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EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

Dual Language Catholic Schools: Innovation and Equity— Considerations for Making the Transition to Dual Language

*Carrie Fuller*¹ and *Elena Sada*²

Abstract: The multiple academic and social advantages of a dual language education are well known; yet there is little practical guidance for Catholic school leaders who are taking on this whole school change. This paper explores the necessary steps for Catholic school leaders to develop equitable dual language schools. Guided by the Gospel principles of love and justice and using the Community of Practice theoretical framework, the authors argue that taking thoughtful risks in transforming one's school can lead to meaningful learning in service to culturally and linguistically diverse students. Seven main implementation areas for developing a dual language Catholic school are considered: Clear goals, vision, and mission; leadership and support; productive partnerships; quality personnel; knowledge of students and high expectations; recruiting, retaining and reassuring students and families; and cross-cultural curriculum and instruction. Practical insights, timelines for feasibility and implementation, as well as examples for school leaders are provided.

Keywords: dual language, Catholic school leadership, community of practice, school transformation, bilingual education

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“In order to maintain the vitality of urban Catholic schools, the quest for a strong Catholic identity, evidence of high academic quality, and innovative approaches to programming and financing have become urgent” (Fuller, 2018, p. 3). If you are a leader in a Catholic school, you probably have asked yourself: What else can I do to revitalize my school? And, while all schools are as unique as the cultures and people that form them, there is a common approach that has innovatively and successfully turned schools into vitalized sources of academic achievement and relevant pedagogy. This common approach is *dual language* – a term that implies an asset-based approach to bilingual education, one in which grade level subjects are strategically taught throughout primary and/or secondary schooling in two languages (Freeman et al., 2018). The three goals of dual language education include high academic achievement, bilingualism/biliteracy, and sociocultural competence (Howard et al., 2018; Lindholm-Leary, 2001, 2005).

There are a variety of dual language program models. Two common ones are referred to as the 50/50 or 90/10 models. A 50/50 program strives for biliteracy from the start and equal parts of the day/week are taught in both program languages. In a 90/10 model, the program starts with a heavier emphasis on the partner language. As a student progresses through the grades, they spend more of their time in English (i.e., Kindergartners learn in Spanish for 90% of the day and 10% of the day is spent in English, first graders learn in Spanish for 80% of the day and 20% in English, and so on) until they reach 50/50, usually by fourth or fifth grade. Further, programs can be known as one-way or two-way language immersion depending on the student population served. One-way immersion refers to a program that serves a majority of students who are dominant in the partner language, or conversely, English dominant and learning the partner language. Two-way immersion programs seek to serve a diverse language population, where equal amounts of students may be dominant in the partner language and English, and thus can serve as language models to each other. Whatever the distribution of time in both languages and the language background of the students, successful dual language programs don't approach the language strands in isolation, as two monolingual programs. Rather, dual language programs promote metalinguistic awareness. Indeed, classroom pedagogy includes making cross-linguistic connections between the languages, such as through the highlighting of cognates, as well as recognizing what is non-transferrable and unique to each language (Escamilla, 2014).

Studies have shown that language is more than a set of linguistic structures and terms. Language is an integral part of the child's identity, and identity affirmation is conducive to academic success (de Jong, 2011). Latinx teachers and children have expressed a greater sense of belonging and commitment when their school sees their home language as an asset and invests in affirming all linguistic, cultural, and personal identities (Flores et al., 2018; Palmer, 2018). Research has also demonstrated additional benefits that come with becoming bilingual and biliterate – the ability to speak, read and write in two languages: brain plasticity and openness to diverse perspectives, intergenerational communication, and the possibility to apply for scholarships or

better paid jobs (Office of English Language Acquisition, USDE). It has also been established that dual language education is the most effective instructional model in terms of bridging the English literacy gap between English learners and the mainstream student population (Butvilofsky et al., 2016). When we imagine schools placing teachers and students at the center and considering their linguistic and cultural background as assets, we also imagine teachers and students growing strong with a sense of belonging (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019), and the affirmation needed to continue this pattern of care and appreciation for others' cultures, perspectives and identities.

As Catholic school leaders, we spent much of our initial career-years imagining and seeking inspiration, and soon realized that our vision included dual language and pluricultural schools, where differences were genuinely seen as assets. We quickly learned that this vision demanded a plan of action imbued with a set of values and understandings. We have dedicated most of our professional life to developing dual language schools that can be tested, improved, and reproduced. We now offer steps and ideas that can inspire and guide a leader who is considering transforming a Catholic school into a dual language school.

We consider this paper significant because while many understand the advantages of dual language Catholic education, few Catholic school and diocesan leaders have been trained on dual language education, and thus, might not feel prepared to start a program. However, that should not deter a visionary. With preparation and guidance, Catholic leaders can successfully establish innovative and equitable dual language schools as effective educational models for all, while simultaneously increasing enrollment and ensuring operational vitality (Fuller, 2018; Fraga, 2016; Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016).

Inspiration and Theoretical Foundation

When I hear other principals talk about transforming their schools, they often ask: "Do I have it in me to delve into a whole school change? Is my school community ready?" As a dual language leader, it was helpful for me to think about my *why*, particularly my journey of working in multilingual communities in the United States, Uganda and Bolivia, as well as my family's immigration story. I found inspiration in my own history (Fuller, 2022, field notes).

Leaders need to seek their own inspiration – a vision that somehow has been part of who they are all along, but has yet to be acknowledged and explored. Additionally, leaders seeking answers to the question: "What else can I do to revitalize my school?" can find inspiration in their school's history, its trajectory, and in its people. The beauty of Catholic schools lies in each school's historical connection to its community, and the appreciation and care for the community as it evolves. Identities are social and relational because they are molded by social and relational interactions;

schools are no exception (Sada, 2020). The identity of a school has evolved with time – the past, present and imagined future, constitute its identity.

A second source of inspiration can be the Catholic education principles of subsidiarity and synodality (*Gravissimum educationis*, Decree on Christian Education). This perspective gives us the ability to innovate and transform more nimbly than public school counterparts. While we lead according to a set of values, understandings, and regulations, we have the autonomy to determine the instructional model and, at times, the curriculum that will best serve our school population, matching – accordingly – our teachers' strengths.

Community of Practice

In addition to adopting a vision, school transformation demands a theoretical foundation. Organizations benefit from using a framework that can serve as reference in the transformation process. While there are many, one we have used is *community of practice*, or CoP (Farsworth et al., 2016). This framework proposes that the school is a community where people share a goal; and that as they interact daily, they advance toward the goal, learning and strategizing together. The CoP's components are three: 1) shared identity and collective set of skills; 2) collaboration or shared time in which members can voice new understandings and remaining questions; and, 3) action – all CoP members carry on their individual tasks that, together, contribute to the community's goal.

To take effect, the three CoP components need to be understood in depth. For example, early in our school transformation process we encountered the following identity-related challenge: How can school stakeholders genuinely share an identity, while their individual identities are so diverse? This was resolved by collaboratively reflecting and understanding the multifaceted and intersectional nature of identity. "We are like all others, we are like some others, we are like no other;" (Lartey, 2013). The Ghanaese theologian Emmanuel Y. A. Lartey, speaks of the harmonious pondering of what is universal in us (our dignity in God's image and all human attributes), what is common to some of us (language, ethnicity/race, and culture), and what is absolutely unique to each (the multiple aspects of our intersectional specific identity). These three identity dimensions of each individual in a school community are equally important, and are not exclusive of each other; while, at times, emphasizing one, the other two remain primordial, and as a set, they all constitute the school's identity. Similarly, the school community's goals as a whole, and the goals of each stakeholder, are equally important and are not mutually exclusive. This harmony between the system's goal and the goal of each of its members, is the first sign of a healthy system (Meadows, 2008). As CoP leaders, we take the time to learn about our teachers, families and students' identities and individual goals. Consequently, as understanding and appreciation for group and individual identities and goals grow, the community's collaboration develops, and actions better reflect growing care and equity, leaving behind hegemonic perspectives that consider some voices, languages and cultures as superior.

Christian Love and Justice

“We seek to create loving communities of kinship precisely to counteract mounting lovelessness, racism, and the cultural disparagement that keeps us apart” (Father Greg Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, p. 139). As Catholic school leaders and believers in dual language education, we are also guided by the Gospel principles of love and justice. “As Fraga (2016) notes and (our) experience has verified, (we) see the potential of two-way language immersion schools to ‘leverage the common bond of commitment to the practice of the Catholic faith as a way of overcoming the social, economic, linguistic, and cultural divisions that remain barriers to the achievement of social justice for many segments of Catholics in the U.S.’ (p. 157)” (Fuller, 2018, p. 17).

We follow the example of Jesus who gathered a pluralistic community of men and women who spoke Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew. And we recognize the complex and sometimes problematic past of Catholic education—from Spanish mission schools (Stevens-Arroyo & Pantoja, 2003) to Native American boarding schools (Adams, 1995) – for culturally and linguistically diverse populations. We also are reminded that as early as the 18th Century religious orders included Black women, and they welcomed a diverse group of students into their classrooms, including enslaved children and children of immigrants of all races and linguistic backgrounds. Further, between the 1830s and 1930s, “the ethnic parish school was an important and popular model” (Walch, 2003, p. 76). Catholic school teachers taught in the language of the immigrant populations they served, while including the instruction of other languages in the community, including English (Clark, 1992; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009).

As Christians, called to a universal love that stretches to repair and retribute for inequities made evident throughout history and, recently, through the pandemic that once again exposed abuses against minoritized populations in our society, we invest our resources in educational models that will effectively dissolve language and cultural barriers. We can build our schools as we want the Church to be – young, vibrant, dynamic, hope-filled, compassionate, and inclusive.

Planning the Transformation

Taking on a whole school change is not about convenience or finding a silver bullet to a great enrollment or financial challenge. It’s about pursuing excellence and taking *thoughtful* risks in order to serve students better. Instead of proposing that everyone transform their school into a dual language Catholic school without the requisite steps to measure and prepare for possible challenges, we are suggesting that schools conduct a feasibility study to take the necessary thoughtful risks to improve their school.

Given the lean economic reality of many Catholic elementary schools today, often starting a dual language program mimics the entrepreneurial spirit of a startup. Ries (2011) describes a startup as “a human institution designed to create new products and services under conditions

of extreme uncertainty” (p. 8). While uncertainty in educational change can be paralyzing, we instead encourage you to default to “yes, we can do it” when considering transforming your school into a dual language school. Converting to a new school model will always imply a risk; however, the risk can be informed, thoughtful, and – whatever the outcome – it always has a continuum. If you try and succeed, you have established a new multilingual and multicultural trajectory for your students. If you *fail* – or obtain diverse results than expected, “Put failure to work towards valued goals” (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow & LeMahieu, 2015, p. 179). It will not be a failure if you use the information to learn and improve the school model, and its responsiveness to the most vulnerable students. Besides, the dual language transformation is typically done one grade at a time, starting with Pre-K or Kindergarten, so even when the learning curve is steep, the progression is slow, allowing for learning and growth over time.

A healthy CoP develops a common identity which has been shaped by a common goal and multiple collaborative interactions. The school’s identity, hence, will include an identity of transformation which will necessarily imply risk taking. When we embrace new opportunities as we transform schools into dual language schools, we must be supported by a community that can tolerate risk thanks to the strength of our common values and vision. The risk, however, is informed and thoughtful. Through collaboration we plan the necessary shared and individual actions to gather data and information in order to assess the readiness of our schools in terms of dual language transformation. The timing is crucial. Concretely, these actions are listed below.

- Create a task force or team of diverse stakeholders to gather the essential data and information (i.e.: teachers’ language(s), parish population, faculty and families’ interest, financial projections, etc.). This team could later serve as part of the implementation and program review processes. Core questions to garner essential data might include:
 - What have been the enrollment trends at your school over the past five years?
 - What is the number of parishioners and community members with preschool-aged children and younger? How many children currently participate in the parish religious education program?
 - What is the home language of the families in your community? How many would be interested in a dual language program?
 - How do you plan to budget and pay for new curriculum and library materials in the target language, as well as professional development for the teachers?
 - What is the nearest public or charter dual language program in your area? Do they have a waitlist?
- Look beyond your community to public, charter, independent and Catholic schools. Who is doing dual language well in your community? Visit them, go on tours, and review their websites.

- Experts are needed: Unless the diocese is equipped, schools and districts typically hire a consultant or partner with a university to lead the feasibility process. While the data collection can be done by school personnel, someone with dual language experience needs to analyze the data as it relates to dual language goals, principles, and cases (in Catholic school settings) across the country. Experts will offer indicators for readiness and can suggest the steps necessary to open a dual language program.

The feasibility process should begin at least one school year in advance of the desired program launch. [Figure 1](#) indicates a possible timeline to follow. While stakeholders want to capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm for a new program, allowing enough time to complete all the steps is vital to success. Sometimes, even more time is necessary.

Figure 1

Possible Timeline



Implementation Considerations

The feasibility process should build momentum and ignite passion for this new project. Remember that people want to be a part of something unique, exciting, and special. As you are conducting the feasibility and beginning the implementation stage, have confidence in the research process and don't lose sight of the vision. Once you have decided to go dual language in the fall, there are seven main implementation areas to consider.

Clear Goals, Vision, and Mission

After reflecting upon your own linguistic, ethnic, and cultural history, consider the unique Catholic identity or charism of your school. Seek out historical documents to find out: Which

Order of Religious Sisters started your school? What country did they come from and what languages did they speak? What populations have your school and parish historically served? Understanding the community demographics and what the parish and school have valued over time will engender a more authentic evolving identity and transformation.

Another task to consider is bringing stakeholders together to cut apart drafts of the school's mission and vision statements so that phrases and words can be added or deleted. After all, these statements must guide the school and community transformation. At the Two-Way Immersion Network (TWIN-CS) Summer Academy, completing this exercise with dual language implementation teams yielded revised mission statements with, "much more explicit language referencing a commitment to linguistically minoritized students, particularly by addressing cultural and linguistic diversity and social justice/global citizenship" (Scanlan et al., 2019, p. 167).

Finally, call on the school community to move forward in a renewed, more inclusive, equitable, and loving way. Review these new mission and vision statements with staff and have them develop visual representations and translations of the words into the language/s of instruction for use with students. This last step is imperative for building buy-in and creating a living mission.

Leadership and Support

Communities of practice require leaders that connect to thoughtful risk (such as in the lean startup model), and develop community buy in. Most importantly, starting a dual language program requires the principal to be the lead learner (Fullan, 2014) and thus, start by getting out to see successful dual language programs in action before starting your own program (Fuller, 2018). Knowing the models and offerings of private and public dual language schools in your community is vital to speaking to the similarities and uniqueness of your school's program.

New dual language principals will not have all the answers but modeling humility and a willingness to learn will go far with developing trust from stakeholders. Saying, "I don't know but I'm going to find out and we can learn together" promotes transparency and community support. While many public schools have a dual language coordinator position, due to the small size and budgetary restrictions at most Catholic schools, you might instead designate a lead dual language teacher or vice principal who can help coordinate the development of the program and serve as a strategic thought partner. As a leader, you can model the necessary learning and commitments by attending key conferences alongside your teachers and admin team. Sharing your new learnings with the students and parents allows them to see that learning is a journey that is ongoing, and that you are serious about keeping abreast of the latest dual language trends. Certainly, starting a dual language program will necessitate the principal becoming a literacy expert to the extent possible. Further, leaders must become comfortable talking about key dual language resources, such as the *Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education*, the *Common*

Core en Español, and the “Can-Do Statements” produced by the National Council of State Supervisors for Language (NCSSFL) and ACTFL collaboration. For links to these resources, see [Appendix](#).

Transforming a school is not only a technical and adaptive change (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) but an emotional one (Hargreaves, 2008) as any sincere learning comes with setbacks and challenges. Therefore, learn to say, “I’m sorry. How can we serve you better?” Listening to the answers of faculty and staff, as well as parents, parish, and community members, and coming up with solutions together regarding curriculum and instruction, extra curriculars, and multicultural school events will make for a more profound school transformation.

Productive Partnerships

Starting a successful dual language program means establishing productive and meaningful partnerships with parents, the parish as well as the surrounding community. Always choose building community over any concept. Listening carefully and compassionately to stakeholders’ concerns and excitement is key. When parents or stakeholders ask about “your vision” for the school, always think along the lines of “our vision”. Indeed, strike “my school, my students, my staff” from your repertoire, and embrace “our”.

Consider leading or hiring someone to lead a dual language visioning retreat with school parents, teachers, parishioners, community members and staff. Dedicate a morning to answering the question, “What’s our *dream* for our dual language school?” in a concrete and detailed way. By laying out all the possibilities, dreaming big, and engaging in this prayerful, imaginative process, you can provide a space for gratitude, positive and hope-filled emotions, as well as build courage for what’s to come.

Quality Personnel

Finding quality dual language personnel at a Catholic school salary requires hiring eager learners who want to help develop the program, who are animated (rather than overwhelmed) by new initiatives, and importantly, passionate about language learning. While one may not be able to attract teachers with high salaries, one can inspire teachers with an inclusive and invigorating vision of a dual language Catholic School.

Leaders can ensure teachers have access to the best professional development and unique experiences such as attending the TWIN-CS Summer Academy and bilingual conferences like La Cosecha Dual Language Conference, or those sponsored by the National Association of Bilingual Education (NABE), the California Association of Bilingual Education (CABE) or the Association of Two-Way and Bilingual Education (ATDLE). Leaders can access Title II funding in order to allow teachers to attend exciting and relevant workshops, as well as to pay for their Masters or credential classes at local universities ([California Department of Education, 2022](#)).

Finally, honoring teachers as co-creators of your dual language program is paramount. These founding teachers and staff members must continually be recognized and thanked for their pioneering spirit. Schools can work with parents to form faculty/staff appreciation committees to raise money in order to offer small monetary bonuses and gifts to acknowledge teachers' hard work throughout the year.

Knowledge of Students and High Expectations

As you look to transform your school, you have to look at who you currently serve. Sending out a home language survey is a must. Through this instrument, you can learn what language/s your students were introduced to as babies, what language/s were used by parents to read and sing to them before entering school, and what language your students prefer now. It's important to also ask about the special learning needs of your students.

Researchers have found that while learning disabilities are often difficult to detect in bilingual learners, with appropriate progress monitoring and support, these students can and should be included in dual language programs (Fortune & Menke, 2010). Disaggregate your current academic data. As a leader, inquire into who has traditionally struggled at your school, and then develop a plan for how to better serve these students through the dual language model.

Most importantly, hold students to grade-level standards, even if they need lots of scaffolding and support. Believing students can master two or more languages and ensuring fidelity to the dual language model will pave the way for student success. That said, learning in two languages can also cause discomfort and frustration for students. Increase students' sense of belonging and language learning by lowering the affective filter – the emotional barrier that comes from nervousness or fear in the learning process (Krashen, 1987). This can be done by being aware of students' social-emotional needs and having a plan for support via common classroom routines, bilingual prayer services, morning meetings and assemblies, as well as providing access to counseling services.

Recruiting, Retaining, and Reassuring Students and Families

When recruiting new students to the dual language program, you must not overpromise. Dual language is not the easy answer for a fledgling school program, and students are not sponges; they don't learn a language overnight. Language learning takes grit and fostering perseverance and patience in students and faculty members is central. Families must know they are committing to something for the long haul (i.e., four to nine years to reach grade level proficiency [Collier & Thomas, 2004]) and that students will gain proficiency at varying rates. Being honest with families from the outset and tempering expectations is imperative. Furthermore, helping families understand that building sociocultural competency is equal to the goals of academic excellence and biliteracy sets the foundation for embracing a holistic view of progress in a dual language program.

Since most Catholic dual language schools are being transformed one grade level at a time starting in the primary grades, schools must actively work to retain the students that are in the upper grades that have not yet converted to dual language. These students and families might be wondering, what's in this transformation for them? Or more negatively, the English-only program families may have feelings of resentment and exclusion since much excitement might surround the new dual language program. A focus on integrating the two programs to ensure one school community could be done via school assemblies, masses, and co-curriculars. Offering a Spanish foreign language class for the non-dual language grades and other opportunities for cultural connections across the school will allow all to feel valued. Another possibility is to build an exciting additional program from the top down. For example, one school in Los Angeles is building out a STEM program, including robotics and a partnership with a local university around environmental justice, starting in 8th grade while simultaneously starting their dual language program in Kindergarten and first grade.

Don't forget to reassure dual language students and parents of the incredible gift that is a dual language education. Make sure to have early wins when kicking off the program by teaching all students a schoolwide chant, key prayers such as the Our Father and Hail Mary, and the birthday song in the language of instruction. Remind parents via newsletters about the research that supports dual language learning and invite a dual language expert to provide a question and answer session to parents in the fall of their first year to address any anxieties or concerns.

Cross-Cultural Curriculum and Instruction

What you invest in shows what you are serious about. Choosing high-quality bilingual, cross-cultural, and comprehensive curriculum resources (including assessments) is key to success. Teachers cannot and should not be asked to develop curriculum from scratch. Developing a new program is complex and having core curricular resources in the target language from the start will ensure a basis for quality instruction. Teachers can begin by creating pacing guides, and then, over time, slowly move to create more robust interdisciplinary curriculum units and maps.

It is important that teachers receive support in language acquisition methodologies such as Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD), or the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP)/Two-Way Instruction Observation Protocol (TWIOP), and focus particularly, in the teaching of language and content standards. Further, dual language faculty agreement on key instructional strategies, common graphic organizers, and a list of must haves for classroom organization, permits students to see congruence in the dual language program from the start.

Test and Refine the Program

Once the dual language program is established, faculty and staff must plan for regular data check-ins and for a more comprehensive yearly program review. Using the rubrics in [Howard et al.'s \(2018\) *Guiding Principles of Dual Language Education*](#), teachers can score their program at the end

of the year and document the successes and challenges in each area. This data will allow program faculty and leaders to strategically plan next steps, decide on additional professional development needed, and determine whether they are collecting the appropriate and necessary data. A program review depends on a 360 degree look at a school using surveys and a thorough analysis of one's school culture, academic achievement, Catholic identity, parent satisfaction, finances, programming and planning. Through the yearly program review, school leaders learn when to make necessary adjustments and changes, and when to stay the course. This "Build-Measure-Learn feedback loop" (Ries, 2011, p. 22) is necessary for meaningful school change.

The reflective process helps foster the creation and maintenance of organizational routines (Sherer & Spillane, 2011). Further, using common digital folders for school data and program reviews is paramount for ensuring that best practices are continued, and historical institutional knowledge is preserved, even with turnover of faculty, staff, and leadership.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented dual language education as a model that aligns with our mission as Catholic education leaders. Two-way immersion dual language is more than a language program; it is a tested model that has the potential to develop inclusive and equitable communities where students' linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds are considered assets worth maintaining, and are seen as gifts to oneself and to one another. Communities of Practice, motivated by Jesus' example, have the power to continue to design and refine schools, transforming them into dynamic, young, and pluricultural micro-Churches. It is our desire that the philosophical background and the steps we offer, present a pathway toward a potential school renovation and transformation.

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Appendix

Additional Dual Language Resources

1. The *Common Core en Español* translation project is a framework produced by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the California Department of Education (CDE) and the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE). It can be accessed at <https://commoncore-espanol.sdcoe.net/>
2. “Can-Do Statements,” a product from the National Council of State Supervisors for Language (NCSSFL) and ACTFL collaboration was designed to help educators and learners identify, clarify, and communicate goals related to curriculum and dual language learning. <https://actfl.org/resources/ncssfl-actfl-can-do-statements>