



“School libraries have tremendous potential to support biliteracy.”

Building a Dual-Language School Library

PATRICK H. SMITH AND BETHANY S. THOMPSON

A growing number of schools offer dual-language (DL) programs, where students from two language backgrounds learn together through both languages. Unlike transitional bilingual programs, which use the child’s home language as a temporary bridge to English literacy, DL programs are “additive” forms of bilingual education that aim to help all children become bilingual and biliterate, most frequently in Spanish and English. This article provides guidance for teacher librarians in schools with a DL program. We describe challenges and solutions involved in building a DL school library.

School libraries have tremendous potential to support biliteracy. They are sources of Spanish and Spanish/English bilingual books that can be difficult to find in public libraries and bookstores. School libraries provide access to information in a broad range of topics and genres, especially for Spanish-speaking and immigrant students whose home access to print literacies, computers, and the internet is often limited compared to English-speaking peers. Research on DL school libraries from the perspectives of library and information science and bilingual education shows that

- DL school libraries usually begin as existing collections that are English monolingual or overwhelmingly English dominant (DelGuidice, 2007; Pucci, 1994; Smith & Murillo, 2013).
- Few school librarians receive professional training or mentoring to promote biliteracy (Bowker & Ciro, 2017), and classroom teachers seldom receive professional development to learn to use school libraries (Burns, 2010).
- School districts underestimate the time, money, and human resources needed to transform a monolingual library into one that supports biliteracy development (Amrein & Peña, 2000; Lambson, 2002).

These findings also suggest that school librarians can benefit from guidance on how to foster biliteracy.

LESSONS FROM A DL SCHOOL LIBRARY

International Prep Academy (IPA) is a public K–5 elementary school in

central Illinois. The campus was built in 1957 and functioned as an English monolingual school for nearly 60 years before being converted to a DL campus in 2014. IPA follows a “whole school, 50-50 model,” meaning that all children are taught approximately half the time in Spanish and half in English. Like many DL programs,

- It is the first DL school in the district.
- Students are identified as English dominant or Spanish dominant, but many are multilingual in Spanish, English, and indigenous languages from Latin America.
- Spanish-speaking students come from diverse cultural, linguistic, and geographic backgrounds, in-

cluding Texas, Mexico, Guatemala, Argentina, Puerto Rico, and Spain. English-speaking students come from homes where African American English and standardized American English are spoken.

Bethany Thompson, the school’s founding librarian, is a native speaker of English who learned French and Spanish as an adult. She holds a master’s degree in library science and is one of two Spanish-proficient librarians in her district. She has been a teacher librarian for more than 10 years and became a DL librarian in 2014. Patrick Smith is a biliteracy researcher and professor of bilingual education. We use a Q&A format to highlight Bethany’s experiences and share what we learned dur-

ing our year-long collaboration in the IPA library.

Q: What was the library like when you started? How has the collection changed?

A: At first we shared the library with a monolingual school while their new campus was being built. The collection was almost entirely in English. At the end of our first year, that school moved its collection to their new campus, and our library had only 100 items, all in Spanish. So our challenge was to rebuild the collection from the ground up. In year 2, we inherited about 1000 Spanish-language books from another bilingual campus. The shelves were pretty empty in the beginning, because it took so long to catalog and pro-



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cess the books we inherited. In years 3 and 4 we received start-up funds to purchase new books. We're currently at about 6,000 books total, with English 48%, Spanish 39%, and bilingual books 13%. A monolingual library for a school of our size should have a collection of about 8,000 books and more for a DL library, so we still have a ways to go. But the library looks and feels much different than when we started. We have a strong collection in Spanish now, much larger than our local public libraries or bookstores.

Q: What subject areas are most challenging to support?

A: High quality nonfiction books in Spanish are hard to find. I can find authentic science- and math-related books in Spanish, but it is difficult to find books in Spanish about U.S. history and social studies. The students are really into cookbooks and graphic novels, but it's hard to find them in Spanish for elementary school readers. Translated books in these subject areas are tricky, because it's hard to tell if the translation is good enough based only on the information online.

Q: How is acquiring books in Spanish different than books in English?

A: We have more ways to acquire books in English. It's harder to order books from suppliers outside the United States, and there are fewer

places where I can get my hands on a copy of new Spanish-language books. At the American Library Association conference and other conferences and book fairs, I can see the books and talk with Latin American publishers. Many Spanish-language books published in the United States are translations that are not culturally relevant for the bilingual learners at our school.

Q: What challenges have you found in cataloging? How does your cataloging software work with books in Spanish and bilingual books?

A: When we acquire a new book in Spanish, if we are lucky, it already has subject area headings and a summary in English, which I translate into Spanish. Subject headings are usually easier than the summaries, which require verb tenses that I'm not always sure about. Our district purchases books through Follett, which is linked to their Destiny library management system. For books in Spanish, Follett provides subject headings and summaries in English. The summaries are less detailed than those that come with the English-language books. They are often just the blurb from the back cover. When I translate summaries into Spanish, I usually add information to make them more descriptive. Teachers or bilingual colleagues in the front office help me check them, so it takes time to get the subject heading and summary right.

For cataloging, I "crosswalk" between two systems: the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules for cataloging books in languages other than English and the standards of the *Biblioteca Nacional de España*. Their subject headings don't always fit with the Mexican and Latin American varieties of Spanish our students know, so we modify them to make them more reader friendly.

Q: How are books displayed? Do you separate books by language or integrate them throughout the collection?

A: Other libraries in our district mark the Spanish-language books with a "Spanish" sticker on the spine and shelve them separately from the English books. As a DL library, we decided to do things differently. We use language stickers on all the books, not just those in Spanish. So each book gets a sticker: "ENG" for English, "SPAN" for Spanish, and "BIL" for bilingual books written in both languages. The stickers are color coded to help kindergartners and others just learning to read. Determining the language a book is written in is usually straightforward, but sometimes I have to really think about it. For example, books with some words in both languages but aren't a typical bilingual book with the same version of the text in English and in Spanish.

We display the books as an integrated collection, not separated by language. So if a student is looking for a book on the geography of Mexico, in the 900s section of the Dewey System, all the books on that topic are there together, and the same is true for the fiction and early fiction collections.

Q: How is the library–classroom relationship different than at a monolingual school or a school with a transitional bilingual program?

A: I've been a teacher librarian and media specialist in all three types of schools, and there's never enough common planning time or opportunity to talk with classroom teachers. Face-to-face communication works best for reaching out to teachers about their classroom projects, sharing new books and resources to supplement their curriculum, and letting teachers know when their students are really interested in a particular author or topic. I visit classrooms after school, and some teachers come to the library, but it's mainly through quick chats in the hall-

way or during lunch duty. DL teachers are even busier than most teachers because they are creating their own materials and adapting existing materials to support learning in two languages. Teachers know that the library is a resource, but they don't have enough time to take full advantage of it.

The DL curriculum also impacts kids' book choices. For example, the kindergarten teachers have a rule that children can take out only paperbacks, because the little ones tend to lose or damage books and families have complained about the cost of replacing hardcover books. Because most of our paperback picture books are in Spanish, kindergarteners and first graders probably sign out more books in

Spanish than they would in a library in a transitional program. This fits with our goal of promoting reading in Spanish in the early grades and helping students understand that Spanish is an important language for learning.

The language of instruction also has an impact. In the first 2 years of our program, we used English as the language of instruction one week and Spanish the next. Some teachers wanted their students to check out only books written in the "language of the week." That changed when our curriculum shifted to teaching some subject areas in Spanish and others in English. Now most teachers want students to check out one book in Spanish and one in English to be consistent



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with the 50-50 language of instruction model, and because children take reading tests in both languages. If a kid is into arts and crafts and wants to check out two books about origami, for example, the teachers have asked me to tell the student to get one book in each language. These are some ways that reading choices are shaped by the fact that we are a DL school.

Q: Funding for school libraries is always a challenge. How have you grown the collection in tight economic times?

A: The annual library budget for each school in our district is about \$1,400, which isn't sufficient to build a

monolingual library, much less a DL library. As a new school, we get \$15,000 a year in start-up funds, and this has allowed us to build the collection more quickly. In fact, we had so many new and inherited books that I couldn't keep up. Just cataloging and processing was a full-time job, but I was half-time the first two years, working without a library clerk, and teaching a full load of classes. I was able to show my building administrator that the wonderful books we'd acquired weren't getting into circulation fast enough. Kids couldn't check them out, and teachers couldn't use them because they had to be cataloged and processed first. The

principal used that argument to justify a full-time librarian position, and we got a half-time library clerk in year four. These additional human resources make a huge difference.

Q: Most teacher librarians train to work in monolingual schools. How did you teach yourself to be a DL school librarian?

A: Honestly, in the beginning I felt overwhelmed most of the time. It was like being a first-year teacher all over again. Beside building the collection, I spent a lot of time working on my proficiency in Spanish, because I hadn't taught bilingually before. I made



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sticky notes with the Spanish phrases I needed to use every day, especially questions and instructions, and posted them on my computer where I could refer to them. My training in music and theater has also helped. Even when students don't understand all the lyrics of a song we are singing, they can appreciate the melody and the motions. I've gotten more accomplished with practice, but on a tough day I sometimes end up "singing" a class more than talking.

Studying for National Board Certification has also helped. The training isn't specifically for DL librarians, but it has helped me set realistic goals for my growth as a teaching librarian, incorporate new ideas into my instruction, and evaluate their effectiveness. It's time consuming because it's on top of our district guidelines and professional and state standards but rewarding because I am constantly learning about my craft. I've also learned by researching what our national and state organizations say about supporting bilingual students and working with Spanish-speaking communities. And collaborating with a university researcher has helped me learn about biliteracy development and the theories behind DL education that are not covered in library and information studies programs.

Q: How has working in a DL school helped you grow as a librarian?

A: I am constantly learning. Being able to teach with confidence in two languages, gaining a better sense of different varieties of Spanish, knowing what books and print resources children enjoy reading in Spanish, understanding how digital learning technologies can be made accessible to Spanish-speaking children: These are

I've also learned to pay attention to the language demands and cultural assumptions of digital texts like online encyclopedias. Teacher librarians are accustomed to previewing the print materials we use, but most online educational content isn't designed for DL students. Some materials have been machine-translated and not necessarily very well.

some of the ways I'm growing as a librarian by working in two languages.

Q: How do children experience the library differently when they can read, hear, and view texts written in two languages?

A: It really depends on their experiences. Some students use mostly Spanish or English at home, and others are from homes that are very bilingual. All children experience forms of literacy at home, such as calendars, shopping lists, and advertisements, but there is a big range in home access to books and computers, as well as their experiences in libraries. Previous schooling is another factor. Some of our students transferred from a school where they were reading and writing only in English. They are very fluent in oral Spanish but had few opportunities to read or write in Spanish in school. Getting those students interested in books in Spanish is a joy to watch. For students who began the DL program as kindergarteners or first graders, having books and activities in Spanish makes the library a welcoming place. Bilingualism is definitely part of that.

Q: Librarians are being asked to take a leadership role in introducing new

technologies. What insights can you share about using digital technologies with DL learners?

A: Don't assume that DL students have good home access to digital technology. Some kids are growing up with the very latest in digital devices, and others don't have a computer or internet. Kids with less access to digital technologies can sound tech savvy because they often know a lot about social media platforms and apps you can use on a cell phone. But they might have less experience with the hardware and interfaces needed to access curriculum and literacy online. For example, touch screens, track pads, keyboards, log-in and password conventions, drop-down menus, turning the volume up and down . . . these are all features commonly assumed in computer-based teaching. But not all kids have access at home, so we need to help them learn these forms of 21st-century literacies.

I've also learned to pay attention to the language demands and cultural assumptions of digital texts like online encyclopedias. Teacher librarians are accustomed to previewing the print materials we use, but most online educational content isn't designed for DL students. Some materials have been machine-translated and not necessar-

As the number of bilingual students and DL programs increase in U.S. schools, teacher librarians are seeking resources and information about how to build a bilingual library, support bilingual curriculum, and serve a new generation of bilingual learners.

ily very well. For example, in a unit on the geography of Latin American cities, we found information in Spanish that was inaccurate or misleading. The layout and graphics of the Spanish version were also much less attractive. As a matter of equity, we should pay as much attention to the quality of digital materials as we do to print.

Q: Any final words of advice for colleagues starting a DL library?

A: Be prepared to work very hard and be patient with everybody, especially yourself! There's so much to learn, and you can't do it all at once. Your campus probably won't have all the resources you need, so enlisting building supervisors, fellow teachers, and parents as advocates is key. Involving campus or district technology experts early on will help them understand the particular needs of a DL library and hopefully avoid or resolve tech problems. It's also helpful to have a colleague, like a fellow librarian or experienced bilingual teacher, to think and plan with. Visiting existing DL school libraries helped me envision what our library should look like, so I am happy to share what I have learned.

CONCLUSION

As the number of bilingual students and DL programs increase in U.S.

schools, teacher librarians are seeking resources and information about how to build a bilingual library, support bilingual curriculum, and serve a new generation of bilingual learners.

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Patrick H. Smith, Ph.D., is a professor of bilingual education at Texas State University, where he teaches courses on bilingual education and linguistically diverse learners and works with future bilingual teachers to promote biliteracy. Email: phs19@txstate.edu

Bethany S. Thompson, M.S. in library science, is a library media specialist at International Prep Academy in Champaign Unit 4 School District. She is a National Board Certified Teacher and has presented on DL school libraries and education through music in school library settings. Email: thompsbe@u4sd.org