence-based self-assessment, and (2) the cultivation of advocacy as a professional skill embedded in team-based planning and schoolwide initiatives. Three case narratives, from rural, suburban, and urban schools, illustrate the model's adaptability and impact, with outcomes ranging from new professional development resources to systemic changes in multilingual programming. The discussion highlights the importance of operationalizing equity through structured dialogue, cross-role collaboration, and sustained inquiry. Implications for scaling include the need for contextual flexibility, administrative participation, and infrastructure that supports long-term implementation. TEAMS USA offers a replicable framework for professional development that moves beyond compliance to institutional transformation.

Keywords: multilingual education**,** teacher professional development, advocacy in education, dialogic learning, critical pedagogy, online training

1. Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

Multilingual learner populations in United States schools have grown dramatically, with English learners now representing over 5.3 million students (11 percent) across K-12 education (Irwin et al., 2022). This unprecedented growth has outpaced the preparation of language teachers and mainstream educators equipped to serve these populations effectively, creating persistent challenges that extend far beyond individual language acquisition support. The complexity of multilingual education requires sophisticated understanding of second language acquisition principles, culturally responsive pedagogy, assessment practices that distinguish language proficiency from academic ability, and collaborative teaching models that integrate language and content instruction. Yet, most teacher preparation programs provide minimal coursework in these areas, leaving educators underprepared for the linguistic and cultural diversity they encounter in their classrooms (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Faltis & Valdés, 2016; Lucas & Villegas, 2013).

The documented academic performance gap between English learners and their monolingual peers has long been cited as justification for improving educational services (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2017). However, this framing is fundamentally problematic because these assessments measure students' performance in a language they are still acquiring, creating inherently unfair comparisons. Additionally, "gap" calculations systematically exclude scores of students who achieved English proficiency and exited EL status years ago, artificially deflating multilingual population metrics (Goodrich, Thayer, & Leiva, 2021; Kieffer & Thompson, 2018; Le et al., 2024). Most critically, an overreliance on these flawed measurements perpetuates deficit-oriented perspectives that view multilingualism as a barrier rather than an asset (Chang & Viesca, 2020).

The more pressing concern is not the academic performance gap, but rather the opportunity gap that this touted underperformance is used to justify. Long-term opportunity gaps between English learners and monolingual peers

reflect both systemic barriers and inadequate teacher preparation in language-responsive instruction. Mainstream teachers often lack knowledge of how to make content comprehensible while developing new proficiencies in academic language, how to leverage students' home languages as resources for learning, and how to differentiate instruction based on language proficiency levels rather than perceived ability (de Jong & Harper, 2005; NASEM, 2017). These opportunity gaps manifest in significantly lower enrollment rates for multilingual students in STEM courses, Advanced Placement programs, and gifted education (Gándara & Santibañez, 2016; Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Kuehl, Azano, & Mata, 2025; NASEM, 2018).

Despite clear federal mandates from *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) and the *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) three-pronged test requiring English language development programs based on sound educational theory, effective implementation with adequate resources, and regular evaluation, many districts struggle with basic compliance. The U.S. Department of Education's guidance reveals persistent failures particularly affecting language education: districts operating without comprehensive English learner service plans, inadequate staffing of qualified EL/bilingual teachers, poor communication with multilingual families, and failure to provide language teachers with necessary resources and support (US ED, OELA, 2016).

TEAMS USA (Teaching English and Academics to Multilingual Students Using Strengths-based Approaches) emerged from our recognition that sustainable change in multilingual education requires building local capacity for advocacy and institutional transformation among language educators and their collaborative partners. Rather than simply providing individual teachers with new strategies or distributing compliance resources, TEAMS USA cultivates advocacy teams within participating schools capable of motivating systematic change in how institutions serve multilingual learners and their families.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 The Need for Specialized Professional Development

Deficit-oriented beliefs about multilingual students remain prevalent in educational communities, undermining teacher self-efficacy and student achievement (Mellom, Straubhaar, Balderas, Ariail, & Portes, 2018; Song, Schultz, Child, Kim, & Dorner, 2023; Viesca & Teemant, 2019; Wesley-Nero & Donley, 2024). Most mainstream teachers lack critical knowledge for effective multilingual instruction, including how to make content comprehensible while developing academic language, leverage home languages as resources, and differentiate based on language proficiency rather than perceived ability (de Jong & Harper, 2005; NASEM, 2017; Weddle, Hopkins, Lowenhaupt, & Kangas, 2024). This under-preparedness stems from insufficient emphasis in teacher preparation programs, inadequate professional development, and difficulties adapting to changing demographics (López & Santibañez, 2018).

However, well-designed professional development demonstrates significant potential for transforming educator attitudes and practices (He & Bagwell, 2021; Uribe-Zarain et al., 2024). Uribe-Zarain and colleagues et al. (2024) documented substantial growth in language attitudes, teaching efficacy, and observed practice among teachers completing sustained culturally responsive education training. Similarly, Täschner, Tröbst, Di Fuccia, & Warwas (2024) found that teacher self-efficacy improved significantly ($g = 0.47$) across a meta-analysis of 115 studies, particularly when interventions included mastery experiences, social persuasion, and reflective opportunities. These findings highlight the importance of comprehensive professional development (PD) models that support both knowledge development and confidence in implementation.

1.2.2 Features of Effective Professional Development

Professional development that effectively supports educators of multilingual learners must attend to both content and pedagogy. Research consistently emphasizes the importance of focusing on subject-specific knowledge and evidence-based teaching strategies tailored to the needs of emergent bilingual students (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Heineke, Guo, Carman, & McTighe, 2023). The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM, 2017) outlined six core domains for teacher learning: language development and acquisition processes, the relationship between culture and language, instructional practices, assessment strategies, professional roles, and family engagement. Building on this framework, Shelton, Hogan, Chow, & Wexler (2022) reinforced the value of these core competencies, emphasizing that literacy-focused PD yielded the strongest outcomes when explicitly tailored to the needs of emergent bilingual students.

In addition to relevant content, the mode of delivery plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of professional learning. Active learning opportunities where teachers engage directly with instructional strategies have been shown to foster deeper understanding and skill development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Heineke et al., 2023). Coaching, in particular, emerged as a powerful component in driving meaningful change in teacher practice (Renn, Choi, Wright, & Morita-Mullaney, 2023). Sims et al. (2023) found that the most successful programs incorporated multiple active

mechanisms such as modeling, feedback, and rehearsal to ensure that instructional changes translated into improved student outcomes.

Equally important is the duration of professional development. Brief or one-off workshops tend to yield limited results, whereas programs with extended time commitments allow for more sustained learning and application. Shelton et al. (2022) reported that programs lasting at least 20 hours showed significantly greater impact. Reinforcing this point, Sims et al. (2023) highlighted the value of long-term supports like self-monitoring and action planning, which help teachers develop and maintain new techniques over time.

The social dimension of professional learning also deserves attention. Teachers benefit from structured opportunities to collaborate, reflect, and co-construct knowledge with peers. Such collaborative participation fosters the development of asset-based perspectives and creates space for teachers to share effective practices (Coulter & Richardson, 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Heineke et al., 2023).

Finally, expert support stands out as another defining feature of impactful professional development. Programs that include expert modeling and coaching consistently demonstrate stronger results (Renn et al., 2023; Shelton et al., 2022). For example, Solís, Lindahl, and Yazan (2024) documented how expert guidance can catalyze shifts in teachers' professional identities as language educators. Similarly, Shelton et al. (2022) observed that school-based professional development with embedded coaching led to higher fidelity in the implementation of evidence-based practices for multilingual learners.

1.2.3 Moving Beyond Compliance to Equity Action

Effective professional development must move beyond individual deficits to address systemic inequities (Chang & Viesca, 2022). Programs should view students' backgrounds as assets, integrate family engagement and multilingual tools, and provide ongoing coaching for immediate classroom application. This approach engages teachers in concrete equity actions (advocacy, strengths-based instruction, and challenging institutional barriers) rather than treating equity as mere compliance (Hamm-Rodríguez, Morales, & Nieto, 2025).

2. Context and Theoretical Framework

TEAMS USA (Teaching English and Academics to Multilinguals Students Using Strengths-based Approaches) is a school-based professional development program created through a U.S. Department of Education National Professional Development grant. The program engages school teams in a ten-month collaborative learning experience structured around the Equity for Educating English Learners (3E) Inventory, a systematic assessment tool comprising ten elements and forty Key Equity Signals (KES) specifically addressing multilingual education quality.

The design of TEAMS USA responds to long-standing challenges in multilingual education: the isolation of language teachers, insufficient institutional support, and lack of preparation among mainstream educators for equity-centered, language-responsive instruction. Rather than targeting individual teachers through short-term strategy workshops, TEAMS USA supports cross-role, school-based teams capable of evaluating institutional practices, identifying equity gaps, and advancing sustained change through collaborative action planning. Each school team includes an administrator, an English Language Development (ELD) specialist, and two to three classroom teachers to ensure engagement across levels of institutional authority and to foster collaborative leadership.

The theoretical foundation of the program is grounded in critical language teacher education, dialogic pedagogy, and advocacy development. Hawkins and Norton (2009) emphasized that critical language teacher education must address power dynamics, linguistic hierarchies, and institutional barriers that multilingual students encounter, while Ojha, Burton, and De Costa (2024) argued that critical teacher education must prepare educators to "play an agentic role in addressing broader societal issues through everyday pedagogical choices" affecting language minorities (p. 203). However, language teachers often struggle to translate critical theoretical frameworks into concrete institutional assessment and transformation (Gay, 2018).

TEAMS USA operationalizes these concepts through the 3E Inventory (Hellman, 2024), which functions as both a critical self-assessment tool and an organizing structure for professional development through ten elements and forty Key Equity Signals (KES) specifically addressing multilingual education quality (see Table 1). The inventory requires teams to engage in evidence-based reflection on language programming quality. For example, rather than asking whether educators "value linguistic diversity," KES 1a asks whether teachers can name every student's home language and know at least a few useful phrases. This reframing transforms general affirmations into specific observable practices that often reveal gaps between institutional intentions and day-to-day realities.

Table 1. The 3E Inventory: Ten Elements for Multilingual Education Equity

Element	Focus Area	Key Emphasis
1. Knowledge of CLD Students	Understanding student backgrounds, languages, and cultural assets	Asset-based student assessment
2. School Climate	Creating welcoming, inclusive environments	Visible multilingual representation
3. School-level Plan	Comprehensive English learner service planning	Legal compliance and effectiveness
4. Language-rich Classrooms	Academic language development across content areas	Systematic language instruction
5. Quality ELD Programs	Evidence-based English language development	Research-supported programming
6. Adequate Resources	Staffing, materials, and institutional support	Resource equity and access
7. Engagement with CLD Families	Meaningful family partnerships and communication	Two-way collaboration
8. Motivating Multilingualism	Supporting home language development	Additive bilingualism
9. Leveraging Funds of Knowledge	Integrating cultural assets into curriculum	Culturally responsive teaching
10. Access to All Programs	Equitable participation in advanced coursework	Opportunity gap elimination

The program's dialogic structure draws on Alexander's (2020) conception of educational dialogue, particularly the role of argumentative discourse in fostering critical thinking and collective learning. Each module follows a ten-phase session structure, from relational team building to cross-team feedback, scaffolded to move participants from self-reflection to evidence-based planning (see *Program Structure and Components* below). For example, the "A Look in the Mirror" phase facilitates intra-team dialogue across roles (e.g., administrators, ELD specialists, teachers), while the "Idea Market" brings teams into cross-contextual conversation with peers from other schools, enabling critical feedback and shared sense-making. These structures are designed to prevent professional insularity and promote a culture of inquiry and equity-focused problem-solving.

TEAMS USA also positions advocacy not as an external political act, but as a professional competency that can be developed through structured collaboration and practice. Drawing from the "remodeling" metaphor (Hellman, 2024), the program frames institutional change as achievable when language educators are supported with the right tools, collaborative partners, and protected time for inquiry and planning. By distributing leadership across team roles and embedding change efforts within school structures rather than layering them on top, the program cultivates conditions for lasting transformation in multilingual learner support.

TEAMS USA integrates three interrelated frameworks (critical awareness, dialogic engagement, and collaborative advocacy) into a cohesive professional development model. This case report explores the design, implementation, and outcomes of TEAMS USA, a professional development model that fosters critical dialogue and advocacy through online, school-based teams. Grounded in critical language teacher education, dialogism, and advocacy as a professional skill, the TEAMS USA model offers a replicable structure for preparing educators to examine inequalities, navigate institutional power structures, and collaborate across roles to enact sustained change for multilingual students. This case report is guided by two central research questions:

1. How does participation in the TEAMS USA professional development model influence educators' understanding of equity in multilingual education?
2. In what ways does the TEAMS USA model support the development of advocacy as a professional skill among educators working in school-based teams?

Drawing on detailed analyses of participant experiences and team-generated initiatives, we show how the integration of these frameworks can move professional learning beyond surface-level compliance and toward meaningful, collective transformation.

3. Case Description: The TEAMS USA Program

3.1 Program Structure and Components

The TEAMS USA curriculum is organized into ten modules; each is aligned with a specific 3E inventory element (see Table 1). Each module requires three hours of engagement, totaling thirty hours across twenty bi-weekly sessions of ninety minutes each. Each five-member school team includes an administrator, English language development (ELD) specialist, and classroom teachers, ensuring engagement across institutional authority levels while building collaborative capacity for sustained change.

Teams receive extensive support including a trained facilitator, a comprehensive handbook, curated resource collections, and guest speakers with expertise in multilingual education. Sessions are delivered synchronously in an online environment, with on-site team meetings and virtual cross-team collaboration. This hybrid design fosters local relevance and peer exchange.

3.2 Session Structure

Each TEAMS USA session follows a consistent ten-phase structure deliberately scaffolded to support collaborative knowledge construction and actionable planning (see Table 2). This structure guides teams through an intentional progression from reflection to dialogue to action. Each session incorporates opportunities for evidence-based assessment, structured planning, and peer-to-peer learning. Teams document specific practices aligned to the 3E Inventory, rather than offering general affirmations, and use shared tools to track their progress throughout the year.

Table 2. Ten-phase Session Structure

Phase	Name	Purpose
1	Warm-Up: Team Building	Establishing relational foundation
2	Update: Team Progress Reports	Accountability and celebration
3	The What and Why: Rationale and Background Knowledge	Theoretical grounding
4	A Look in the Mirror: Self-Assessment Discussion	Evidence-based team dialogue
5	A Look Around: Peer Models, Guest Speaker	Collaborative knowledge construction
6	Discovery: Resource Walkthrough	Evaluating tools and strategies
7	Action Planning: Team Goals	Collaborative decision-making
8	Idea Market: Cross-team Feedback	Argumentative dialogue across contexts
9	Doing It: Task Distribution	Concrete commitment to action
10	TEAMS USA Continuous Improvement: Feedback	Program refinement

The program's consistent design provides scaffolding for meaningful collaboration while encouraging localized solutions based on each team's context and needs. Regular interaction with other schools in the cohort, particularly through the *Idea Market* and *Continuous Improvement* phases, to make sure that teams benefit from broader perspectives while maintaining ownership of their site-specific initiatives.

4. Methodology

This case report draws on data from the implementation of TEAMS USA in the 2023 and 2024 academic years across seven school sites, with the aim of documenting how cross-role school-based teams engaged in critical dialogue and advocacy for multilingual learners. Data was gathered over the ten-month program cycle through multiple sources: exit interviews with participating educators, team-generated action plans, and program artifacts including session reflections, planning documents, and self-assessment records based on the *3E Inventory*.

4.1 Data Sources

Structured group exit interviews were conducted with each school-based team at the conclusion of the program. The interviews focused on participants' experiences, perceived changes in knowledge and practice, and reflections on institutional impact. The interview structure allowed for open-ended responses while centering on key constructs of the program, including equity awareness, collaboration, and advocacy development. In addition to interviews, the researchers collected artifacts from the school teams throughout the program. Artifacts included 3E inventory self-assessments, school specific action plans, and ongoing documentation provided by teams during the program. Action plans were particularly important in understanding how teams translated their learning into site-specific strategies aimed at advancing equity for multilingual learners. Plans were analyzed for depth, complexity, and alignment with the theoretical goals of the program.

4.2 Participants

The data for this study were collected from two cohorts of educators who participated in the TEAMS USA professional development program during the 2023 and 2024 academic years. Initially, seven school-based teams were involved, but one team withdrew mid-year due to district-level constraints, leaving six active teams. Participants represented a variety of roles and grade levels, including early childhood and elementary classroom teachers, special education teachers, ELD specialists, instructional coaches, and school and district administrators. The cohorts also included educators in specialized roles such as reading intervention, Spanish language instruction, and library media services. While most participants worked in elementary settings, Cohort 2 included secondary educators, reflecting a broader effort to support multilingual learners across the K–12 continuum. All participating schools were located in different regions of a midwestern state.

All procedures that involved human participants were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the authors' home institution. All data have been anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

4.3 Researcher Positionality

Members of the research team had distinct roles during the implementation of TEAMS USA, such as program designer, facilitator, content advisor, and evaluator. A subset of the team led facilitation of the professional development sessions, providing guidance, resources, and support to school teams. Their role focused on working alongside participants to build knowledge together and encouraged teams to make their own decisions instead of following a set plan. Facilitators were asked not to give direct instructions, but instead to guide teams by asking questions and supporting their own ideas and leadership. Participants often viewed the facilitator as a multilingual education expert and sought their perspectives when making local decisions. While the program emphasized the co-construction approach, this dynamic inevitably shaped how participants engaged with the facilitator and may have influenced their submitted artifacts.

To mitigate potential bias introduced by the facilitators' dual roles as designer/content advisor, evaluation procedures were intentionally structured to maintain independence. All data collection for research purposes, the exit interviewing in particular, was conducted by a separate member of the research team who did not participate in program delivery. This external evaluator had no direct contact with participants during the program and was not involved in facilitation to allow for greater neutrality in eliciting participant feedback.

When analyzing the data, the team looked at multiple sources to gain a well-rounded view, such as interviews, action plans, and participants' self-assessments. Each member of the research team double-checked the findings for accuracy.

5. Case Narratives

To illustrate how TEAMS USA supported critical dialogue and advocacy in diverse educational settings, we present three case narratives from participating schools: a rural high school, a suburban middle school, and an urban elementary school. Each example highlights context-specific challenges, team-led solutions, and the institutional outcomes that followed. These cases reflect the flexibility of the TEAMS USA model in fostering localized and theory-aligned transformation.

5.1 Case 1: Rural High School: Developing Cultural Asset Documentation

5.1.1 Context and Challenge

Green Valley High School (pseudonym) served students from Central America, India (Gujarati speakers), China, Vietnam (Hmong speakers), and Micronesia (Chamorro, Chuukese, Palauan, and Pohnpeian speakers). Although the district's Lau plan met compliance requirements, it provided insufficient guidance for serving such linguistic diversity within rural resource constraints. The team's baseline 3E Inventory assessment revealed significant gaps in cultural knowledge. KES 1a, requiring educators to name students' home languages and demonstrate familiarity with basic phrases, exposed limited understanding of the diverse communities they served. Rather than viewing this as a professional deficit, the school team reframed it as an opportunity to learn directly from students and families.

5.1.2 Advocacy Solution

The Green Valley team chose not to interpret their knowledge gap as a deficiency; instead, the team embraced it as a chance to grow through direct engagement. They developed innovative cultural asset documentation through recorded student interviews. Students were interviewed in small groups organized by country of origin, with questions designed to elicit funds of knowledge:

- "Describe what your daily life was like in your home country."
- "Tell me about what school was like for you in your home country."
- "How did you celebrate special events in your home country?"
- "What brought you to [location]?"
- "What is one important thing you would like your teachers to know?"

As one team member explained: "We are going to interview groups of students from specific countries and record their answers. We are then going to share the videos during PLC days with the high school staff for them to learn about the different cultures of our students."

5.1.3 Outcomes

The interview project generated multiple institutional changes: recorded interviews became professional development resources shared district-wide, the documentation process transformed educator-student relationships through concrete understanding of students' backgrounds, and the team developed comprehensive school-level plans incorporating cultural knowledge and protocols for supporting multilingual learners.

5.2 Case 2: Suburban Middle School: Building Comprehensive Transition Support

5.2.1 Context and Challenge

Horizon Intermediate School (pseudonym) serving nearly 1,000 students from ten elementary feeder schools across forty square miles faced unique challenges supporting multilingual learners' transitions. Students spent only one year in the building before moving to traditional middle schools, which limited opportunities for sustained relationship-building. Multilingual students experienced particular difficulties navigating institutional complexity while potentially losing continuity in English language development services.

5.2.2 Advocacy Solution

The team implemented a multi-level advocacy strategy to address school climate issues and long-term service coordination.

Short-term Initiatives. Short–term initiatives included: (1) Culture Day celebrations showcasing student diversity; (2) multilingual displays and flags representing home countries; (3) enhanced multilingual library resources, and (4) systematic recognition of student cultural backgrounds.

Long-term Initiatives. Long-term initiatives included: (1) information transfer systems to ensure continuity of English language development services across transitions; (2) communication protocols between ELD specialists at feeder schools and sixth-grade teachers; (3) mentoring programs pairing multilingual students with successful older students; and (4) professional development preparing teachers to support multilingual learners with content instruction.

5.2.3 Outcomes

The team's efforts improved school climate and systematic service delivery. Teachers reported feeling better prepared to support multilingual students; student visibility and engagement increased. The mentoring and information transfer system created continuity beyond the intermediate school year, strengthening long-term academic trajectories.

5.3 Case 3: Urban Elementary School: Integrating Multilingual Support Within IB Framework

5.3.1 Context and Challenge

World Link Elementary School (pseudonym) operated as an International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme World School within a district context that discouraged school-level policy development. Though the IB school's educational philosophy emphasized multilingualism, intercultural understanding, and global citizenship, the educator team noted that implementation was often superficial, lacking integration into instructional and institutional practices.

5.3.2 Advocacy Solution

Rather than creating parallel programming for English learners, the team developed systematic approaches to integrate multilingual education within existing IB frameworks:

- Curriculum integration: Incorporating multilingual students' linguistic and cultural resources into IB programming, using home languages as inquiry resources and positioning multilingual students as cultural perspective experts.
- Professional development alignment: Integrating linguistic and cultural responsiveness into existing IB training rather than requesting separate multilingual education sessions.
- Resource development: Ensuring IB materials reflected multilingual students' backgrounds through multilingual libraries, home language inquiry resources, and assessment approaches recognizing knowledge regardless of English proficiency.
- Family engagement enhancement: Building on IB's community partnership emphasis to position multilingual families as educational partners and cultural resources.

5.3.3 Outcomes

The approach resulted in sustainable, embedded practices rather than add-on activities. Teachers reported greater confidence in supporting multilingual learners within the IB model, and the school's efforts sparked district-level conversations about how equity-focused practices could enhance rather than dilute existing instructional frameworks.

5.4 Cases Comparison

The three case narratives illustrate how the TEAMS USA model supported meaningful change across diverse school contexts and maintained fidelity to its core frameworks of critical awareness, dialogic engagement, and collaborative advocacy. Each team began identifying local equity gaps using the 3E inventory and developed context-responsive strategies to address them. The rural high school prioritized cultural knowledge building and leveraged student voice to

deepen staff understandings and inform professional development. In contrast, the suburban middle school focused on systematic service coordination and climate-building strategies to ensure that multilingual learners remained known and supported as they moved between schools after a brief placement in this school. Meanwhile, the urban elementary school aligned multilingual support with their IB identity. They embedded language equity practices into their curriculum, professional development, and resource design.

Despite differences in setting, team composition, and institutional constraints, all three schools demonstrated a shared trajectory from compliance-focused understanding to proactive, equity-centered advocacy. Each team moved beyond isolated classroom strategies toward systematic interventions that engaged multiple players at all levels and restructured school practices. The rural team's documentation efforts became district-level resources; the suburban team's transition supports improved student experience and instructional coordination; and the urban team's integration work influenced district policy conversations by modeling how multilingual education can be embedded within existent instructional frameworks. All together, these three cases highlight the adaptability and scalability of the TEAMS USA model, showing that sustained, cross-role professional development can yield locally grounded and theoretically coherent school transformation.

6. Findings

Exit interviews, action plans, and team documentation demonstrated two major areas of transformation among educators participating in TEAMS USA: (1) the evolution of equity understanding and (2) the development of advocacy as a professional skill. These findings illustrate how the TEAMS USA model guided participants from general awareness to targeted action and from individual reflection to collaborative institutional change.

6.1 Evolving Understanding of Educational Equity

Participants entered the program with a general commitment to supporting multilingual learners but lacked structured reflection and targeted strategies for examining institutional barriers. The 3E Inventory's evidence-based questions created "critical moments" where educators confronted gaps between assumptions and documented practices. Teachers noted that the program "facilitates and opens topics we had not considered," fostering conversations about previously unexamined issues and assumptions about multilingual learner experiences.

This shift involved cognitive and emotional dimensions. Teams initially assuming adequate multilingual support realized limitations through inquiry and dialogue. One educator described moving their school's self-assessment "from a five or six to a negative three," after gaining clarity about necessary work through student stories and environment audits that revealed multilingual students' experience complexity. As one participant reported, colleagues were "seeing students with different eyes" through intentional professional reflection.

Participants identified "the importance of emphasizing the benefits of being multilingual and encouraging/motivating families and students to develop and maintain native languages in addition to learning English," recognizing linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a deficit. Teams developed increasingly sophisticated analysis of institutional practices and their impacts, enabling identification of specific, actionable changes that generated meaningful improvements.

6.2 Advocacy as a Professional Skill

Participants initially viewed advocacy as an abstract concept or work that happened outside classroom responsibilities. Through structured activities and collaborative planning, they recognized advocacy as a professional skill cultivated through practice, reflection, and strategic collaboration. The structured cohort model enabled cross-role collaboration essential for sustainable change, as teams learned coordination among administrators, ELD specialists, and classroom teachers was necessary for institutional transformation.

Action plan analysis revealed consistent progression from compliance-oriented activities to comprehensive institutional initiatives. Early plans focused on individual classroom improvements like updating translation services or adding multilingual books. Mid-program plans developed systematic family engagement strategies and school-wide professional development. Final plans demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of systemic change processes, proposing multi-year initiatives addressing resource allocation, policy development, and community partnerships simultaneously.

Teams translated learning into concrete advocacy through school-based projects increasing equity and visibility: multilingual signage, culture fairs, redesigned family intake processes, and belonging surveys. Most participants framed work as beginning longer-term shifts rather than one-off activities. One team began after-school Spanish courses for staff; another embedded equity content in weekly newsletters; others developed professional development modules disseminating TEAMS USA learning.

A World Link Elementary participant reflected on "a multitude of ideas and resources" for classroom and school-wide integration, highlighting increased teacher agency for ownership of advocacy-driven changes rather than waiting for administrative initiatives. The systematic resource collection created "a library of resources that teachers could access as

they move forward with implementing change." By program completion, educators expressed greater confidence advocating for multilingual students and driving institutional change. As one teacher summarized, TEAMS USA provided "quality time spent finding out about the needs of our students and how we can work to meet them while sharing this with our staff and new teachers." This reflection illustrates how the program increased knowledge while empowering educators as leaders, ensuring sustained advocacy beyond individual classrooms.

By the end of the program, educators expressed increased confidence in their ability to advocate for multilingual learners and to lead institutional change efforts. They reported that TEAMS USA expanded their knowledge and also empowered them to act within their classrooms and across their schools to promote sustained, systemic equity for multilingual students.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

7.1 Discussion

7.1.1 Scalability Barriers

Findings from two cohorts indicate that the TEAMS USA model holds strong potential for broader implementation if key conditions are upheld. Central to fostering equity-centered change were the structured use of the 3E Inventory, sustained cross-role collaboration, and intentional facilitation. However, scaling this model presents several challenges beyond logistics and funding.

Political will is a critical variable. The success of TEAMS USA depends on schools and districts embracing a vision of equity that involves interrogating long-standing practices, redistributing decision-making power, and addressing systemic bias. In districts where multilingual education is under political scrutiny or treated as a marginal issue, educators may encounter resistance to equity-driven initiatives, regardless of their individual commitment or training.

In addition, old ways or structural inertia can limit the impact of TEAMS USA efforts. Educators may build new habits and mindsets during the program, but without policy changes, dedicated roles, or ongoing reinforcement, these shifts can be difficult to sustain. Long-term transformation requires infrastructure to monitor implementation, support iteration, and protect time for collaboration. This is especially crucial in schools where professional learning is compliance-driven.

Finally, uneven power dynamics within school teams can also hinder progress. As observed during implementation, administrator participation was essential to bridging silos and transforming ideas into action. When administrative involvement was inconsistent, team cohesion suffered, and advocacy efforts stalled. TEAMS USA is designed to work within existing hierarchies while creating structured opportunities for collaboration; however, that balance is delicate and context-dependent.

7.1.2 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when looking at the results of TEAMS USA. First, the program took place in a well-supported setting with funding, stipends, a trained facilitator, and a clear timeline. While these factors allowed for meaningful engagement, they may not reflect the actual conditions of districts or schools with fewer resources. Future implementations should examine how the model works in less optimal situations.

Second, the virtual format had both benefits and drawbacks. The virtual format allowed participants from different locations to be part of the program and provided flexibility. However, it also changed the way teams interacted. For example, ELD specialists often dominated the exit interviews, which might have limited the range of perspectives or more detailed feedback from other team members. Additionally, because some facilitators helped design the program, their involvement may have influenced how participants shared their experiences and decisions.

Finally, given the different roles participants have in their schools, their professional relationships likely affected the data collected, especially in group settings. Although steps were taken to decrease this influence, such as using an external evaluator for interviews, these dynamics are part of the everyday school environment and should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

7.1.3 Implications and Future Research

The TEAMS USA model provides an example of how equity-driven professional development can be structured around dialogic learning, collaborative advocacy, and critical awareness. Its emphasis on team-based inquiry, embedded tools (like the 3E Inventory), and distributed leadership offers a replicable structure for schools seeking to move beyond compliance toward institutional transformation.

In practice, the TEAMS USA model fostered dialogue through a consistent structure of virtual sessions. These sessions featured guided reflection prompts, team-based discussions, and cross-team exchanges through structured activities such

as the "Idea Market." Designed to encourage equal participation across roles, the sessions incorporated collaborative tools like shared digital templates, breakout rooms, and asynchronous planning documents. Each team engaged in advocacy development as part of their action planning, translating insights from dialogue into concrete initiatives tailored to their school contexts. Because teams included administrators, classroom teachers, and specialists, advocacy efforts extended beyond individual classrooms and were framed as a collective, schoolwide responsibility. This combination of structured virtual engagement and diverse team composition enabled schools to move from conversation to action within their local settings, offering a replicable model for online professional learning that supports institutional change.

Future research should explore how school-level changes initiated through TEAMS USA are sustained or adapted over time, providing a clearer understanding of the model's long-term impact. Investigations into implementation fidelity are also needed, particularly in cases where administrative support or facilitation quality varies, as these factors may significantly shape outcomes. In addition, examining how the model functions across diverse policy environments, including districts with restrictive multilingual education policies or limited institutional autonomy, can shed light on the conditions necessary for success. Importantly, researchers should also attend to student-level impacts, assessing whether institutional changes driven by TEAMS USA led to measurable improvements in access, engagement, and achievement for multilingual learners. Finally, future work should identify strategies for institutionalizing equity practices, such as embedding professional development cycles into district calendars, aligning action plans with curriculum review processes, and designing hybrid leadership models that engage multilingual families and students as active co-advocates in the change process.

7.2 Conclusions

TEAMS USA contributes a replicable, theoretically grounded model for advancing multilingual learner equity through school-based professional development. Its strength lies in positioning advocacy as a professional competency, critical reflection as a shared practice, and professional learning as a sustained, collaborative process.

The program's success depended on content but also on structure. The dedicated time, skilled facilitation, and administrative participation were essential. As implementation expands, attention must be paid to conditions that support scalability, including political will, curricular coherence, and structural supports for sustainability.

Ultimately, TEAMS USA illustrates that meaningful equity work is possible when schools are given the tools, structures, and trust to engage in critical inquiry and collective action. It offers a model for moving beyond rhetorical commitments to multilingual learners and toward systemic, context-responsive transformation.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the U.S. Department of Education and the dedicated team behind the Office of English Language Acquisition. We extend our sincere thanks to those who make the National Professional Development (NPD) discretionary grants program possible, and to the educators who participated in TEAMS USA. Their commitment to providing high-quality education to culturally and linguistically diverse students is deeply appreciated.

Authors contributions

Dr. Andrea Hellman conceptualized and designed the professional development and contributed to drafting the manuscript. Dr. Ximena Uribe-Zarain led the study design, performed the data analysis, and drafted portions of the manuscript. Dr. Angela Bell and Heather LeCureux critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

TEAMS USA program created through the support and funding from a U.S. Department of Education National Professional Development grant (T365Z210121).

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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