

MICHIGAN

UNITED STATES





MISS ALATA, MICHIGAN, USA

“Beginning of the year, no one comes to me and talks to me. And then when they feel more comfortable, more connected to me, the connection that they feel allows them to speak to me about so many things... I always try to make them feel that they’re part of this learning process and they are responsible. Like I show them that they’re important.”

– Miss Alata

By Michelle J. Bellino, Vikrant Garg, and Mara Johnson

ABOUT MISS ALATA

Miss Alata teaches English language, literature, and composition courses to newcomer students at a public high school in southeastern Michigan, in the United States, where 72% of students enrolled are classified as English Learners/ Multilingual Learners (EL/MLs). A majority of the multilingual learners are native Arabic speakers from Yemen; a smaller portion of students are from Mexico and Central America. A number of these students experienced violent conflict and other forms of socioeconomic precarity in their countries of origin, entering the US school system with limited or interrupted exposure to formal education.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

A sense of relational care drives Miss Alata’s instructional choices and her interpersonal relationships with students. This care is informed by her own experiences as a migrant and multilingual learner who transitioned from middle school in Syria to high school in the US.

Noting that she often felt “invisible” in high school, Miss Alata stands outside her door during class transitions to greet students. Having experienced a school curriculum that decentered diversity, she selects books, resources, and classroom displays that represent and support students in drawing upon their identities and cultures. This desire to ensure students feel seen and valued extends into the genuine excitement Miss Alata shares with students as they see their academic strides. In the beginning of the year, some students are learning the alphabet or how to write full sentences. When students are frustrated about their learning, Miss Alata reminds them that she once was in their shoes, and their possibilities are vast. By the end of the year, students compose essays that summarize and analyze texts. Miss Alata encourages students to recognize where they began and celebrate how much they have grown, and these reminders build students’ confidence through an

ethos of care wherein they are seen and valued as capable.

CREATING RELEVANT CURRICULUM

Miss Alata readily creates moments for exchanging cultural knowledge among her students and herself, and she draws on this cultural knowledge instructionally.

In planning classes, Miss Alata follows state curricular standards and adds in supports for multilingual learners, such as using sentence stems (phrases to begin a sentence, to scaffold writing development). She also designs curriculum with her students' identities and experiences in mind, intentionally selecting resources that will resonate with students' backgrounds or draw out meaningful contrasts. For example, during a role play activity in which students had to place a restaurant order, Miss Alata invited students to share their preferences for coffee and tea, knowing the cultural significance of sweet, milky tea for Yemeni families. As a class, they ask questions about how authors make choices about representing themselves and others. After watching Disney's live-action *Aladdin*, Miss Alata invited her students to consider the decision to cast an Egyptian actor, as well as why there is no Arabic spoken in the film. Moving back and forth between intended and implicit messages, Miss Alata encourages students to become critical readers and viewers, asking questions about the texts they are exposed to.

RECOGNIZING IDENTITIES

Miss Alata's classroom is not a monolingual space. Though developing English language fluency enhanced her confidence as a learner, Miss Alata recalls, "I still never felt like I belonged." Miss Alata recognizes that "language is an essential part of their [students'] identity," and thus invites students' home languages into the room on a regular basis. She works to ensure that migrant students in her classroom develop and practice English language and literacy while maintaining connections to their home languages, gain confidence in their skills, and build community across students with diverse backgrounds.

The practice of 'translanguaging' recognizes the need for continued support for first language use as a foundational bridge in other language development. Routine practices in Miss Alata's classroom involve direct translation, app-based translation tools, and teacher-student or student-student interactions in their home languages before full class interactions in English. Fluent in Arabic, Miss Alata easily communicates with Arabic-speaking students and can offer spontaneous translation. However, most of the classes she teaches include Spanish-speaking students as well. Keenly aware of how a student who is a linguistic minority both in the school and in their English class may feel

doubly isolated, Miss Alata seeks out Spanish vocabulary words to integrate into lessons, actively invites Spanish-speaking students to translate key words and phrases for the class, and positions herself as a learner of other languages.

SCHOOL-WIDE COLLABORATION

Miss Alata emphasizes that she does not do this work in isolation. Creating a welcoming and inclusive school culture happens not only in her class but across the school and has been a priority amongst school leaders.

Drawing on her own memories of feeling socially isolated in school, Miss Alata wants newcomer students to be aware of and interact at school events and after-school programming, such as athletics, clubs, dances, and fundraisers. Importantly, Miss Alata does not insist on student involvement or dictate the terms under which they should participate in school events; rather, her goal is to ensure that newcomer migrant students are aware of opportunities so that they are able to make decisions about whether and how to participate.

Outside of classes, teachers and administrators communicate about students' academic, socioemotional, and sometimes material needs. Miss Alata invites other teachers into her classroom to observe practices that support multilingual learners, and occasionally co-plans with teachers working in different subject areas. Supporting students means that teachers and staff need to work together, and their collaboration emerges from, and reinforces, a supportive school culture that values diversity. This strong ethos of care and a culture of mutual support sustains teachers, as well as students.

Learn More about [Miss Alata](#) and school-wide efforts to welcome migrant learners and create a space where everyone belongs in [“Supporting recently arrived students: Lessons learned from MHS”](#) and [“From welcoming to belonging at Melvindale High School.”](#)