
Centring multilingual learners and countering racism in Canadian teacher education

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Résumé

This article includes aspects of a larger study in which we critically examine how and what mainstream teacher candidates learn in pre-service programs about supporting multilingual learners (MLs). Since 2015, the province of Ontario has required that all teacher candidates — not just future ESL specialists — be prepared to support MLs. Within this context, we provide a description and discussion of who multilingual learners are imagined to be in policy documents and by various actors in education, along with examples of teacher candidate learning from a mixed-methods case study of teacher-candidate learning in the Master of Teaching at the University of Toronto. Our article reveals the complexity of preparing teachers to support MLs and suggests possibilities for

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Key words: critical teacher education, multilingual learners, education policies

Résumé

Cet article comprend quelques aspects d'une étude plus vaste où nous examinons de manière critique comment les futurs enseignants apprennent à soutenir les apprenants multilingues. Depuis 2015, la province de l'Ontario exige que tous les futurs enseignants —et non seulement les futurs spécialistes de l'ALS— soient préparés à soutenir les apprenants multilingues. Dans ce contexte politique, nous décrivons et discutons comment on imagine les apprenants multilingues dans les politiques et comment divers acteurs dans le milieu de l'éducation et au sein du programme de Maîtrise en Enseignement à l'Université de Toronto imaginent ces apprenants. Finalement, nous suggérons des possibilités pour centrer les apprenants multilingues et contrer le racisme dans la formation des enseignants canadiens.

Mots-clés : formation critique à l'enseignement, apprenants multilingues, politiques éducatives

Introduction

This article includes aspects of a four-year study that aimed to (1) determine whether Ontario's teacher education policy is consistent with the diversity, strengths, and needs of multilingual learners (MLs) and, (2) identify how teacher candidates, teacher educators, and practicing teachers in local boards interpret and enact Ontario's 2015 policy requirement (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017) that all teachers learn how to support K–12 multilingual learners.

Our multi-stranded research project, inspired by a growing body of research on teacher education for diversity, began in 2016. Since then, the local, national, and global contexts of our study have continued to change with an increased focus on the need for equity and inclusion in education. As such, our understanding of the rich and varied data gathered over more than four years has also evolved and new questions have continued to arise.

The main questions guiding the four-year study include:

1. How do teacher candidates make sense of new knowledge about supporting multilingual learners in relation to the racial and linguistic ordering in school that they experienced as students themselves and again as novice teachers?

2. What are the possibilities and limits of required learning about linguistic diversity and supporting multilingual learners in pre-service programs?
3. What are the possibilities and limits of new research on translanguaging in changing teacher candidates' thinking and practice about this racial and linguistic ordering of school?

Overview of the research methods of the four-year study

Although our focus in this article involves the presentation of findings related to one sub-question, we provide an overview of all our research methods because, to answer this sub-question related to how multilingual learners are imagined, we drew from multiple data sources.

To meet the first objective of the larger project, i.e., to determine whether Ontario's teacher education policy is consistent with the diversity, strengths, and needs of multilingual learners (MLs), we created 36 video portraits using the Flipgrid app with MLs ranging in age from 6 to 20 who responded to prompts created by the research team focused on their linguistic repertoire, life milestones, hopes, and aspirations. These portraits, that are termed *Me Maps* (About Me Mapping, 2022), feature a number of MLs of refugee background who were also participants in another SSHRC-funded project led by Gagné and Le Pichon-Vorstman (n.d.). The video portraits were created in participants' homes, at school or in community settings and served as a foil for policy interpretation to determine whether Ontario's teacher education policy is consistent with the diversity, strengths, and needs of MLs. As of 2019, these Me Maps were integrated into the Supporting English Language Learners (ELLs) course as a pedagogical resource for teacher-candidate learning. The way teacher candidates (TCs) were invited to engage with Me Maps is based on Keet et al.'s (2009) notion of mutual vulnerability where TCs were given the opportunity to open themselves up in the same ways that MLs did to create these Me Maps in order to learn with and from MLs as complete humans, not simply *language learners*.

To meet the second objective of the larger study — that is, to identify how teacher candidates, teacher educators, and practicing teachers in local boards interpret and enact Ontario's 2015 policy requirement that all teachers learn how to support K–12 multilingual learners — we designed a multi-stranded ethnographic case study of the Supporting ELLs course at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education). We conducted observation in 10 sections of the course over three years, collected coursework from over 150 candidates, conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 TCs and 10 members of the instructional team, and have researcher field notes from two members of the research team who are also course instructors. We also designed a professional content knowledge test to understand what TCs learn about multilingualism

and multilingual learners in the Master of Teaching program. It was adapted from a German-language test (Köker et al., 2015) we had permission to work with. We have over 400 responses from TCs over three years. Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with English as a second language (ESL) teachers and specialists in Ontario and completed a comparative analysis of how accredited teacher education programs prepare TCs to support MLs in Ontario. Data for this comparison include an analysis of teacher education program websites and semi-structured interviews with teacher educators.

In this article, we begin by providing some information related to the context in which the larger study is embedded as well as a brief overview of key literature and the conceptual framing of the larger study. Then, we attempt to answer this sub-question: Who are multilingual learners in Ontario imagined to be?

Context

In this section, we consider the context in which the larger study is embedded. We focus on the linguistic diversity that exists in Ontario as well as aspects of the Master of Teaching program at the University of Toronto.

Linguistic diversity in Ontario

While Ontario is a very linguistically diverse province, multilingualism in Canada exists in a political and ideological context dominated by English and French, the official languages. In fact, the Ontario Education Act prohibits using any other languages to teach the curriculum, with very few exceptions. There are many *immigrant* languages spoken in Ontario which each have their own history of migration and settlement and are often the target of discrimination and/or racism. Although there is a policy to support the learning of these languages as a subject in Ontario, this policy positions these languages at the margins of school life, and thus subordinate to English and French. Regarding Indigenous languages, there are policies that support learning these languages *as subjects only* in provincially funded schools, not as the medium of instruction. Finally, bilingual provincial schools for the Deaf and hard of hearing use American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des Signes du Québec (LSQ) as the medium of instruction but neither ASL nor LSQ is available to students as a medium of instruction in mainstream schools.

Overall, language education policies function to establish and sustain what Haque (2012) describes as a hierarchy of minoritized languages in Ontario. These policies also structure social reality and position non-official languages as subordinate to English-French bilingualism. As such, when feasible we use the term *multilingual learners* in ways that are broad, without masking the racialized and colonial logic that organizes the use of multiple languages in

Ontario and of the people who speak them. However, we also use the term *English language learners*, as this is the term used in government policy documents as well as in course titles across Ontario universities.

Master of Teaching at the University of Toronto

The case study component of our research is embedded in the Master of Teaching (MT) Program which is a 20-month graduate teacher education program that combines the study of educational theories, evidence-based teaching practices for equity, opportunities to conduct and use research, four practicum placements in local schools and an optional internship in Canada or abroad at the end of the program.

The MT Program vision statement reflects a commitment to equity, diversity, and accessibility: “As a community, our faculty, students and graduates share a deep commitment to all learners and the building of a more just, equitable and sustainable world” (OISE, n.d.a). The Master of Teaching Admissions Statement is aligned with the MT Mission Statement and flows from *OISE’s Guiding Principles on Equity and Diversity* (2018) as this excerpt reveals: “At the University of Toronto, we strive to be an equitable, diverse and inclusive community . . . OISE is dedicated to admitting qualified candidates who reflect the ethnic, cultural and social diversity of Toronto’s schools” (OISE, n.d.b).

The MT program expectations include knowledge, competencies, and values that the MT candidates will develop and display following the successful completion of the MT program. Several of the expectations focus on aspects of equity, diversity, and/or social justice, notably:

1. recognize and investigate their own social locations, biases, (dis)advantages, and predispositions in relationship to their teaching and research;
2. understand that teaching requires ongoing learning and engagement with current issues and the different perspectives and worldviews of local and global communities;
3. demonstrate an understanding of the ways systemic and institutional practices impact learners and groups, and identify ways to address inequities and inequalities (OISE, 2022, pp. 5–6).

The Supporting ELLs course which is the focus of our study exists alongside several mandatory courses where equity, diversity, and social justice are central such as Anti-Discriminatory Education and Indigenous Experiences of Racism and Settler Colonialism in Canada. As such, Supporting ELLs is not the only course where issues related to race, colonialism, and discrimination might come up.

Key literature and conceptual framing of the larger study

Our four-year multi-stranded study grew from a strong base of research on teacher education and evolved as we attempted to be responsive to the changing context of teacher education in Canada as well as new ideas arising from empirical studies and social movements striving for equity and inclusion in education and more broadly.

In connecting our study to the relevant literature, we observed the continued disciplinary siloing of research on teacher education and multilingual learners. In the field of applied linguistics, there is a hesitancy—perhaps a refusal—to consider racism and white-settler colonialism systematically as observed in conceptual models for linguistically responsive teaching (e.g., Köker et al., 2015; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Viesca et al., 2019). In the field of language policy, the complexity of teacher education and teacher learning about MLs is generally flattened when it is proposed that the competencies, beliefs, and/or attitudes of teachers of MLs can be measured (e.g., Köker et al.) or when approaches across contexts are simply described and compared (Wernicke et al. 2021). In teacher education research, there is near silence on the intersection of language, racism, and white-settler colonialism with the recent exception of Picower (2021), who draws on Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Theory to critique teacher education and propose alternatives.

Our research is framed by Critical Race Theory in language teaching (e.g., Von Esch et al. 2020), critical Whiteness studies (e.g., Picower, 2021), and raciolinguistics (e.g., Flores & Rosa, 2015 and Rosa & Flores 2017), which allow us to understand teacher candidates as products and producers of White institutional listening as well as their shifting subjectivities (Britzman, 2013). Daniels and Varghese (2020) explain how often *solutions* to problems in teacher education are actually reinscriptions of raciolinguistic ideologies and practices. In addition, Rösch's notions (2019) of *Linguizismus* as discrimination targeting language and its social function, *Lingualisierung* as discrimination targeting speakers, and *Privilegierung* as privileging users of a standard variety of the dominant language provide important lenses for interpreting our findings.

As we attempt to answer our sub-question related to who MLs are imagined to be, we draw on some of the literature described in this brief overview. However, an in-depth discussion is precluded by space constraints.

Who are multilingual learners in Ontario imagined to be?

Here we provide a description and discussion of who MLs are imagined to be in policy documents, and by various actors in education, along with examples of teacher candidate learning from various data sources in our mixed-methods

case study of teacher-candidate learning in the Master of Teaching at the University of Toronto. All names are pseudonymous to preserve the anonymity of participants.

Policy documents

In the 2007 Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) *ESL and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for K–12*, MLs are described as students with a first language other than English, or a variety of English that is significantly different from the English used in Ontario’s schools, thus identifying these learners only on the basis of whether or not *Standard* English was their first language. The 2007 policy describes Standard English as “the variety of English that is used as the language of education, law, and government in English-speaking countries” (p. 8).

In 2008, in the *Supporting English Language Learners—A practical guide for Ontario educators—Grades 1 to 8*, the Ministry of Education also provides examples of this diverse group of learners that include both Canadian-born and newcomer MLs such as Canadian-born Indigenous learners, children who were born in an immigrant community in Canada where a language other than English is primarily spoken, children who have come to Canada with their families as part of a planned immigration process, newcomer students with refugee backgrounds, and international students who pay fees to attend school in Ontario. In addition, this document includes sections with titles such as “Understanding what English language learners bring to Ontario classrooms” (OME, 2008, p. 7) and “Understanding the bilingual advantage” (p. 8). While the information in this document leads to a greater awareness of the diverse backgrounds of MLs, they are still identified primarily based on whether English is their main spoken language at home.

To determine the type of programming MLs should receive, the Ministry introduced an assessment tool called the Steps to English Proficiency (STEP) which assesses learners’ oral language, reading and writing proficiency using a six-step continuum. The creation of the STEP materials is guided by a vision for the “successful English language learner as a capable and competent student . . . who comes with many assets and skills” (OME, 2015, p. 8). The vision specifies that MLs will: “see themselves in the learning environment” and “feel that their culture and language are valued” (p. 8). Based on the results of the STEP assessment, students are placed into an English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Literacy Development (ELD) program. The STEP assessment imagines a proficient Step 6 learner to be someone who can use grade-level academic language, without the use of their L1. According to the descriptors in the STEP tool, any use of the home language would mark a student as a Step 1 or Step 2, or a beginner language learner. As such, the STEP assessment

is not fully aligned with the guiding vision for the successful ML.

The Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) *Accreditation resource guide* (2017) imagines MLs to be students whose first language is not the language of instruction, and it provides recommendations for supporting MLs in English-medium schools. The OCT stipulates that teacher candidates should learn how to support the diverse needs of their MLs in the context of planning instructional and assessment practices for *all* students and learning how to work with *all* students, thus drawing attention away from the unique needs of MLs.

In the Ontario Ministry of Education documents, we see broader definitions of MLs. By specifying other kinds of multilingual groups in Ontario, and the various ways that MLs have arrived in Ontario schools, we see an effort to avoid reducing the category of ML to a monolithic student profile. However, these policy documents and resource guides still function to subordinate these other multilingualisms to English which we see most clearly with the STEP resource for assessing English language proficiency.

Teachers and teacher educators

We asked a pool of experienced teacher educators across 10 of Ontario's teacher education programs as well as several teachers in Ontario's school boards who they imagine MLs to be. Their responses were diverse — for some professionals committed to deep reflection and interrogation of their thinking and practice — they imagine MLs on the basis of their English proficiency but also as a complex category of multilingual learners of English in Ontario. ESL teachers describe multilinguals as resourceful agents of translanguaging with home languages that enrich the classroom and foster the growth of their full language repertoire at school. Some of these teachers easily relate to the MLs as they remember their own experiences as immigrant MLs to Canada who benefitted from specialized instruction and accommodations. In relation to this, the teacher educators interviewed understood MLs as learners in need of teachers with specialized training to support English acquisition especially because they see them with language learning needs beyond what the current policy imagines.

However, some ESL teachers hold somewhat reductionist views of Ontario's MLs as entering Ontario schools with literacy gaps and inadequate first-language literacy skills. MLs are often viewed stereotypically as a collection of abstractions as described in ESL programming tools such as STEP (OME, 2015) rather than as learners with individual circumstances. Other teachers push back against this classification. Sylvia notes:

I get quite frustrated, you know, one of the challenges I think is just the language we use around ESL and ELD. I hate all that terminology because it's

such deficit thinking, and it's almost like we're being intentionally siloed by that language, because everything's reduced, is very reductivist thinking, it's all reduced down to the kids' language, and that's all it is.

In terms of teachers and teacher educators, we see greater variation in how they imagine MLs to be in Ontario than the definitions of MLs provided in policy documents. This is likely the case because of their extensive professional experience and in some cases the commitment of some of these individuals to interrogate their own experiences, beliefs, and practices regarding multilingualism. As noted by Daniels and Varghese (2020), one of the most important challenges for teacher education involves knowing how to engage novice, pre-service candidates in this learned wisdom so as not to reproduce stances and practices that further marginalize multilingual children and youth.

Teacher candidates

In one strand of the larger study, we conducted a case study of the mandatory course for supporting MLs and analyzed data from classroom observations, participants' artefacts, interviews, and a pedagogical content knowledge test of competencies in supporting MLs in K–12 Ontario classrooms. What we found is that TCs imagine multilingual learners in different ways. Firstly, they imagine MLs in relation to their own experiences. For example, Mira, a multilingual who learned French and Spanish in school and whose home language is Arabic, describes an ML she met during the practicum. Mira reported that this student was not receiving additional support and thinks the student is hiding her learning difficulties behind a positive attitude. Another example involves Davis, a TC who describes himself as a monoglot and feels that students' home languages are inaccessible like a black box. He says, "They could be saying and doing all kinds of incredible things in that black box, but I can't peer into it." Conversely, we also found that the term English learner masked the TCs own experiences. For example, Vera describes places like Dundas in Southern Ontario as monolithic and not having any MLs, even though her Serbian immigrant family lives there. After describing her parents as fleeing the war in the former Yugoslavia, Vera explained that she grew up speaking "their" language. She does not say much else about her current proficiency in Serbian, but the idea that this language belongs to her parents and not to her can be read as part of organizing small-town spaces in Ontario as not having MLs, perhaps not even recognizing these spaces as multilingual. MLs are to be found elsewhere — despite this candidate's objective status as a multilingual person.

In addition, MLs are imagined as motivated to learn English because of the desire to fit in and to do well academically with families who also expect them

to learn English. TCs imagine MLs as resourceful because they use tools to facilitate their learning, such as translation software and strategies that include working in same-language groups and translanguaging, when taking notes and during activities. Even though MLs are ascribed positive characteristics that include being engaged, hardworking, and resourceful, MLs are mainly viewed in relation to learning and attaining proficiency in English. In the excerpt that follows, Faith, self-identified as monolingual, explains that activities such as Me Maps can help build MLs' self-esteem and connects this to the goal of learning English.

I think it could be a good self-esteem boosting activity [Me Maps] for them, especially if they're feeling timid about using English and speaking out in class or even about feeling timid about using their home language, but the fact that you're encouraging both is kind of a like a nice thing to do.

TCs' descriptions of who constitutes an ML vary. Many TCs recognize that MLs are somehow "different", and therefore in need of accommodations or modifications, but what that "difference" is, is not always clear to them. Some TCs consider MLs and students with exceptionalities together while others question this grouping. For example, Sherry who grew up speaking Mandarin, is careful to say that a student who does not speak at school could have been a selective mute and not an ELL. The same TC identifies ELLs as students receiving language programming so when students are no longer seen to need language support they are no longer understood as ELLs. Sherry says "the ELL student was basically out of the ESL program. So, she wasn't really an ELL anymore."

Some TCs imagine MLs from a deficit perspective. For example, George, identified as monolingual, talks about MLs as not having self-advocacy skills and struggling with the content of subject-specific courses especially at the advanced levels such as university courses at the secondary level. It is important to note that when teacher candidates assess students using STEP, they move from an assets-based perspective to a deficit description using words such as *limited*, *incorrect usage*, and *not mastered*. In fact, Luciana, a multilingual TC, expressed her concern that using STEP as an assessment tool put her and her classmates into a situation where it was difficult to speak about MLs from an assets-based perspective. Daniels and Varghese (2020) argue that putative solutions, such as the processes embedded in STEP, can work to reinforce dominant structures, beliefs, and practices, in ways, that they caution "might in fact reinscribe Whiteness itself".

Lastly, multilingual learners are imagined as part of a racialized ordering of Ontario. For Hannah, identified as an English-French bilingual, white immigrants don't "count" as English language learners. Instead, MLs are found

in parts of the province with “flipped” populations, which can be read as referring to racialized immigrants, not white immigrants from Western Europe. Hannah says, “Basically like you have a class full of White students who maybe immigrated from Western Europe, a couple like their grandparents came over a couple years ago. So just in terms of English language learners, there are significantly fewer.” The results of the analysis show that while teacher candidates in this study generally take into consideration the complexity of multilingual learners’ experiences, when they begin to use the term ELL, their thinking undergoes a shift towards focusing on MLs in terms of their English-language proficiency.

Also, we see TCs’ construing the languages of MLs as “black boxes”, that is, as mysteries that are simply unknowable to English speakers, and in ways that reflect and reinforce the racialized structuring of languages and their speakers in Ontario. Importantly, multilingual TCs also engaged at times in framing MLs in this way. The arguments that Haque and Patrick (2015) make about how Canadian language policies manage racial difference are clearly reflected in our data. We also see evidence in both policy and among individuals to think and act more inclusively and in more nuanced ways. However, it is not the intention that matters, but rather the outcome—by operating or limiting ourselves to the given categories of MLs as well as assessment practices that focus on English only, and by thinking of our practice in relation to English only, the outcome is the hierarchy of minoritized and racialized languages that Haque (2012) describes. An ongoing challenge in teacher education involves the introduction of Rösch’s notions (2019) of discrimination targeting language, its social functions and speakers, as well as the notion of privileging users of a standard variety of the dominant language while making connections to a hierarchy of languages associated to race as described by Haque and Patrick (2015).

Me Maps

Kubota and Lin (2006) remind us that “as a social construct, racial representations are always in flux and situated in social and historical processes” (p. 474). In fact, we want to stress the fluidness and opportunity to think and act differently and that raciolinguistic ideologies are not immutable. To demonstrate this, we conclude this section with a description of how teacher candidates took up the Me Maps we created to meet the first objective of the larger study. The TCs access the Me Mapping with Multilingual Learners website (About Me Mapping, 2022).

One way that the teacher candidates in our Supporting ELLs course are learning about who multilingual learners in Ontario are, is by engaging with the Me Maps of K–12 learners where they talk about their linguistic and cultural

repertoires, timelines, home countries, families, friends, interests, skills, and future aspirations. These Me Maps have helped our teacher candidates see the complex nuances in learners' linguistic and cultural identities. Teacher candidates have started to recognize how they themselves may have boxed learners up into categories according to their first language, tokenized their experiences or perpetuated stereotypes. For example, Natalia reflects that "with the students, we kind of box them up, yes they are EL learners, and this is their L1". According to Jaylee, "we talk so much about differentiated learning for ELLs, but never actually get to meet these learners... so it can be easy to tokenize their experiences and funnel them into stereotypes". By hearing the learners talk about themselves in their Me Maps, teacher candidates realize that they can start learning things about their multilingual learners such as their home environment and culture, which adds depth to their identities. For Justin, watching the Me Map videos provide his first exposure to MLs with refugee backgrounds. He says, "they are not defined by their past experiences ... there's so much more to who they are, so many interests, passions and aspirations." The Me Maps also help Justin and other teacher candidates to see MLs as having learned multiple languages in their home country, and continuing to learn English, French, and other languages in Canada.

Although the Me Map videos created in this project do not capture the full extent and types of diversity that exist among MLs in Canada, they provide pedagogical affordances for teacher candidates to learn about their multilingual students beyond the descriptions and categorizations of these learners in various Ministry of Education and Ontario College of Teachers' policy, curriculum, and assessment documents.

Conclusion

Although we have focused on just one sub-question related to our four-year study, an examination of our answer to this question reveals how complex it is to counter racism and ensure that teacher candidates learn to support multilingual learners in elementary and secondary schools in Ontario within the framework of a single course in a two-year post-graduate teacher education program. The course at the heart of our study is taught by a range of instructors who bring varied perspectives on MLs to the way they operationalize the course (Bale et al., 2019). The diverse TCs who also bring varied perspectives on MLs, experience the mandatory Supporting ELLs course in unique ways and make their own connections between what they learn in this course and their diverse practicum placements where they are mentored by host teachers with perspectives on MLs that may diverge from their own and their course instructors' perspectives on MLs. Finally, the curriculum policy documents they learn about in the Supporting ELLs course and the Me Maps of MLs that

are embedded in course activities and assignments also provide a diversity of perspectives on who MLs are.

Our findings from the case study of the Supporting ELLs course at OISE have led to new challenging questions related to our practice as teacher educators including:

- Which theories, teaching practices, and assessment tools should we centre in our instruction related to MLs irrespective of Ministry mandates to ensure that we are not reinforcing dominant structures, beliefs, and practices in our instruction in ways that might reinscribe Whiteness and further colonize teacher education?
- In the context of a crowded teacher education curriculum, how do we make time to help TCs to become aware of their beliefs about MLs and consider pedagogical practices that will support the fullest development of MLs in Ontario classrooms?
- How can we collaborate across teacher education programs to ensure that our instruction related to supporting MLs is sensitive to context while robust enough to prepare TCs for the diversity of MLs?
- How can we build meaningful relationships with practicing teachers so that our critical engagement with topics related to supporting MLs are not relegated to a few class sessions of a single teacher education course, but rather are the topic of consideration, study, and critique in partnership with teacher candidates, practicing teachers, and teacher educators?

Our findings suggest some avenues for moving forward to ensure that every teacher who graduates from a teacher education program in Ontario has the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work effectively with MLs in elementary and secondary schools and counter racism. However, enhanced collaboration within and across teacher education programs, as well as school districts in terms of understanding who MLs are and what type of support they require, is necessary to counter racism in teacher education and ensure that graduates can work with MLs as more than just learners of English.

In future research, it will be important to explore how Ontario's teacher education curricula focused on supporting MLs influence the teaching behaviours of graduates and, ultimately, how MLs are affected by having teachers who have the knowledge and skills to support them.

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