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# Sustaining a Dual Language Immersion Program: Features of Success

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The promise of dual language education has spurred a movement in the field of bilingual education to shift from remedial programs to enrichment forms of bilingual education. Although research supports the effectiveness of such programs, many programs do not maintain their level of implementation and quickly revert to their original remedial form. This research looks at one elementary campus that has implemented a 2-way dual language program for more than a decade. Findings indicate that pedagogical equity, qualified bilingual teachers, active parent–home collaboration, and knowledgeable leadership contributed to the program’s success.

Key words: dual language education, leadership in bilingual programs, successful factors in bilingual education

The continued growth in the number of speakers of languages other than English is reflected in the rapidly increasing number of students in U.S. schools for whom English is a second language. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2005) show that the number of school-age children who spoke a language other than English reached almost 10 million in 2004. Such a dramatic increase continually challenges educators to provide effective language programs with

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quality instruction for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Some educators choose to view these challenges as opportunities by offering a two-way bilingual program as an educational option for meeting the needs of both monolingual Spanish speakers and monolingual English speakers.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In dual language education, two languages are used in the classroom for instruction and learning. Biliteracy is as much an aim as full bilingualism, with literacy being acquired in both languages either simultaneously or with an initial emphasis on native language literacy (Baker, 1996). Only a small number of bilingual programs in the country have the continued maintenance of the first language as an explicit goal (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2005). Hence, many English learners (ELs) receive instructional programs that are too short term in focus and are not cognitively or academically challenging (Thomas & Collier, 1997a).

With respect to the ultimate goal for ELs, the policy of transitional bilingual education, or ESL programs whose aims are English language proficiency and assimilation, is explicitly non-bilingual. Because the focus is on learning English without a strong effort to retain the native language, these programs incorporate a minimalist form of bilingualism for the period of time that students are in them (Hakuta & Gould, 1987; Snow & Hakuta, 1992). Dual language bilingual programs are an attempt to eliminate this minimalist form of bilingualism and to promote academic achievement for ELs as well as foreign language immersion for English-dominant students (Alanís, 2000; Lindholm-Leary, 2001). The opportunity for students to become bilingual is increased by the dual language bilingual approach. ELs benefit from retention and development of their native language while acquiring English, and English speakers enjoy exposure to real speakers of the foreign language. The program provides an atmosphere that allows students to acquire a second language and learn about another culture without sacrificing their individual identities. In so doing, the dual language program is responsive to the needs of children, the school, and the community.

For many ELs, improved access to quality bilingual education programs (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; J. D. Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991) can facilitate success in school. ELs who have failed in various types of ESL and transitional bilingual education programs have made phenomenal gains in dual language programs (Thomas & Collier, 2002). In addition, native English speakers in these programs, despite learning through two languages, excel in their native English, scoring higher than peers studying only in English (Thomas & Collier, 2003).

The dual language bilingual program represents a pluralistic view of language (Christian, 1996). Administrators and teachers assume that bilingualism is cognitively, socially, and affectively beneficial both for students learning English and

for those who are English dominant. Several reviews have been conducted of research and evaluation studies concerning bilingual and immersion education that identify certain pedagogical and social factors that contribute to successful language education programs (Carter & Chatfield, 1986; Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988; Thomas & Collier, 1997b; Willig, 1985). These factors form the core criteria of successful language education, particularly dual language education programs, and serve as a framework for effective implementation and successful outcomes (Lindholm-Leary, 2001). These criteria include (a) administrative and home support, (b) school environment, (c) high-quality instructional personnel, (d) professional development, and (e) instructional design and features. Because variations in program design and delivery occur within a particular sociopolitical context, it is necessary to look at individual programs to identify factors that may contribute to the effectiveness of this model (Freeman, 1998). In particular, it is imperative to examine the factors that contribute to program sustainability in an era of increasing hostility toward bilingual programs.

## MODES OF INQUIRY

### Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore the factors that may have contributed to the success and sustainability of one dual language program in an inner city, urban-diverse campus. The aforementioned critical features of successful dual language education programs were used as a foundation from which to begin the research.

### Research Questions

1. To what extent has participation in the program contributed to students' academic outcomes?
2. What factors contributed to the sustainability of the dual language program at City Elementary?

### Procedures

To address the central questions set forth in this paper, we used three sources of data: (a) site visits and non-participant observations; (b) taped and transcribed key personnel interviews; and (c) data from the fifth-grade English Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in reading, mathematics, and science.

We utilized purposeful sampling within a case study methodology to identify key personnel for focus group and individual interviews. Informants included 10

dual language teachers and 1 campus principal involved in dual language program implementation at the K–5 grade levels. The campus principal and 2 of the 10 teachers had participated in the original discussions and decisions regarding implementation of the dual language program more than a decade ago. All were female native Spanish speakers of Mexican American descent with various years of teaching experience ranging from 1 to 19 years in bilingual education.

### Data Analysis

Teacher focus groups and individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Transcripts of informant interviews, field notes, and documents were manually coded to generate meaning for analysis. As delineated by Miles and Huberman (1984), the data analysis proceeded from noting patterns and themes to arriving at comparisons and contrasts to determining conceptual explanations. Triangulations of multiple data sources (e.g., district- and state-level documents) were built into data collection and analysis for the purpose of achieving trustworthiness.

To determine if students enrolled in the dual language bilingual program were meeting minimum state expectation standards, we examined standard scores on the English TAKS reading and mathematics for the fifth grade. According to state accountability guidelines, minimum expectations were equivalent to approximately 70% of the items being correct on each subject area test. Qualitative data were analyzed along descriptive methods.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

City Elementary School, a K–5 school with 321 students, is located in the heart of an urban city in south central Texas. In all, 85% of the student body is classified as economically disadvantaged by state and federal guidelines; 87.8% of the student population is Mexican American, and 29.4% speak Spanish as a home language. Located in a historic area of the inner city, City Elementary is in the middle of a thriving retail community and many single family homes, including a large community-based homeless shelter. The dual language program has been educating children in English and Spanish since 1995 and serves as the bilingual program for the campus. English-speaking parents have the option of placing their students in the two-way program or in an all-English classroom. Based on state accountability ratings, City Elementary has achieved a rating of Exemplary or Recognized for the past 5 years.

## FINDINGS

City Elementary School implements the 90/10 model. The program begins in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, although some children enter the program in first grade. During the first few years, the goal is to present 90% of the content instruction in Spanish and 10% in English. The percentage of instruction provided in English and Spanish per grade level is as follows: kindergarten and first (90% Spanish and 10% English), second (80% Spanish and 20% English), third (70% Spanish and 30% English), and fourth and fifth (50% Spanish and 50% English). The 90/10 model requires an initial emphasis on the minority language because this language is less supported by the broader society and, thus, academic uses of this language are less easily acquired outside of school (Collier & Thomas, 2004). Research studies on this model have indicated high academic achievement for both groups of students (Genesee, 1987; Lindholm-Leary, 2004).

According to the campus brochure, the dual language program at City has three main goals:

1. To promote high levels of oral language proficiency and literacy in both Spanish and English.
2. To achieve proficiency in all academic subjects, meeting or exceeding district and state standards.
3. To cultivate an understanding and appreciation of other cultures and to develop positive attitudes toward fellow students, their families, and the community.

Like all dual language programs, teachers attempt to achieve balanced numbers of language-majority students and ELs in the classroom so that each group can serve as a linguistic resource and peer model for the other. Exposure to the second language is important because learners can hear the language being used in different contexts and have extensive opportunities to use the target language (de Jong, 2002; Mora, Wink, & Wink, 2001). Heterogeneous classes address the concern that some transitional bilingual programs isolate ELs from other students. Native English speakers may enter the program at the pre-K, kindergarten, or first-grade levels. Spanish speakers, however, may be admitted at any grade level. Although the most desirable student ratio in the classroom is 50% English speakers and 50% Spanish speakers, the program can operate successfully as long as neither language group falls below 30% of the classroom population.

### Student Outcomes: Academic Data

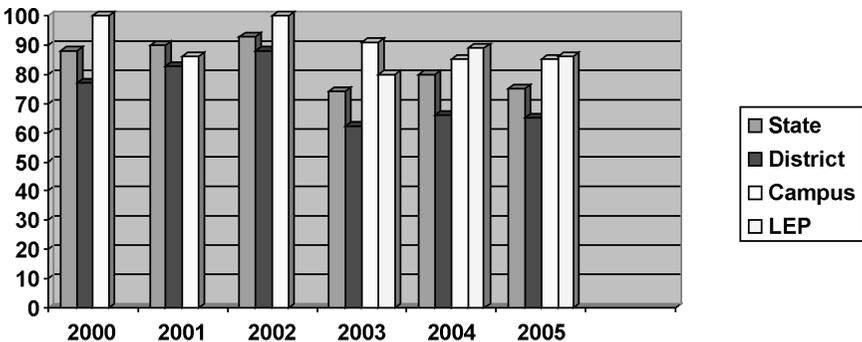
The length of time spent in a dual language bilingual program is positively correlated with student academic achievement. Thomas, Collier, and Abbott (1993)

found the most powerful predictor for EL achievement to be the amount of formal schooling in the native language (L1). Significant differences in program effects become cumulatively larger as students continue past the third grade when the curriculum becomes cognitively more complex. Therefore, only scores for the fifth grade were examined. Analyses began with the 1999–2000 school year (the year the first cohort of kindergarten students entered fifth grade). The three figures reflect scores for City Elementary in the areas of English reading, mathematics, and science.

Scores for the fifth-grade TAKS test in English reading indicated that students at City Elementary consistently outscored students across the district and, with the exception of 2001, around the state (see Figure 1). Students exhibited high scores in the 80 to 100 range. This finding is impressive given that students were tested in English even though students in the dual language program did not receive formal English reading until the third grade. Consequently, Spanish did not hinder the development of English for either the English-dominant or Spanish-dominant group.

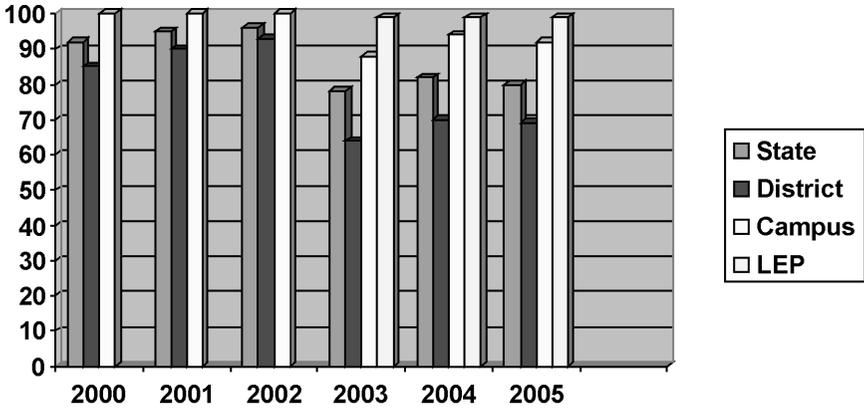
TAKS scores for English mathematics indicated that students consistently outscored their peers across the district and across the state, with an impressive 100% passing rate for the 2000–2002 academic years (see Figure 2). Similarly, the use of Spanish for instruction did not hinder the development of English for either the English-dominant or Spanish-dominant group in the dual language program.

Science scores for students at City Elementary paralleled those of mathematics and reading, reflecting a high degree of achievement (see Figure 3). This is significant given the context of science achievement in the state of Texas. During this 3-year period, the pattern of achievement levels across the state reflected little progress in science, as students' scores reflected 50% passing rates.



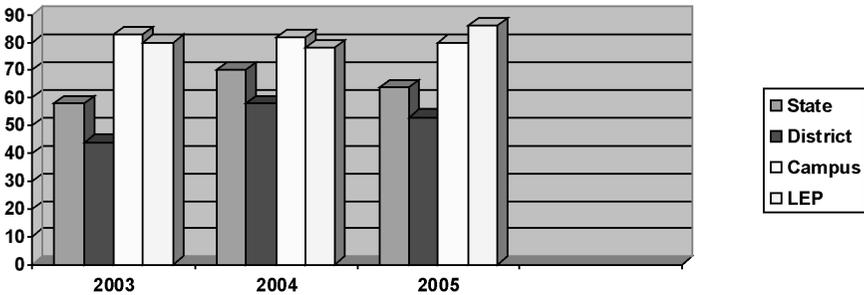
Source: Texas Education Agency.

FIGURE 1 Grade 5 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills: English reading. 2003 indicates a change in exam. LEP = limited English proficient.



Source: Texas Education Agency.

FIGURE 2 Grade 5 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills: English mathematics. 2003 indicates a change in exam. LEP = limited English proficient.



Source: Texas Education Agency.

FIGURE 3 Grade 5 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills: English science. 2003 indicates the first year science was assessed in Texas. LEP = limited English proficient.

## DISCUSSION

TAKS results for reading, mathematics, and science indicate that students at City Elementary progressed in academic areas better than other students in the district and across the state based on state accountability standards. It appears that the dual language program's use of Spanish did not retard or impede children's acquisition of English or their English academic achievement. Given the gains in student

achievement, our question was, what factors contributed to the success and sustainability of the dual language program at City Elementary?

### Critical Features of the City Elementary Dual Language Program

Based on the dual language literature, we identified four factors that may have contributed to the success and sustainability of the dual language program at City Elementary. These are (a) pedagogical equity, (b) effective bilingual teachers, (c) active parent participation, (d) knowledgeable leadership and continuity.

#### Pedagogical Equity

The academic and linguistic success of Spanish-dominant children in dual language programs can be attributed to the use of the curricular mainstream taught in the child's native language as well as rigorous content standards regardless of the language of instruction. In contrast to remedial bilingual programs that offer "watered down" instruction, dual language enrichment models offer the curricular mainstream taught through two languages with rigorous content standards and high expectations. Such an environment is empowering, addressing issues of equity as well as test scores (Baker, 1996).

The dual language program at City Elementary remained true to research in second language acquisition, ensuring that students gained cognitive academic language proficiency and learning strategies in the native language before transfer to the second language was expected of them (Cummins, 1996). For example, all students were expected to read grade-level Spanish text as early as kindergarten, and math instruction, often cooperative in nature, required students to engage with one another as they worked through the learning process. In their desire to facilitate language acquisition and content area understanding, teachers made use of heterogeneously structured language pairing and peer-mediated instruction. Small student pairings allowed for the requirement of academic conversations that were important for cognitive as well as linguistic development. Thus, the potential for the cognitive benefits associated with full bilingualism were considerable.

In addition to rigorous content standards, the staff at City Elementary supported the notion of equal status of languages, as they were careful not to promote one language over the other, as suggested by one first-grade teacher: "It is hard to elevate the Spanish language given the English influence, but we try everything we can to make students feel excited about knowing two languages." Teachers at City incorporated all forms of Spanish literature into their curriculum and lesson designs in their efforts not only to promote Spanish but also to increase the level of Spanish literacy.

The use of the first language promoted a stronger learning environment for native Spanish speakers and allowed for students to engage in the curriculum through active learning. Equally, native English speakers appreciated the value of acquiring a second language as they engaged in interactions with their Spanish-speaking classmates. According to another first-grade teacher, “English-speaking students feel proud about knowing and speaking Spanish.” The positive attitude toward bilingualism was evident in teachers’ classrooms as well as in the print along the hallways. Much of this print included representations of collaborative student work related to a variety of content areas and in both languages.

### Effective Bilingual Teachers

According to Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan (2000) complete understanding of the goals and philosophy of the bilingual program is crucial for teachers. Through this understanding, teachers at City Elementary believed in the value of the dual language program and displayed confidence in their instruction, as evidenced by the level of Spanish vocabulary introduced in every content area. Faculty at City Elementary believed that students must be actively engaged to learn and must take responsibility for their own learning. Consequently, teachers gathered regularly to discuss vertical alignment and were given the “green light” by their administrator to adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of their students. Teachers were constantly seeking to improve their teaching and worked together to promote a positive social and academic environment for all children, as evidenced by the following comment: “We make sure our curriculum is aligned to each grade level. If we don’t have vertical alignment, that makes it much harder for us as teachers and for our students.” In addition, the goal was balanced development in all three areas; the dual language teachers did not emphasize language development over academic and social development.

The dual language program followed the curriculum expectations as outlined for each grade level for the independent school district, yet teachers enhanced the curriculum via integrated instruction and project-based learning. Instructional approaches observed throughout the school to facilitate this process included hands-on mathematics and science, literature-based reading, and cooperative learning. Teachers made extensive use of heterogeneously structured groups to increase opportunities for language acquisition and understanding of content. Teachers asked children to work together on assignments that required active negotiation of meaning. Additionally, the use of manipulatives and experiential learning not only encouraged active engagement and higher order thinking skills but also provided a supportive context for integrating students of different levels of English/Spanish proficiency for content instruction.

To facilitate the academic process, teachers employed effective second language acquisition strategies to ensure comprehensible input for second language

learners. Language was taught both formally and informally, and instruction was student centered. Partnering and the use of cooperative learning strategies both served as important stimuli to meet this cognitive and linguistic challenge. Teachers at City Elementary viewed all of these strategies as opportunities for meaningful language use and avenues for providing comprehensible content.

Based on our observations, the teachers at City Elementary were similar to those studied by García (1991), who identified attributes of effective teachers serving ELs. García characterized the following practices as exemplary: (a) a focus on instruction that is meaningful to the children with the use of themes as vehicles for language and literacy development, (b) opportunities for active learning through hands-on learning in collaborative groups, and (c) collaborative and cooperative interactions among the students that are heterogeneously organized. García also found that successful teachers held high expectations for their students and were receptive to suggestions and committed to culturally relevant pedagogy. All of these features were found to varying degrees at City. A quote by one second-grade teacher summed it up: "At this school, if you are not ready to work beyond your classroom, don't even come and apply." The teachers at City were committed to their students and to building partnerships with their students' parents.

### Active Parent Participation

Although some parents have a limited awareness of the scope of their children's bilingual education program (Lee, 1999; Sheffer, 2003), parents whose children are enrolled in an immersion program tend to have high levels of involvement (Cloud et al., 2000). Parents at City Elementary played a critical role in program planning and sustainability. Based on parent meeting attendance, parents of students in the dual language program were committed to the bilingual and bicultural benefits afforded to their children. Parents were encouraged to volunteer in classrooms and to extend the learning process from school to home. Teachers' comments indicated that parents understood that program participation was not limited to their children but included their own involvement in all aspects of the dual language education program (Craig, 1996; Peña, 1998). Consequently, parents participated in semiannual parent meetings with the teaching staff to discuss issues and strategies for improving literacy and numeracy and agreed to meet with parents new to the program to offer support.

A final component of City Elementary's parent program was continuing education. Teachers at City Elementary offered parents classes for English and Spanish development. This allowed parents the "experience" of second language acquisition along with their children. Parents frequently approached the campus principal to discuss programmatic issues and anxiety over language development. One of the areas of concern for many parents was the decision regarding program placement. To offset this anxiety, the principal invited parents and children to observe

classrooms as they made their decision regarding classroom placement. From our attendance at parent education meetings, it was clear that all key stakeholders were committed to the success of the program.

### Knowledgeable Leadership and Continuity

Recent research has determined that the principal's level of commitment to a program is essential to implementing and maintaining enriched education programs such as dual language education. Principals who were well informed about the program (Aguirre-Baeza, 2001; Calderón & Carreón, 2001) fostered a proactive school climate that maintained high academic goals for all students (Lessow-Hurley, 2005; Montecel & Cortez, 2002). At City Elementary, the principal's level of knowledge about dual language programs and instructional practices for supporting ELs was evident through her discussions with parents and faculty. She remained current on dual language research, state law, and parent rights so that she could work with parents as she advocated for the program. She attended conferences with her teachers and read research articles during her own personal time. One teacher commented, "... She knows everything, and it's amazing to me how I might pick up a book and read it today, well, she already knows it. She already read it ... she is very informed." As a savvy instructional leader, she maintained close ties with central office personnel to support her teachers and students. Through continued resource allocation she supported program implementation and professional development as indicated in the following statement: "Sometimes you have to be creative. You only have so much money to use for professional development. You need to figure out how to structure that." In addition, the principal worked hard to hire a qualified bilingual faculty as she developed staffing plans.

A unique but critical aspect at City Elementary School was the continuity of leadership. This principal had been instrumental in program implementation more than a decade ago. She attended numerous trainings and visited other dual language programs across the state. She also enlisted the help of local university faculty for questions and staff development. Teachers and parents had a strong voice in the option of implementation. This was not a top-down decision but a democratic process in which all involved had a say in the matter. This allowed teachers and parents to have ownership of the program, a crucial factor in establishing democratic leadership.

The consensus among teachers was that the principal's support and knowledge regarding dual language instruction had been crucial in program sustainability, as evidenced by the following comment: "It is because of her that our program has lasted for so long and been so strong." Another teacher commented, "I think that the strength of the program lies in that she's been able to provide that leadership. She has taken it from the beginning and helped nurture it, and soften rough spots that we've had." As a result, teacher turnover was low, a factor that has also facili-



tated the longevity of the program. A kindergarten dual language teacher referred to City's principal as a motivating force: "She expects a lot from us, and then I think that sort of turns around on us, and then we expect a lot from our parents and our kids, too."

A crucial factor in the success of this campus was the principal's desire to build leadership capacity among her teachers by allowing them to implement creative strategies in the classroom and encouraging them to take on leadership roles. She shared a democratic view of leadership as she consistently engaged teachers in the decision-making process: "Well, I can't make the decision for them. They have to decide for themselves." Each of these aspects demonstrated a sincere belief in the program and its level of effectiveness for all students and contributed strongly to the sustainability of the dual language program.

### EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The power of a dual language program is not just in its additive nature but in the pedagogical equity that exists for both language groups. It is not enough to merely adjust the language of instruction; teachers must adjust their philosophy, their teaching strategies, and their view of ELs. As teachers shift their belief about second language acquisition to one of enrichment versus one of remediation, the entire focus of the curriculum begins to shift as well. Teachers begin to evaluate how the curriculum best serves the needs of their students as they create the conditions under which children and parents can empower themselves. This cannot happen, however, without an administrator who understands the nature of bilingualism and the importance of advocacy for teachers, students, and biliteracy.

One common phrase among all interviewed was the continuing need to "fight" for the program with central office staff and some parents, as voiced by one teacher: "Although they do not inherently support the program, they do not block its implementation either." Administrators must be aware of the pitfalls and the need to support teachers at every step of the way. Otherwise, the influence of standardized testing and the desire for a quick transition to English overpowers teachers' best intentions and ultimately sabotages the program.

### CONCLUSION

Dual language bilingual programs address several serious issues facing education in the United States. ELs are no longer segregated for any portion of the school day but are receiving the same core academic curriculum as their English-dominant peers. It is the kind of access ELs have to high-status knowledge and the quality of instructional interactions in dual language programs that defines educational qual-

ity and promotes greater equity. This is possible because effective dual language classrooms promote a high degree of student involvement (A. G. Ramirez & Stromquist, 1978; Strong, 1983), contextualize classroom discourse (Wong Fillmore & Valadez, 1986), and value students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (García, 2005). This situation empowers native Spanish and native English speakers by promoting native Spanish and English language development as well as academic progress, and it nurtures a strong sense of self-identity (Christian, 1999; Thomas & Collier, 1999).

Changes in policies, programs, and practices that positively address the changing demographics by bringing disparate groups together are not only necessary but inevitable. The most significant reform in educational opportunities for ELs occurs when teachers and administrators at individual school sites work together at the campus level. These changes are not possible, however, without committed administrators, parents, and teachers who understand the process of bilingualism and the nature of schooling for language-minority children.

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