

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What If We Did This Differently? ESOL Program Innovation Through Teacher-Led Policy EnactmentShuang Fu ^{a*}^a New York University* Contact Info: 239 Greene St., New York, NY 10003, U.S.A., sf3335@nyu.edu**Article Info**

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Abstract

This critical ethnographic case study examines how an ESOL teacher in a rural elementary school enacted policy innovation. Based on one-year ethnographic fieldwork, the study traces how Laura, the school's sole ESOL teacher, restructured service delivery and developed an individual learning plan for a newcomer student with a disrupted schooling experience. Drawing on the framework of critical policy enactment, the study reveals how teacher agency, institutional conditions, and sociopolitical contexts converge in the daily realities of rural multilingual education. The article calls for systemic recognition of teachers as key policy actors and urges educational leaders to cultivate conditions that support educator-led innovation and justice-centered practices in broader educational settings.

Keywords

critical policy actors; language education policy; policy enactment; rural education; teacher agency

INTRODUCTION

To be truly visionary, we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality. (hooks, 2000, p. 110)

In schools across the United States, multilingual learners (MLs) are often placed in program structures shaped by restrictive teaching practices (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). Thirty-minute pull-out sessions, computer-based language programs, and fragmented support schedules are frequently justified as efficient, yet they are rarely equitable. These design choices, whether deliberate or inherited, communicate powerful messages about who belongs, whose knowledge counts, and whose future matters (García & Kleyn, 2016).

This is especially true in rural school districts, where the growth of multilingual populations has outpaced the capacity of existing systems. While urban centers have long been home to MLs, rural areas, particularly in the South and Midwest, have seen rapid increases in immigrant families and bilingual students (Coady, 2019). In these new destination communities, schools often struggle to build programs that meet learners' needs. Staffing

shortages, limited access to ESOL-certified teachers, and small numbers of MLs per grade complicate grouping, scheduling, and instructional planning (Ruecker, 2021). Teachers frequently report feeling underprepared for multilingual instruction, and programs often default to pull-out models with minimal integration into the core curriculum (Li et al., 2025).

At the same time, rural schools are also spaces of relationality and possibility. Their small scale and close-knit structures can provide room for place-responsive design and teacher-led innovation, particularly when educators are positioned as policy actors with the authority to make context-specific decisions (Coady et al., 2015). This article builds on that possibility by tracing how one ESOL teacher in a rural Georgian school redesigned her school's language program through subtle adjustments of local conditions. In contexts where resources are constrained and policies often conflict, teachers must navigate complex tensions between compliance, care, and equity (Fu & Aubain, 2025; Uysal & Tian, 2025). Policy enactment, in such settings, becomes a creative and deeply situated practice.

Laura¹, the teacher at the center of this study, embodies this role. Drawing on her professional experience and close knowledge of students' needs, she restructured the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program model at her school and developed more responsive supports for newcomer students. Using the lens of critical policy enactment (Ball et al., 2011), this study shows how, even within limited staffing and resource constraints, teachers can act with creativity and care to reshape what language policy looks like in practice. Two questions guide the study:

1. How do ESOL teachers act as critical policy actors when engaged in local program (re)design?
2. What institutional and professional conditions enable such innovation within a rural elementary school?

By focusing on the micro-level policy enactment, this study expands understanding of how ESOL teachers enact policy within rural constraints, illustrating how justice-oriented practices emerge from creative negotiation. Here, I use justice-oriented practices to refer to situated pedagogical and programmatic decisions through which educators respond ethically to students' particular needs, histories, and conditions. As Lyotard and Thébaud (1985) write, when the question of justice is raised, "It remains to be seen in each case" (p. 99). Such a lens

¹ All names of individuals and schools referenced in this article are pseudonyms used to protect the confidentiality of participants and research sites.

directs our attention to see any ongoing effort that makes schooling more responsive, humane, and equitable as a practice of justice. Practically, it surfaces actionable design principles related to scheduling, newcomer support, and funding alignment that can guide similar efforts in under-resourced schools. In short, this study affirms that the policies that most deeply shape students' lives are not always codified in legislation. Sometimes, they are written in everyday schooling. Sometimes, they begin with a teacher daring to ask: What if we did this differently?

LITERATURE REVIEW

ESOL Programs in Rural U.S. Schools

Despite the growing number of MLs in rural areas across the United States, ESOL programming in these settings remains under-researched and often under-resourced (Coady, 2019; Showalter et al., 2019). In many rural districts, ML populations are smaller and more dispersed across grade levels and schools, making it difficult to hire full-time ESOL specialists or sustain bilingual models that require stable staffing. Teacher recruitment and retention further complicate this landscape. Because rural teacher labor markets are often highly localized, educators without prior ties to a particular region may experience professional and cultural isolation (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). As a result, rural ESOL teachers may serve multiple grades, travel between buildings, and work with fewer opportunities for professional development and collaboration. Some federal and state funding formulas are also tied to enrollment size or concentration of low-income students, which can place rural districts at a further disadvantage (Brenner, 2016).

Beyond school, students in rural communities have less access to cultural resources such as libraries and museums (Miller et al., 2019) and are exposed to the broader social effects of economic and public health crises (Burfoot-Rochford & Schafft, 2021; Rigg et al., 2018). In this sense, although challenges such as shortages of certified ESOL teachers and limited access to linguistic and cultural resources are not exclusive to rural schools, they often take on a different urgency in rural contexts (Johnson et al., 2021).

Rural ESOL programming is also shaped by local sociopolitical conditions. Many rural communities, especially new immigrant destination areas, have experienced demographic change without parallel growth in multilingual infrastructure (Coady, 2019). In such settings, anti-immigrant sentiment and monolingual ideologies become especially salient (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). Correspondingly, ESOL services often default to pull-out instruction, computer-based learning, or itinerant teaching schedules that separate language support from

academic content (Gándara & Orfield, 2010; Fu, 2024a). While these models may seem practical responses to local constraints, they can also reproduce deficit assumptions that position MLs' home languages as obstacles to overcome.

Collectively, this body of scholarship suggests that rural ESOL programs should be understood through the geographic, institutional, and ideological conditions that shape MLs' educational trajectories. Building on the scholarship, this study examines rural ESOL programming as a site of policy enactment and local design. Specifically, it foregrounds teachers' micro-level policy work to show how programmatic decisions are made in everyday school life and how rural contexts can both constrain and enable justice-oriented innovation.

Teachers as Policy Actors

The growing body of scholarship that positions teachers as policy actors challenges the conventional top-down narrative of policy implementation (Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Menken & Garcia, 2010). Rather than viewing educators as passive recipients of policy mandates, critical policy studies illuminate the agentive, situated, and interpretive work teachers do to translate, adapt, and even resist policies in local contexts (Ball, 2012). In language education, this shift is particularly important. ESOL teachers navigate complex sociopolitical terrains shaped by linguistic ideologies, and they often have to reconcile restrictive English-only mandates with the need to honor students' home languages and foster affirming, inclusive environments (Marichal, 2021). Studies have shown how ESOL and bilingual teachers leverage their knowledge of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds to influence school policies and curriculum decisions (Uysal & Umansky, 2025; Wang & Fu, 2026). In such work, the boundaries between teaching, leadership, and policy-making blur.

Importantly, teachers' policy work often unfolds through everyday acts that may appear mundane yet carry significant consequences for students' access to learning and a sense of belonging. Bauler and Kang (2020), for example, show how ESOL teachers and co-teachers in New York State developed resilient collaborative practices despite insufficient co-planning time and curricular constraints. Similarly, Kimario et al. (2025) emphasize that teachers' emotional labor can become a central site of policy negotiation and critical professional learning. As Koyama and Varenne (2012) remind us, compliance and resistance are not fixed opposites, but points along a continuum of adaptation through which educators respond to policy demands in context. This insight is especially useful for understanding ESOL teachers'

work, since much of what they do involves making decisions within and against institutional constraints rather than simply implementing policy as written.

This contextual and relational dimension of policy work- that is, the way policy is shaped by local conditions, relationships, and everyday interactions- becomes even more significant in educational spaces shaped by immigration and racialization. Scholarship suggests that schools can serve as nested contexts in which immigrant students’ sense of belonging is negotiated at the macro, meso, and micro levels (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Rodriguez, 2022; Rodriguez & Crawford, 2022). Within these spaces, teachers become important mediators of resources and recognition. At the same time, such work is shaped by local histories and community dynamics. In rural contexts, for instance, teachers’ perceptions of students have long been implicated in broader processes of sorting and social reproduction (Petrin et al., 2014). Carr and Kefalas’s (2009) work highlights how educators in rural locations may informally position students along uneven pathways such as “achievers,” “stayers,” and “seekers,” revealing how schooling can reflect and reproduce local hierarchies. However, more recent scholarship on the new Latino diaspora also points to more expansive possibilities. Hamann et al. (2024), for example, document how educators in a century-old school responded to demographic change by valuing the knowledge, skills, and experiences of students and their families.

Taken together, these studies suggest that teachers’ policy work is deeply contextual, relational, and politically consequential. Especially in settings marked by demographic change and institutional constraint, teachers are policy actors who shape how policy is mediated and contested in everyday school life. As de los Ríos and Molina (2020) urge, educators must “conceive of school spaces and classrooms in more inclusive ways that span curricula and include community engagement with families” (p. 50). This study builds on the scholarship by examining how an educator enacted policy in a rural ESOL program.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: POLICY ENACTMENT IN MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

Building on the literature that recognizes ESOL teachers as active policy actors, this study is grounded in a policy enactment framework that redefines our understanding of educators’ relationship with policy. Critical policy enactment emphasizes the dynamic, contextually mediated processes through which policy is interpreted, negotiated, and reshaped in practice. In other words, policy enactment involves collective and collaborative endeavors in which

“participants are both receivers and agents of policy” (Saunders, 1987, p. 108). This multi-dimensional approach to analysis of policy work requires identifying and embracing the dialectic relationship between policy constraints and affordances.

One of the key facets of policy enactment is taking context seriously. As Ball et al. (2011) point out, “policies begin at different points, and they have different trajectories” (p. 6). Though some policies are formed through conventional top-down or bottom-up approaches, other practices are formalized into policies without clear beginnings or endings. Therefore, studying the enactment of policies in classrooms requires capturing the nuanced links between policies, practices, contexts, and ideologies. For example, a central contribution of this study is its attention to the rural schooling context, which remains underexplored in multilingual education research. In rural schools, ESOL teachers often face unique constraints that require them to be exceptionally resourceful and fill multiple roles, from instructors to program coordinators. Thus, I conceptualize rural ESOL policy work as an intensified form of enactment, shaped by both the liminality and flexibility of small-scale institutions. It asks not only how policy is enacted but also where spaces of agency emerge and what programmatic possibilities can be designed when teachers are positioned as both instructional leaders and policy actors.

Ball and colleagues (2011) propose that educators are situated policy actors whose policy work is shaped by interpretive frames, material conditions, professional cultures, and institutional histories. Their model of policy enactment identifies four key dimensions:

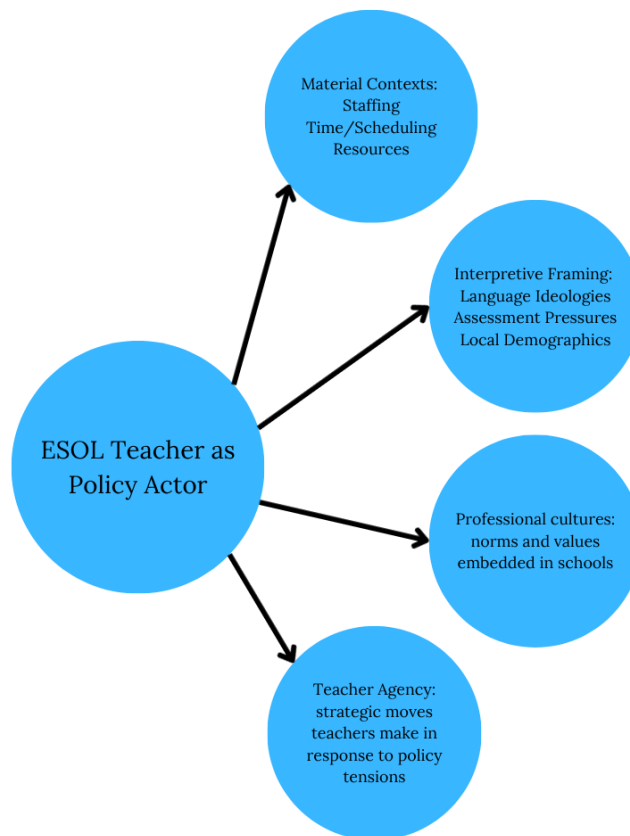
1. Interpretive framing: how educators make sense of policy texts and discourses;
2. Material contexts: the time, staffing, and resources available to them;
3. Professional cultures: norms and values embedded in schools;
4. Agency and resistance: strategic moves teachers make in response to policy tensions.

This study extends policy enactment by focusing on how one ESOL teacher functions as a micro-policy designer, particularly in her efforts to reshape the structure of ESOL programs. These decisions are inherently political and structural, revealing how educators leverage their institutional knowledge and ethical commitments to reimagine what equitable programming looks like. In this study, the focal teacher drew on her professional expertise and deep knowledge of her students’ needs to redesign the ESOL model, combining push-in and pull-out supports, aligning with content areas, and accounting for language development. Her actions underscore that policy work is not always loud or confrontational; it often manifests in

mundane design choices that have significant consequences for students' access to language development and content learning.

A final key concept in this framework is teacher agency. While agency has been theorized from multiple perspectives, there is no single, universally accepted definition (Priestley et al., 2012; Tao & Gao, 2017). Following work that understands teacher agency as a doing rather than a being, I draw on an ecological perspective on teacher agency that emphasizes its temporal and relational nature (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). From this vantage point, agency is the outcome of the interplay of iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions. That means teachers draw on their past experiences and understandings (iterational), make judgments in response to present conditions and constraints (practical-evaluative), and orient their actions toward desired futures for students and programs (projective). Crucially, the ecological perspective underscores that agency is both individually and socially resourced. It is enacted by means of the environment rather than simply in the environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Figure 1. ESOL Teacher as Situated Policy Actor in a Rural Context



Tao and Gao's (2017) work on language teacher agency illustrates how teachers "match" their expertise, capabilities, and experiences with available contextual resources and opportunities to take agentic action. In this study, then, Laura's agentic work reflects her identity commitments, including how she understands who multilingual learners are and what they deserve. By tracing how Laura assembles her individual expertise with contextual affordances to reimagine the ESOL program, this study illuminates teacher agency as a temporal, situated achievement at the heart of policy enactment.

Figure 1 above visualizes how the ESOL teacher enacts language education policy across four interrelated dimensions of context: material, interpretive, professional, and agentic. This conceptual framework anchors the study's analysis of how teacher agency and everyday practices become central to local policy-making in under-resourced educational contexts. It invites us to recognize policy enactment not just in political discourse or state-level negotiations, but in the everyday, relational, and design-centered work of teachers who make multilingual education possible in rural America.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a critical ethnography of a single case to examine how one ESOL teacher enacts policy innovation within a rural elementary school context. Critical ethnography aligns with the study's commitment to understanding education as a site where power, ideology, and inequality are both reproduced and contested, and where "the personal is political" in teachers' everyday decision-making (Madison, 2011). This approach enables close examination of the micro-political processes through which Laura exercised agency while navigating institutional constraints, community dynamics, and broader sociopolitical pressures.

The single-case design further supports this inquiry by enabling an in-depth examination of one teacher's policy enactment within a bounded rural school context. Specifically, it helps generate a contextualized understanding of how teacher agency and local dynamics interact in practice (Uysal & Gao, 2026). Meanwhile, the critical ethnographic lens situates those everyday decisions within larger questions of power, ideology, and educational justice. Together, these approaches support the tracing of the micro-political processes through which policy innovation emerged in everyday school life.

Research Context and Focal Participant

Georgia's ESOL programs operate within a layered policy structure in which federal requirements, state guidance, and local decisions intersect. Federal and state policies require schools to identify MLs, provide English language development, and ensure access to grade-level content. In Georgia, students are identified through the Home Language Survey and WIDA Screener, and districts make local decisions about ESOL service delivery within state guidelines. Common models include pull-out instruction, in which students leave the general education classroom for targeted ESOL support, and push-in instruction, in which ESOL teachers support students within mainstream classrooms (Georgia Department of Education, 2025b). Because districts and schools retain discretion over how these services are organized, local administrators and ESOL teachers become important actors in shaping policy implementation.

Oakwood County Elementary School is located in a rural county in northeast Georgia. According to the 2025 College and Career Ready Performance Index (Georgia Department of Education, 2025a) report, the school served 556 students. Its demographics reflect both the region's historical composition and recent demographic shifts in rural America: 65.8% White, 13.3% Black or African American, 12.8% Hispanic, 6.3% multiracial, and 1.8% Asian or Asian Pacific Islander. All students were classified as economically disadvantaged. From 2018 to 2025, the proportion of Hispanic students increased from 10.8% to 12.8%, and the percentage of English learners rose from 8.5% to 9.5%.

This rural context offers an important window into how ESOL teachers enact policy in under-resourced settings with limited multilingual education infrastructure. The geographic features and small scale of rural districts generate both constraints and possibilities that differ markedly from those of the urban and suburban systems that dominate ESOL research. Within this setting, I focus on Laura, the school's only ESOL teacher, whose work exemplifies teacher-led policy enactment in a rural context.

Laura is a White ESOL teacher at Oakwood County Elementary School with 23 years of experience. Before entering ESOL, she worked for 20 years as a kindergarten and homeroom teacher across urban, suburban, and rural school contexts. In her early years, she taught in the metro Atlanta area and later moved to a suburban school setting before joining Oakwood. Over time, her advocacy for immigrant communities and her participation in local committees deepened her commitment to multilingual education. Laura self-described her Spanish proficiency as intermediate and consistently expressed a desire to learn more about students'

languages, cultures, and family lives. Her advocacy for immigrant communities and her participation in local committees deepened her commitment to multilingual education over time. This commitment also extended beyond the school year; during the summers of 2023 and 2024, she traveled to Mexico and Guatemala to better understand the cultural and linguistic contexts of many of her students and their families.

At age 50, she chose to pursue a specialist degree in TESOL and World Languages Education. Her trajectory reflects scholarship suggesting that teachers' commitments to MLs are often shaped through evolving understandings of language, identity, and equity (Pentón Herrera et al., 2025; Uysal & Sah, 2026). It was during this period of graduate study, when I was a doctoral student, that Laura and I first met at the university. As I got to know her, I became interested in how individual teachers create and sustain innovative practices in resource-constrained educational settings.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Villenas (1996) said, “As ethnographers, we are like colonizers when we fail to question our own identities and privileged positions, and in the ways in which our writings perpetuate ‘othering’”. (p. 713). Following Villenas, I approach this study with attention to my own positionality. As a Chinese transnational scholar trained in a predominantly White U.S. institution, I entered K–12 school spaces carrying both privileges and vulnerabilities. I grew up in a small city in northeastern China, a region long marked by economic marginalization and labor outmigration. This life history informs my sensitivity to questions of place, inequality, and educational opportunity (Fu, 2024b).

However, in U.S. schools, I was often positioned not simply as minoritized but as an educated Chinese woman associated with the racialized figure of the “model minority” (Qiu et al., 2023). In contrast to the deficit ways MLs were often framed, I was at times read as aligned with institutional authority because of my highly educated background. This tension made me aware of the contradictory ways my raced, classed, and gendered identity was negotiated in the field. Therefore, positionality to me is always relational, fluid, and shaped through ongoing engagement with participants (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993). I did not become an “insider” in any complete sense, nor could the difference ever be fully overcome. Rather, this study was shaped by a continual process of reflexivity, in which I sought to build reciprocal relationships while remaining attentive to the limits of my understanding and the power embedded in representation.

Reciprocity was also an important part of my fieldwork practice. I looked for ways to participate in the school life that were relational and respectful to the community. At various points throughout the year, I brought food and drinks to share at school celebrations. I also hosted a Lunar New Year celebration, where I shared traditional Chinese foods such as spring rolls and dumplings, introduced students to Lunar New Year traditions, and organized interactive activities. In thinking about these moments, I realize that it was these shared experiences and genuine acts of reciprocity that helped establish trust, deepen my engagement, and foster mutual respect with both Laura and the students.

Data Collection

Classroom Observations

The study was IRB approved by both the Oakwood County School District and the researcher's institution. Data collection took place over the course of an academic year. I typically spent three days per week in Laura's classroom conducting participant observations. When I visited in the morning, I observed three class periods; when I visited in the afternoon, I observed four. This sustained fieldwork enabled a deep understanding of daily practices, classroom routines, and the contextual conditions shaping Laura's policy enactment.

A primary source of data was observational fieldnotes. I used fieldnotes to document classroom events, capture contextual details, and record interactional dynamics. Because the pace of classroom activity did not always allow for full documentation in real time, I sometimes jotted down key details and impressions for later expansion. This process proved especially useful during analysis. Approximately three months into fieldwork, I began audio recording all class sessions and selectively video recording particular lessons or activities. I made this shift because recordings allowed me to revisit interactions that I could not fully capture through fieldnotes alone. In deciding between audio and video, I sought to minimize disruption to classroom instruction. I discussed the use of recording devices with Laura and paid close attention to students' responses.

Based on these considerations, audio recording became the primary method because it allowed me to capture verbal interactions and the flow of classroom dialogue without the added visibility of a camera. Video recording was used more selectively when visual context, such as gestures, body language, or spatial arrangements, was especially important. I also occasionally photographed students' work and classroom artifacts. These images served as visual documentation of classroom activities and learning processes. Together, fieldnotes, recordings,

and photographs allowed me to triangulate across data sources and develop a fuller ethnographic account of classroom life.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to classroom observations, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with Laura. The first focused on her career trajectory and path to becoming an ESOL teacher. Because language teacher agency emerges through the interplay of individual histories and contextual conditions (Tao & Gao, 2017), I began with a life-history interview to better understand how Laura's past experiences shaped her pedagogical choices and advocacy efforts.

After spending a semester in Laura's classroom, I conducted a second interview focused on language education policy and pedagogy. This timing allowed me to ask context-specific questions grounded in particular students, classroom routines, and service decisions I had observed. For example, I was able to connect my questions about policy directly to the forms of support certain students received. This second interview lasted more than three hours, reflecting both the depth of our conversation and the trust built over time. Finally, I conducted an exit interview in which Laura reflected on her experience of having me in the classroom throughout the year. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Throughout the data collection process, I also engaged in ongoing informal conversations with Laura before and after class. These exchanges were especially valuable because they allowed us to discuss specific classroom interactions, pedagogical choices, and day-to-day challenges in immediate context. In addition, I incorporated ongoing member checking through informal communication (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Guest et al., 2012). When Laura clarified or challenged my interpretations, I revised them accordingly in order to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. By the end of the study, I was able to share my writing with her. We also began co-authoring a separate piece currently under revision.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was iterative and began during data collection. I periodically reviewed my notes, reflections, and interview transcripts to identify emerging patterns and refine my research focus (Saldaña, 2015). After the conclusion of fieldwork, I engaged in a four-phase analysis process based on Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010): data preparation (transcription and organization of fieldnotes and recordings), data exploration (close reading of the corpus and memo writing),

specification and reduction (coding for emergent and theory-driven themes), interpretation (synthesizing codes and developing narrative accounts of key findings).

I employed both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductively, I drew on policy enactment and critical policy scholarship to guide initial coding categories, including policy discourse, institutional practice, power and ideology, equity, and tensions between policy intentions and local enactment (Ball, 2012; Diem et al., 2014). Inductively, I remained open to patterns that emerged from the data, particularly those related to teacher agency and relational decision-making in school and classroom. In the final interpretive phase, I grouped related codes into broader categories and developed analytic accounts of the key processes through which Laura enacted policy within her teaching context.

To foreground Laura's experiences in concrete ways, I constructed vignettes to represent the findings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). These vignettes were developed through iterative revisiting of fieldnotes, interview transcripts, recordings, and analytic memos. I selected episodes that captured recurring tensions and meaningful moments of decision-making, then refined them to ensure that they remained grounded in the data while also resonating with the broader categories developed in the last stage of analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014). The vignettes allowed me to illuminate the human and micro-political dimensions of policy enactment, showing how Laura actively interpreted, negotiated, and reshaped multilingual education policy within localized constraints. Rather than presenting her work as simply individual or exceptional, the vignettes illuminate the practical ways through which teachers create more equitable educational possibilities.

FINDINGS: LAURA'S CRITICAL POLICY ENACTMENT

In this section, I share two vignettes that illuminate how Laura enacted policy in ways that challenged normative institutional structures. Guided by the four dimensions of policy enactment, I examine how Laura interpreted policy expectations, worked within material conditions, navigated her school's professional culture, and exercised agency in response to policy tensions. I explore what critical policy enactment can look like among ESOL teachers and identify factors that may support or constrain their policy enactment. As we will see from the vignettes, when teachers are committed to educational justice and question taken-for-granted structures, they can sense emerging possibilities and identify ways to drive powerful changes.

Vignette 1: Reimagining Program Structure: “What If I Lump All of Them Together?”

As the only ESOL teacher at Oakwood County Elementary, Laura moved constantly between different grades and covered various responsibilities across the school day. Her day often began in the trailer classroom (see Figure 2 below), where she prepared materials before walking into the main building for push-in support in mainstream classrooms. Later in the day, she shifted into pull-out teaching, bringing students from particular grades to the trailer in scheduled blocks. These blocks were organized by grade level, allowing Laura to work with groups of third-, fourth-, or fifth-grade MLs. In between these instructional responsibilities, she also had lunch duty and other school-based obligations. For the hour before dismissal, she provided individualized literacy support for Danika, a newcomer student, during Laura’s own planning period.

Figure 2. The Trailer Classroom for ESOL Instruction



Observing Laura’s schedule raised a central question for this study: How did this particular service model come to be, and what kinds of policy work did it require? As described, the model was a hybrid structure that provided both push-in and pull-out instructions for learners. In push-in periods, she entered general education classrooms to support MLs within content instruction and to stay connected to what was happening in their home classrooms. In pull-out periods, she brought students from the same grade level to the ESOL trailer for targeted language instruction. However, this structure had only been redesigned after Laura took the position and contrasted sharply with the previous model.

Prior to Laura's arrival, ESOL services were more fragmented and largely computer-driven. She described the earlier model as one in which students came to the trailer for isolated sessions, completed lessons on the computer, and then returned to class. On Fridays, she recalled, "they could just play on the computer." Although such an arrangement met formal requirements for service delivery, Laura saw it as instructionally thin and socially isolating. The trailer, in this sense, functioned less as a space of meaningful support than as a peripheral location removed from the life of the school. Research has shown that such pull-out arrangements can heighten MLs' sense of separation and difference while limiting access to peer interaction and grade-level content (Cioè-Peña, 2017; Fu, 2021).

Laura's interpretive work began with her making sense of the inherited structure. That is, she saw the computer-driven pull-out model as inefficient and socially isolating. Laura wanted a model that provided more instructional coherence, stronger alignment with classroom content, and more sustained time with students. Reflecting on her first impressions of the program, she explained:

When I came, I found the administration very open. I was like, 'They need more support, and I don't know what's happening in their home classes.' So, I started looking at my schedule and the way it works.

Rather than simply requesting additional time or staffing, neither of which was readily available, Laura proposed reorganizing the delivery of ESOL services and suggested grouping MLs by grade level into shared instructional blocks. As she put it, "I didn't think that was the most effective way to serve the kids. I said:

What if I lump all of them together in one, and then that gives me an extended 40 minutes of time? That will open up different time blocks. The school gets money. They get funded for two different services.

This decision was beyond making a scheduling adjustment. Working within material constraints of time, staffing, FTE requirements, and limited ESOL infrastructure, Laura grouped students into longer grade-level blocks to create more predictable instructional time. At the same time, these longer periods gave Laura enough time to implement multimodal and more innovative teaching approaches that would have been difficult in short, fragmented pull-out sessions. In this way, the schedule change reflected a critical awareness of MLs' needs and created conditions for supporting their academic growth in more meaningful ways (Harman et al., 2022).

Further, Oakwood's rural context was salient to this redesign in several ways. First, Laura's work reflected the concentration of responsibilities that often characterizes

multilingual education in rural schools. As the only ESOL teacher in the building, she was the teacher, scheduler, coordinator, advocate, and program designer all at the same time. Responsibilities that might be distributed across multiple staff members in a larger district were concentrated in a single role. Second, the redesign emerged within a form of institutional thinness. At Oakwood, the absence of a specialized ESOL design team or a robust multilingual infrastructure meant that responsibilities often spread across several roles in larger districts were concentrated solely in Laura. On the one hand, Laura had to build a workable model within limited staffing and dispersed student needs. On the other hand, the small scale of the school gave her room to propose an alternative structure without moving through multiple layers of bureaucracy.

Laura also connected this redesign to her professional history. Reflecting on her view of push-in and pull-out instruction, she explained:

I feel like when you are pulling the kids out, you can make such a big difference. But I think the fact that I worked as a homeroom teacher for a long time before I worked as an ESOL teacher gives me a different lens.

As a former classroom teacher, Laura had seen how frequent pull-outs could interrupt instruction and mark MLs as deficient. From an ecological perspective on agency, her redesign emerged at the intersection of past experiences, present constraints, and future-oriented goals. She mobilized her history as a homeroom teacher (iterational), evaluated the limitations of the inherited computer-based model and the realities of a small rural school (practical-evaluative), and acted with a vision of more coherent language and content learning for MLs (projective). Laura's professional life course thus became a key resource in reimagining what ESOL could look like in Oakwood.

At the same time, Laura named the structural challenges that accompanied this redesign. "It's a scheduling nightmare," she told me, "because you have to figure out where the kids are going, where the teacher is going, and when." Coordinating push-in and pull-out blocks across multiple grade levels required intricate planning and constant adjustment. She also emphasized that this kind of innovation should not depend solely on individual personality:

I don't think my experience would happen often because I'm comfortable advocating for things. My personality ... I don't mind advocating. I don't mind coming up with a plan that's an alternative and presenting it to someone. I'm not afraid of hearing a no. But that's not what the majority of teachers are like.

Here, Laura named a central tension in teacher-led policy enactment. Her micro-policy design reflected agency and quiet resistance. She did not reject policy requirements outright but identified points of flexibility within them and used those openings to create a more responsive model. In her view, many teachers, especially in tightly controlled or unsupportive environments, may not feel able to initiate such changes even when they recognize the need. In rural contexts, where specialized programs may depend on one or two individuals, this dependence on personal advocacy becomes even more consequential.

Laura's reflections, therefore, point beyond her individual case to questions about structures of support. As she explained:

On one hand, it feels like the district should be coming to decisions like this, but then on the other hand, should they really? Because who better knows their students' needs than the people who are directly working with them? My dream vision would be that a district would allow a place for teachers to be able to say, 'Here is what I think my students need,' and that the district could come up with a plan to meet that.

Laura's comments highlight the possibilities and the precarity of teacher-led innovation in rural contexts. Her redesign also depended on the school's professional culture, particularly administrators' openness to teacher-led problem solving and their willingness to let Laura reorganize service delivery. The next vignette turns to another dimension of Laura's policy enactment: the creation of more flexible pathways for newcomer students within rigid age-based systems of placement and support.

Vignette 2: Flexible Pathways for Newcomers: Individual Learning Plan at the Micro-Level

Danika lived in Mexico until she was seven, but she never attended school there. Neither of her parents is literate in Spanish. When she arrived in a rural part of Georgia at the beginning of second grade, they actually gave her the screener for kindergarten, which indicated that her district must not have many ESOL students because they did not know which screener to use.

Being a child of migrant farm workers, Danika moved a lot. In fact, she went to seven different schools from the beginning of second grade to the middle of third grade. She arrived at our school in January 2023, in third grade. And at the end of third grade, she only knew her letters, had no foundational reading skills, and she was not really making much progress.

Danika is the oldest of four in the house, including a brother who is five years old and has extreme special needs. He does not speak, he is confined to a wheelchair, and he is in the special education class at our school. They live on a poultry farm, and they have four chicken houses. They get the chicks in and then raise the chicks. And they will pull out the deceased and feed them.

When the brother had surgery, there was a special education person who was obligated to provide home-bound education. That is how this teacher got to know the family, and it is actually a really beautiful story. When I talked to her about it, she said that this family has completely changed her mind on immigration. Even with a very conservative political view on immigration, she said, “I’ve never seen people who are so hard working. It’s not fair that they can’t qualify for medical aid, and they can’t qualify for the extra services. I don’t understand why, if we allow people to come into the country, we can’t give them the support that they need?”

This was the story Laura told me about Danika: a girl whose grade placement, language development, and literacy history did not align neatly, and whose family lived with migration, disability, labor, and rural isolation. As I listened, I was struck by how quickly such a child could be absorbed into the routines of schooling and quietly left behind. This vignette shows how, in the absence of structural support for MLs with interrupted schooling, Laura constructed a micro-level individualized learning pathway for Danika that challenged rigid age-based placement and literacy expectations.

Age-based grade placement remains one of the most normalized practices in U.S. schooling (Krol, 2023), rarely questioned yet profoundly consequential for MLs with limited prior schooling. When I asked Laura how the school supported students like Danika, she paused and then said:

There’s nothing structural. And I think that is where I struggle. Because to me, teaching English is different from teaching literacy. And a lot of our students that we get from Central and South America have had neither previous schooling experience nor English proficiency. If you can’t teach them basic literacy, they’re not going to be able to make progress. You can teach English, but if they can’t read and write, they’re going to keep falling behind.

Laura’s words captured the interpretive framing that guided her response to Danika. Her distinction between teaching English and teaching literacy became central to how Laura made sense of policy requirements and what those requirements failed to address. Age-based placement, combined with the absence of designated support for newcomers with interrupted schooling, meant that Danika was treated as a “typical” third grader for most purposes, expected to engage grade-level texts and tasks while being assessed through systems that did not account for her limited literacy experience. From a formal policy standpoint, Oakwood had met the minimum requirements. That is, Danika had been screened, identified, and placed in an ESOL program. However, this procedural compliance did not provide meaningful support addressing Danika’s combined realities of interrupted schooling, emergent literacy, and newcomer status.

Figure 3. Danika Holding the Picture Book About Her Family



The rural context intensified this problem as a material condition of policy enactment. Oakwood was not simply a small, under-resourced school; its location also constrained students' access to the school- and community-based supports more commonly available in urban and suburban settings. In a more resourced district or less geographically isolated context, Danika might have encountered a dedicated newcomer program or more formal coordination among multilingual and literacy services through either the school or community organizations. At Oakwood, however, such structures did not exist. The result was that a student like Danika could be formally included while still being substantively underserved.

In the absence of structural support, Laura exercised agency by creating her own solution. She reworked her daily schedule so that during her planning period, she could meet one-on-one with Danika:

I knew she needed more than what the regular ESOL block could give her. So during my planning time at 2:15 pm, I started pulling her every day just to work on letters, sounds, basic reading- things she'd never really had the chance to learn.

What emerged in practice was a micro-level individualized learning plan, even though no formal document existed at the school. Drawing on what she knew about Danika's family,

migration history, and responsibilities at home, Laura designed short, targeted lessons focused on letter-sound correspondence, decoding simple words, and building confidence as a reader (see Figures 3 and 4). Over time, Danika began to recognize more letters, attempt short texts aloud, and participate more in small-group ESOL activities. These changes were modest and uneven, but they mattered so much for this little girl.

Figure 4. Phonics Practice Session



In this sense, Danika's case also illustrates what Jaffe-Walter et al. (2019) describe as the political work of schooling in immigrant students' lives. Their study shows that schools can become important sites where immigrant students' vulnerability and access to support are negotiated across context, and where educators often move between protecting students from immediate harm and empowering them toward fuller participation. Laura's work with Danika operated in this register. Her one-on-one literacy instruction was protective in that it shielded Danika from being fully swallowed by age-based expectations and literacy demands she had not yet had the opportunity to meet. It was also empowering, as it created conditions for Danika to participate more fully in the classroom's academic life. This lens also helps make sense of the special education teacher's shift in perspective.

In predominantly White and politically conservative rural contexts, immigration is also seen through exclusionary perspectives. However, sustained contact with families can unsettle those narratives by making visible the labor, care, and inequities that shape immigrant lives. The teacher's changed view, then, reveals how school-based relationships can interrupt dehumanizing immigration discourses and create openings for more humane recognition and support. In this way, educators can become mediators of recognition for immigrant students and families, especially in contexts where broader political climates render them invisible.

In our conversations, Laura repeatedly returned to the idea of creative solutions. She said,

We've talked about that whole thing of creative solutions. I think that's what we have to do because the structure isn't there. We have to find ways to make it a little more correct at the classroom level and at the school level, right?

For Laura, creativity was not about enrichment or novelty; it was about bending rigid structures enough to make room for students whose trajectories did not fit the standard mold. In this rural context, such creativity became possible partly because of the flexibility of a small school, where teachers could sometimes improvise outside formal systems. However, that same flexibility also revealed the fragility of support. Laura's intervention depended on her willingness to give up planning time, her confidence in approaching administrators, and her ability to improvise within a thinly resourced program. As Laura put it:

The decisions that were made for Danika, they've only been made because I am me. Because I'm willing to give up my planning time, because I'm comfortable going to my principal with a different idea. If someone else were in my position and didn't want to push, those decisions probably wouldn't have been made.

This comment crystallizes a key tension in rural multilingual education: the small scale of the school can create room for responsiveness, but in the absence of stronger infrastructure, equitable support may depend too heavily on individual educators' labor and advocacy.

In this vignette, Laura's one-on-one literacy instruction and interpretation of what newcomer support should look like illustrate how ESOL teachers can act as policy actors, crafting local responses that better fit students' lived realities. Meanwhile, Danika's story makes clear that rural contexts shaped the limited institutional supports available to her and the unstable solutions that emerged because of Laura's individual advocacy. It also suggests that in rural communities where immigration largely shaped by dominant conservative discourses, relationship building can become one of the few spaces where such assumptions are challenged through direct encounter (Fu, 2026). The vignette therefore raises pressing questions not only about teacher agency, but also about what kinds of rural infrastructures are needed so that support for newcomer students does not depend solely on the extraordinary labor of individual educators.

DISCUSSION

In this article, I explored how teacher agencies were understood and approached in specific educational spaces. By examining Laura's experience and her innovative approach to the ESOL

program, it became clear that teachers play a critical role in shaping educational practices to serve their students better. Laura’s story highlighted the importance of teachers’ ability to assess and adapt their instructional methods critically. Her willingness to question the status quo and propose a new model demonstrated how teacher agencies can lead to meaningful improvements in educational settings (Fu et al., 2023; Priestley et al., 2013). The vignettes shared above not only shed light on the challenges and successes faced by teachers like Laura but also underscore the necessity of supporting teachers in their efforts to effect change.

Laura’s innovations emerged within a specific rural context that, paradoxically, transformed apparent limitations into opportunities for creative problem-solving. Her case illuminates how rural educational settings can enable forms of teacher agency that might be constrained in more bureaucratized, resource-rich environments. Understanding these contextual dynamics is crucial to supporting similar innovations in rural districts while avoiding romanticizing the challenges rural educators and students face. As the sole ESOL teacher in Oakwood Elementary, Laura faced what larger districts might view as an impossible situation: serving MLs across multiple grade levels and schools with minimal specialized resources. The lack of multiple ESOL staff members made traditional program models simply not feasible. However, the study also complicates deficit accounts of rural schooling by showing how small-scale and relational proximity can create openings for justice-oriented innovation. As McHenry-Sorber et al. (2023) emphasized, community ties are important resources at rural locations, even amid structural disadvantages. Laura’s relationships with colleagues and her familiarity with students’ lives enabled her to design culturally responsive supports. In Danika’s case, that responsiveness was reflected through her deep understanding of how agricultural labor, mobility, family care responsibilities, and community politics shaped her schooling.

To be clear, the practices documented in the study are not unique to rural schools; non-rural schools can enact similar innovations. My argument, rather, is that rurality shaped both the constraints Laura faced and the possibilities she could create. Recent scholarship has cautioned against defining rural as “not urban” or reducing rurality to size or distance alone (Welsh, 2025). Instead, rural schools differ in the ways place shapes organizational capacity, access to resources, staffing patterns, and community context. At Oakwood, Laura’s work emerged within a rural configuration of institutional thinness. She was the school’s only ESOL teacher; MLs were relatively few and dispersed across grades; newcomer-specific structures were absent; and support depended heavily on one educator’s advocacy. Danika’s case further

shows that schooling was shaped by agricultural family migration and a White-dominant conservative context. Thus, my claim is not that Laura’s practices are exclusive to rural schools, but that rural context gave teacher-led policy enactment their particular urgency and form.

Furthermore, Laura’s case illuminates the limitations of depending on exceptional individual teachers to create innovative programming for MLs. Her frank acknowledgment that her successes occurred “because I am me” exposes how current systems inadvertently constrain educational equity by requiring forms of advocacy and innovation that many educators may not feel equipped to provide (Rivera Guerrero & Gallo, 2025). Laura’s case suggests that the quality and coherence of rural ESOL services may hinge on whether a single teacher is able and willing to serve as a micro-policy actor (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). That is precisely why her case should not be read as an exceptional success story alone, but as evidence of the need for ongoing refinement and infrastructure.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER PREPARATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Laura’s success stemmed significantly from her cross-context expertise in mainstream elementary education and specialized ESOL practices. This background enabled her to envision multilingual education not as a separate service but as integrated support that could enhance students’ overall educational experiences. Her case suggests fundamental reconsiderations of how we prepare educators to work effectively with MLs across diverse educational roles.

Traditional teacher preparation programs often maintain sharp boundaries between mainstream education and specialized ESOL training, potentially limiting educators’ capacity for the kind of integrated thinking that Laura demonstrated (Tigert & Peercy, 2018). Her ability to redesign ESOL programming emerged from understanding both sides of the service delivery equation: how mainstream classrooms functioned and ESOL principles. This suggests the value of preparation programs that provide all elementary educators with substantial knowledge of multilingual education while ensuring that ESOL specialists understand the mainstream curriculum and classroom dynamics (Nutta et al., 2020). Such cross-training could enable more educators to function as bridges between specialized and mainstream education, reducing the isolation that MLs often experience in traditional pull-out models.

Laura’s innovations also required advocacy skills, institutional understanding, and the confidence to challenge existing structures. Her ability to propose alternatives while addressing

administrative concerns about funding and scheduling reflected a sophisticated understanding of educational policy processes that many preparation programs do not explicitly address. Teacher education would benefit from components that help candidates understand policy processes, develop advocacy skills, and practice proposing innovative solutions within institutional constraints (Picower, 2013; Wang & Fu, 2025). This could include analysis of school budgets and scheduling constraints, as well as opportunities to research alternative program models. Such preparation could help more educators develop the institutional literacy necessary for effective policy enactment.

Moreover, the discussion of Laura's experience highlighted the importance of collaboration between teachers and administrators (Patrick, 2022). While Laura was able to navigate the complexities of scheduling and funding on her own, her reflections suggested that systemic support from administrators was crucial. Teachers should not have to shoulder the burden of policy implementation alone; instead, there should be structures in place that facilitate their involvement in decision-making processes. By doing so, educational institutions can ensure that policies are not only theoretically sound but also practically viable and responsive to classroom realities.

CONCLUSION

As we face an uncertain future for multilingual education in American schools marked by shifting political climates, funding cuts, and ongoing debates about language policy (Lozada & Figueroa, 2023), Laura's story offers hope and guidance. Her work reminds us that while we may not always be able to influence national legislation or state mandates, we can choose to uplift and invest in the educators who bring nuance, care, and creativity to policy implementation. In this way, Laura's story illuminates how educational transformation can grow from localized, responsive, deeply human acts of care that turn constraints into opportunities and innovation.

However, Laura's story also raises a sobering question: must systemic change depend on exceptional individuals? While her efforts demonstrate the possibilities of teacher agency, they also underscore the fragility of relying on individual will in the absence of institutional support. To move beyond this precarity, we must build the conditions that make justice-oriented, creative, and sustainable teaching possible. This means recognizing teachers' professional expertise, valuing their lived knowledge, fostering collaborative leadership, and creating space for educators to ask and act on the question: "What if we did this differently?" When such

conditions become routine rather than exceptional, when such questions become institutional rather than individual, then we move from isolated acts of resistance to systemic change.

Laura’s reflections also serve as a critical reminder of the emotional and ethical labor required of educators who challenge the status quo. Her willingness to see beyond current realities toward more just possibilities and push against deficit narratives about MLs all stem from a sense of revolutionary love (hooks, 2000). This love is not sentimental; it is transformative. It requires seeing beyond current limitations toward more just futures and doing the painstaking daily work to advocate for MLs. For the millions of MLs across rural America and beyond, such love must become the foundation upon which we build policies, programs, and pedagogies that recognize their brilliance, affirm their identities, and honor their dreams. In the end, let’s conclude the article with Laura’s own words on the role of teachers as policy actors:

I feel like I do have expertise in my field, I feel like I’ve worked hard and long as a teacher in general.

I spend a lot of time and energy, everything from doing it in ESOL to reading things on my own, to constantly thinking through the lens of a multilingual learner.

I think when you have teachers that are specialists in what they’re doing, administrators need to know that teacher knows more than they do.

Really, a school administrator should know how to run the school. They cannot be an expert in all areas of instruction. They have to have that overarching lens.

Then you have these teachers that have expertise learned through all these years.

And why don’t you let their thoughts shine?

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