

## Research Report

# Students with Visual Impairments in a Dual-language Program: A Case Study

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Dual-language education, or dual immersion, is an educational model that is used in public school districts in the United States to provide education to English-speaking and non-English-speaking children with the goal of having each group of students learn a second language. Over the past 30 years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of dual-language programs in the United States. Information collected by the Center for Applied Linguistics (2004) indicates that there were only seven dual-language programs in 1979, compared to 304 programs in 26 states and the District of Columbia in 2004. The Center for Applied Linguistics also reported that while most of the programs are English-Spanish programs, a total of 287, there are other language combinations, such as English-French, English-Chinese, English-Korean, and English-Navajo.

A number of characteristics define or distinguish dual-language programs from other bilingual programs in the United States. Important features of these programs include the integration of language-minority students (non-English speakers) and language-majority students (native English speakers) for at least 50% of the instructional time, the

provision of content and literacy instruction in two languages to all students, and a balance in the number of language-minority and language-majority students in the program (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2004).

Dual-language programs provide an effective environment for learning a second language because there is a naturally occurring interaction in both languages with peers who speak each language fluently. Moreover, there are also sociocultural benefits to such programs. Certainly, speaking a second language can broaden one's understanding of the values and customs of members of other cultural groups and therefore allow for a greater acceptance and respect of cultural diversity (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). In addition, academic excellence and bilingual proficiency are the goals and the results of these programs for both English-speaking and non-English-speaking students (Christian, Montone, Lindholm, & Carranza, 1997).

The increasing number of dual-language programs and the benefits that have been shown from attending these programs were the motivating factors for this study. The goal of the study was to examine how students who are visually impaired (that is, are blind or have low vision) can be successfully included in a dual-language program, the necessary factors for the students' success, and the benefits they can derive from participation.

## **Method**

The case-study approach was used to answer the study's research questions. According to Patton (1987), case studies are useful when there is a need to understand a particular problem or situation and are an appropriate method of inquiry

when the cases provide information on how to improve programs by studying the failures and success of other programs. By asking "how" and "why" questions, Yin (2003) determined that the use of the case-study approach was the appropriate strategy to answer research questions. Yin further stated that by using the multiple-case study design, a study is usually considered more robust.

## **Context of the study**

The study was conducted in a northern Colorado dual-language school that educates native Spanish and native English speakers. In this school, 16 general classroom teachers and 12 additional teachers offer classes in physical education, music, art, literacy, English as a second language, special education, a gifted-and-talented program, counseling, and reading assistance. Support for students who are visually impaired is provided by an itinerant teacher of students with visual impairments and a full-time paraprofessional. At the time of the study, 286 students were enrolled in the school, 2 of whom were visually impaired.

## **Participants**

The participants in the study included Sarah and Madison, two students who are visually impaired; Sarah's father and Madison's mother; 10 general education teachers; and 2 teachers of students with visual impairments (both the former and current teacher of visually impaired students). All 12 teachers were bilingual and biliterate, but the vision teachers were not. Some of the general education teachers had the opportunity to teach both Sarah and Madison. The following is a description of the students:

### *Sarah.*

Sarah is 11 years old, is in the sixth grade and has been in the dual-language program since preschool. Sarah's mother and two older brothers are also bilingual and biliterate. The two older brothers previously attended and graduated from this school. Sarah is of European descent, and English is the first language in her home. She has light perception only as a result of congenital bilateral microphthalmia with colobomas, and uses braille as her primary literacy mode.

### *Madison.*

Madison is 10 years old, is in the fifth grade and has been in the dual-language program since kindergarten. Madison is of Hispanic descent; however, English is the first language in her home. Madison has retinopathy of prematurity with a measured visual acuity of 20/700 in the left eye and no light perception in the right eye. She uses braille as her primary literacy mode and a closed-circuit television to access graphs, maps, and charts.

Neither Sarah nor Madison has an additional disability that would interfere with her linguistic or academic progress. The teachers described both students as cooperative, hard workers who are interested in learning a second language. Both are likable students with good peer relationships in both language groups and with each other. Outside school, they use both English and Spanish with their friends and family members.

### **Data analysis**

Semistructured interviews with the students, parents, general classroom teachers, and vision teachers were audiotaped,

notes were taken on the participants' responses to the interview questions, and the tape recordings were transcribed. The transcriptions and notes were read and coded by the two authors to determine relevant themes. Within-group and general themes were identified.

## **Distinct themes**

The data analysis revealed distinct themes that were important to the students, parents, and teachers. The themes will first be presented by groups and then by general themes.

### **Students**

Although both students were young, they were able to talk at length about their program. Some of the themes that were generated were as follows:

#### *Native language models.*

Since most of the teachers who delivered instruction in Spanish were native speakers and many came from different Spanish-speaking countries, the students mentioned that they enjoy learning from teachers with different Spanish accents. Not only were they learning Spanish, but they were able to learn that Spanish can be pronounced differently, depending on the country from which speakers come.

#### *Uses of Spanish.*

The students mentioned that they enjoyed speaking Spanish with their friends outside school, as well as ordering meals in Spanish for their family members at restaurants. They also mentioned that they were able to have more friends because

they can have both English- and Spanish-speaking friends.

## **Classroom teachers**

Interviews with the 10 general classroom teachers revealed the following themes:

### ***Delivery of instruction.***

The teachers discussed the changes that were necessary in the delivery of instruction. Most teachers mentioned that they were often not able to be as spontaneous with their lessons with Sarah and Madison as with their sighted students, which restricted their teaching styles and sometimes reduced teachable moments. They also said that because they could not change the braille materials that the students used, they were less likely to make changes halfway through a lesson and that the delivery of instruction needed to be more structured and planned.

With regard to the delivery of instruction, most of the general classroom teachers also said that they thought that they were better teachers as a result of their experience teaching Madison and Sarah. Since most of them had training in teaching a second language, which strongly relies on visual cues, having a visually impaired student required the teachers to examine, analyze, and reflect on their teaching methodology, and consequently their teaching instruction improved. For example, several teachers discussed the need to verbalize what they were reading or writing on the chalkboard.

### ***Time demands.***

The teachers frequently mentioned the time needed to plan

adequately for instruction. In addition, many of the teachers felt a demand on their time for meetings with team members, the teacher of students with visual impairments, and with the parents.

### ***Information.***

The teachers expressed a desire to find out information about the students with visual impairments prior to the start of the new school year. They indicated that they would like to have had access to relevant information about the students (such as the students' visual status in relation to their performance in class and the degree of language proficiency) and to learn about possible strategies that could be used in the classroom.

### ***Students' characteristics.***

The teachers thought that for a student with a visual impairment to be successful in a dual-language program, the student needs to have strong auditory skills and strong language abilities. They also indicated that the students should be willing to take risks and contribute in class and in the school. The teachers also mentioned that the positive behavior of these two students contributed to their successful participation in a program that expects so much from all the students.

### ***Parents' commitment.***

The teachers said that parents' strong commitment is an important factor for students' success. They noted that parents really need to want their children to be in a dual-language program and that they need to be realistic about the added demand that such a program represents for them and

their children.

## **Teachers of students with visual impairments**

Interviews with the two teachers of visually impaired students revealed the following themes:

### ***Commitment to the program's philosophy.***

The teachers of students who are visually impaired expressed the need for a strong commitment to the goals of the program. Scheduling before and after school times to work with students on access skills allowed the students to stay in the classroom during instruction in the second language. However, by doing so, the teachers needed to modify their workday schedules because their work was often performed outside the regular working hours. Flexibility in their daily schedule was necessary to support the program.

### ***Collaboration.***

The teachers indicated that collaborating with classroom teachers was important to facilitate the balance of the students' language needs and educational needs. They said that during Spanish week (the week in which all instruction is given in Spanish), they needed to do more intense listening and watching to be able to keep up with their responsibilities, particularly when they were assisting students in the classroom. They also described their collaborative efforts at this school as more "intense" than in a typical English-only school. The teachers also considered collaboration to be necessary to ensure that materials were provided in both languages to the students. In addition, they noted that collaboration with parents is important to facilitate flexible scheduling for the students.



### ***Opportunities to experience a different instructional model.***

The teachers indicated that having the chance to work in a dual-language program provided a unique teaching opportunity for them. They also said that they would never have experienced a different model of education had it not been for these two students.

### ***Students' characteristics.***

Both teachers indicated that it was important for students to start the program in kindergarten. They also mentioned that at least average intelligence and the motivation to learn a new language are factors in students' success.

### **Parents**

As was mentioned previously, one parent from each family was interviewed. The parents' comments provided the following themes:

### ***Commitment to the program.***

The parents indicated their strong commitment to the dual-language program. In their case, they had to bring their children before school started in the morning and allow the children to stay after school to learn the access skills that the children needed to participate fully in the general classroom. The parents also noted the amount of time they spent working with their children on homework in the evening and mentioned the importance of providing additional activities that encourage children to use the second language.

### ***Supportive environment.***

According to the parents, the dual-language environment was able to accept and support their children's educational needs. The parents also thought that the program provided a broader educational and cultural experience that their children would not have experienced in a regular English-only program.

### *Benefits for the future.*

The parents indicated that learning a second language may have benefits for the future. As one parent said: "I see her down the road, ... using her language skills in her professional career."

## **General themes**

Several themes were consistent throughout the interviews. There appeared to be a general consensus for the following themes:

### *Availability of materials.*

Obtaining materials in English and Spanish braille is essential for students to be successful in a dual-language setting. There was a consensus that only when written materials are presented in both languages equally can a student truly become bilingual and biliterate.

### *Diversity.*

The theme of diversity and the benefits of being educated in a setting with diverse cultures was common among all the groups who were interviewed. There was a general consensus that since the dual-language setting provides greater acceptance of children's diverse characteristics, visual

impairment is viewed in a more positive manner than in a regular school program. The parents, in particular, expressed their belief that their children will be more likely to accept culturally diverse people as a result of their participation in the program. The students said that they thought that their visual impairment has been less of a problem at this school because of the program's positive acceptance of differences.

### *District and school support.*

The participants mentioned that support from the school district and school is essential to the success of the students with visual impairments in the dual-language program. They believed that the school and district have been extremely supportive of the effort to educate these two students in the program.

### *Commitment to the value of bilingualism.*

The participants stated that a commitment to the value of bilingualism is a prerequisite to attending a dual-language program. They said that parents, students, and all educators need to believe and promote the concept that bilingualism is a worthwhile goal for all students to achieve for cognitive, linguistic, and cultural reasons.

## **Conclusion**

The parents, teachers, and students all agreed that it is possible for students who are visually impaired to attend a dual-language school and be successful. However, it is important to realize that an even greater degree of collaboration among the students, parents, general classroom teacher, vision teacher, school, and school district is needed

to educate students who are visually impaired in a dual-language program or school than in a general education program. The parents, teachers, students, and school district personnel must work on the single goal of educating the students to become bilingual and biliterate, regardless of the students' visual status.

This northern Colorado school has shown that it is possible to provide a dual-language education to students who are visually impaired. As dual-language programs continue to grow in many communities in the United States, they will be considered a valuable alternative for the education of students with visual impairments. Although coordinated efforts are required for success in these programs, considerable benefits for the students and society in general will be the result of participation in these programs.

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