

**Inclusive Dual Language Programs: Meeting the Needs of Emerging Bilingual Students
with Disabilities in Bilingual Classrooms**

by

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A dissertation accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in Educational Leadership

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Spring 2025

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Inclusive Dual Language Programs: Meeting the Needs of Emerging Bilingual Students with Disabilities in Bilingual Classrooms

Dual language (DL) programs are rapidly expanding in the United States, offering students the opportunity to develop proficiency in two languages. While research has consistently demonstrated the academic, cognitive, and social-emotional benefits of DL programs for diverse learners, there remains a critical gap in understanding how these programs effectively serve students with disabilities. To explore this gap, I conducted a qualitative study focused on the experiences and perspectives of administrators and teachers in two Oregon school districts. Through interviews with stakeholders, I identified themes that reveal how practitioners navigate the opportunities and challenges of supporting emergent bilingual students with disabilities (EBSWD) in DL settings.

Participants emphasized the critical role of systems and structures that foster a school culture grounded in both bilingualism and inclusion. School culture emerged as a central theme, with participants describing how leadership that actively promotes equity and inclusivity helped establish environments where EBSWD could succeed. These findings highlight that the successful inclusion of EBSWD in DL programs relies not only on well-designed, school-wide systems but also on leadership that intentionally cultivates a culture of belonging, linguistic diversity, and high expectations for all learners.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Lina Shanley, for her thoughtful guidance, steady support, and encouragement throughout this process. Her flexibility, insight, and feedback were instrumental at every stage of this dissertation's development, and without them, this work would not exist.

I am also sincerely thankful to my committee members, Dr. Heather McClure and Dr. Sylvia Thompson. Their expertise, thoughtful questions, and commitment to my growth helped shape and refine both my research process and my thinking. I am also appreciative of the many professors in the DED program whose mentorship pushed me to strengthen and deepen my understanding of educational research and practice.

To my partner, Haven—thank you for being my unwavering support system. Your encouragement, patience, and humor, not to mention the endless tea deliveries and proofreading marathons, carried me through this program.

I am incredibly grateful to my parents, Heidi and Kyle, for their endless encouragement, listening ears, and steadfast belief in me. Mom, thank you for always picking up the phone, offering wisdom, and serving as a model for what compassionate and equity driven leadership can look like. Dad, thank you for having my back and for always reminding me of my strength.

Finally, I want to thank the dedicated educators who participated in this study. Your passion, insight, and generosity with your time were humbling and inspiring. I feel truly fortunate to learn from practitioners who are making a difference every day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE SYNTHESIS.....	11
Parameters For Literature Review	12
What is Dual Language?.....	13
Benefits of Dual Language	14
Societal Impacts of Dual Language	17
Bilingualism & Special Education.....	18
Dual Language for Children with Disabilities	19
Limited School Resources	22
School & Family Disconnect.....	27
School-Wide Systems	30
Advancing Research in Dual Language.....	31
Present Study	31
II. METHOD.....	34
Research Design Overview.....	34
Researcher Positionality.....	34
Setting	35
Participants.....	36
Participant Recruitment & Selection	37
Participant Demographics.....	37
Data Collection	38
Data Collection Procedures.....	38

Informed Consent.....	40
Recording & Transforming Data	40
Data Analytic Strategies	41
Methodological Integrity	42
III. RESULTS	43
Administrator Interviews	44
Building Equitable Classrooms.....	44
Changing Student Populations.....	46
Feelings of Uncertainty in Developing DL Cohorts.....	46
Family Engagement	47
Student Behaviors	48
Behaviors as a Piece of the Puzzle.....	49
Time Constraints.....	49
SPED Students Particularly Impacted by Time	50
Available Resources.....	51
Prioritizing DL Amid Shifts in Resources	52
Academic Intervention Systems	53
Finding & Retaining Bilingual Staff.....	53
Grow Your Own Programs	58
Supporting DL Staff.....	60
When Creative Solutions Run Short.....	60
Building Staff Culture.....	62
Supporting a Unified Staff.....	63

Navigating School and Community Culture.....	64
Shifting Culture for Dual Language	67
Admin’s Why.....	68
Teacher Focus Groups	70
Gaps in Staff Support.....	70
Bilingual Special Education Staff.....	71
Initiatives to Grow Staff Knowledge	73
Staff Dynamics.....	73
Limited Instructional Time	74
Balancing Language and Special Education.....	75
Family Dynamics	75
Student Behavior.....	76
Data Analysis	77
Fostering an Inclusive School Culture.....	78
Family Engagement	79
Staff Buy-in.....	79
Available Resources.....	80
Staff Recruitment & Retention	80
Academic Interventions	80
Managing the ‘Balancing Act’	81
Building Diverse Class Cohorts.....	81
IV. DISCUSSION.....	82
Successes in District Policies, Resources and Programs	84

Challenges in District Policies, Resources, and Programs	87
District Level Systems That Differentiate Between SPED and Language	88
District Level Processes That Support EBSWD in DL Classrooms.....	89
Additional Observations	90
Why so Much DL?.....	90
Analysis of Participants & Recruitment	91
Limited Number of Districts.....	91
External Relationships	92
Participant Demographics.....	92
Designing DL Cohorts	93
Limitations & Future Research.....	94
Conclusion	95
APPENDICES	97
A. DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY	97
B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....	98
C. FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL	100
D. DISTRICT LETTER OF AGREEMENT	102
REFERENCES CITED.....	103

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Terms Used in Literature Search	12
2. Identified Themes Presented by Research Question.....	78

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

Dual language (DL) programs have experienced rapid growth in the United States, reflecting a global shift towards bilingual education. A recent canvas of DL programs in the United States revealed a significant increase in DL from approximately 1,000 programs in 2010 to over 3,600 programs in 2021 (Roberts, 2021). This over three-fold shift in DL programs highlights a growing recognition of their transformative potential for students, communities, and the nation as a whole.

As this trend occurs, state education agencies across the country are key leaders in expanding access to DL, dedicating resources and efforts in advancing biliteracy initiatives in public education. For example, in 2022, the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington State set a goal to provide DL programs to all students by 2030 (Washington Office of Public Instruction, 2020). This goal captures the growing commitment to bilingual education taking place in our nation. The focus on DL by state agencies and individual school districts suggests a paradigm change in education, with many noting the role of bilingualism as a strategy to build linguistic and cultural competencies required for students to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

The rapid growth of DL programs highlights the need for a more thorough understanding of these educational models and their integration into existing school systems and policies. As DL programs become a core piece of public education in the United States, it is crucial to evaluate their effectiveness, establish best practices, and understand the steps toward successful implementation. This knowledge will be essential in maximizing the impact of DL programs and

ensuring that they empower all students, enrich communities, and strengthen the nation's linguistic and cultural tapestry.

Parameters for Literature Review

I started with a wide range of search terms related to bilingual special education to explore the existing literature. Specific terms used are noted in Table 1. This initial search helped me identify a wide range of articles and authors, which supported narrowing my scope. As I read, I identified key authors and frequently cited works across a wide range of research information to expand my review. By focusing on authors and articles frequently cited across multiple sources, I was able to refine my review and target the most relevant and impactful research in the field.

Table 1
Terms Used in Literature Search

Special Education	AND OR	Bilingual	AND OR	Dual Language
Disabilities		Bilingual Education		Dual Language Classrooms
		Bilingualism		Dual Language Programs
		English Language Learners		Dual Language Education
		Emerging Bilinguals		Bilingual Classrooms
		English Second Language		Bilingual Programs
		Bilingual Students		Bilingual Schools

What is DL?

Dual language (DL) programs offer students the opportunity to develop proficiency in two languages simultaneously. In the United States, DL programs are offered in a variety of languages, with Spanish language programs being the most prevalent, making up about 80% of DL programs in the nation (Roberts, 2021). There is no guidance from state or federal governments regarding the selection of a language base or teaching framework (US Department of Education, 2015). Despite the absence of standardized guidance on language selection, the diverse array of languages represented in DL programs reflects the commitment to fostering linguistic diversity and cultural understanding in American education. While school districts may structure their DL programs in different ways, two primary models are most often used: one-way immersion and two-way immersion (Baker, 2011).

One-way immersion programs primarily focus on providing students from the majority language community with academic exposure to another target or focus language (Baker, 2011). For instance, English-speaking students may receive instruction in Spanish in a one-way immersion program. The level of instruction in the target language can vary across one-way immersion programs, but generally, there is a stronger emphasis on developing proficiency in the focused language, with most if not all instruction provided in that language.

Two-way immersion programs, on the other hand, bring together students who are native speakers of the target language and students from the majority language community (Baker, 2011). Instruction is delivered in both languages, typically with a 50/50 split. The goal of two-way immersion programs is to foster language development in both groups of students. Two-way DL programs are gaining popularity in the United States, as they provide a valuable opportunity

for English language learners (ELL) and native English-speaking students to learn and grow together (May, 2017).

Schools typically choose the type of DL immersion model that best aligns with their student demographics, staff expertise, and level of community support. In practice, factors such as the school environment, staffing availability, and community involvement can influence how the selected DL model is implemented. For instance, a district may adopt a two-way immersion model but deliver instruction through two separate teachers for each language. DL models can vary not only across districts but also within individual school buildings, sometimes blending elements of multiple models. Regardless of the specific model used, DL programs have the potential to unite diverse school communities by creating meaningful opportunities for students, staff, and families. These programs often serve as a bridge for fostering community relationships and enhancing communication among linguistically diverse populations (Collier & Thomas, 2017).

Benefits of DL

Each type of DL model has unique advantages, but students in these programs consistently demonstrate significant language gains and advancements in academic abilities. Collier and Thomas (2017) found that ELL children in DL classrooms outperform their monolingual peers on school-based academic measures. Research among Latinx and low-SES middle-grade students in the United States supports this finding (Lindholm-Leary & Block, 2010). Researchers discovered that low-SES Latinx ELL students in DL programs outperformed their general education peers in language arts and mathematics assessments. DL students also demonstrated accelerated growth on the state-level standardized test, with ELL students in DL

classrooms exhibiting particularly strong growth and achievement in both math and language arts.

The academic benefits of DL programs extend to bilingual language development for students with diverse backgrounds. Burkhauser et al. (2016) found that 8th-grade students in Oregon performed on par with, or even surpassed, their native English-speaking peers in the Standards-Based Measurement of Proficiency assessment of language proficiency. The findings reveal that by eighth grade, most students achieved at least an intermediate-low level of proficiency in nearly all language skills in their partner language. Further, after four years of immersion, students whose home language was Spanish performed similarly to their peers in reading and speaking but outperformed them in listening and writing (Burkhauser et al., 2016). This suggests that DL programs effectively support bilingualism and biliteracy. Creating inclusive spaces for minority language speakers to achieve proficiency faster should be a priority in our schools.

Researchers have noted numerous cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism. For instance, Zelazo et al. (1996) found that bilingual children develop problem-solving skills faster than their monolingual peers. Bialystok (1988), a leading researcher in the cognitive development of bilingual individuals, also noted that bilingual students outperform their monolingual counterparts on metalinguistic tasks. Further, broad trends in cognitive research suggest that bilingualism may induce structural changes in the brain, leading to improved cognitive functioning throughout life (Pliatsikas et al., 2020). A longitudinal study by Bak et al. (2014) demonstrated that bilingual individuals outperformed monolingual individuals on tests of general intelligence at age 60. This finding supports the long-term benefits of bilingualism, with positive outcomes present throughout life.

Some studies have identified potential drawbacks to bilingualism, such as smaller vocabularies in each language (Bialystok, 2009), but the majority of research suggests that bilingualism provides significant benefits for cognitive functioning. While research hasn't directly compared cognitive changes between learning another language in a DL program versus learning a new language in other settings, the benefits documented for bilingual individuals suggest these advantages likely apply regardless of the specific learning context. These research findings underscore the transformative potential of DL programs in fostering long-term success for all students, and their potential to bridge the learning gap for students regardless of their language background.

The benefit of DL extends beyond cognitive and academic achievement to include important social-emotional and behavioral outcomes. Collier and Thomas (2017) note that children in DL programs showcase stronger attendance, greater interest in school, and a greater interest in the learning process as measured by teacher rating scales. One qualitative study examining the perspectives of adolescents in DL classrooms found that these programs offer opportunities for deep discussion and reflection on ethnolinguistic identities (Kibler et al., 2013). Kibler et al.'s (2013) findings supported prior research, suggesting that teens develop a sensitivity, awareness, and recognition of other cultures through their experiences in DL programs. However, researchers have not fully explored how students may benefit from DL classroom settings outside of academics.

Given highlighted findings that note opportunities for whole student growth, researchers need to better understand this phenomenon among a wide student population. Specifically, Genesee & Lindholm-Leary (2021) reviewed research on the suitability of DL education for diverse students in Canada and the U.S., including those from minority language

backgrounds, economically disadvantaged families, and with special education needs. The study found that young learners have the capacity to learn multiple languages without hindering their development. Furthermore, DL education is not only suitable but also effective for students with diverse characteristics, leading to comparable or better outcomes in both English and the partner language compared to their peers in monolingual programs (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2021). These findings challenge the misconception that DL education is only beneficial for mainstream students and highlight its potential to support the academic success and language development of diverse learners.

Societal Impacts of DL

DL programs not only foster multilingualism but also contribute to economic growth, improved psychological well-being, and a more diverse labor market (Gandára & Escamilla, 2017). Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) notes that our labor market is becoming more and more diverse, which reflects broad level data supporting shifting diversity in the United States. In the U.S., investing in DL programs could address the current disadvantage of a predominantly English-speaking workforce in an increasingly globalized economy (Gandára & Acevedo, 2016). By nurturing bilingualism and biliteracy, DL programs can empower individuals to access a wider range of opportunities, enhance their earning potential, and contribute to the nation's economic competitiveness (Gandára, & Acevedo, 2016). A report on bilingualism in California reveals that bi/multilingual households often have higher median incomes than monolingual households (Eliason, 2022), further emphasizing the economic benefits of multilingualism. In an increasingly interconnected world where monolingual individuals are at a disadvantage, programs which prioritize bi/multilingualism for all becomes an imperative.

Beyond economic advantages, DL programs also promote inclusivity and cultural understanding. By valuing and developing students' native languages alongside English, these programs create a more equitable and enriching learning environment (Collier & Thomas, 2017). Kibler et al. (2013) examined the ethnolinguistic outcomes of a high school Spanish/English dual-language program called Languages Across Borders (LAB). The study focused on how the program affected students' understanding of themselves, language, language learning, and their peers. The findings showed that the LAB program facilitated students' recognition and appreciation of their peers' ethnolinguistic identities, their understanding of language as a cultural phenomenon, their awareness of language learning through real-life interactions, and their appreciation of their own and others' diverse linguistic resources. The study highlights the ways in which DL programs can support students in developing a deeper appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity, thus preparing them to thrive in an interconnected world.

Given the compelling academic and societal benefits of DL programs, it is critical to explore strategies for ensuring their accessibility to all students, including those with disabilities. By addressing potential barriers and providing appropriate support, we can create a truly inclusive educational landscape where all students can reap the rewards of multilingualism and biliteracy.

Bilingualism and Special Education

The evolving demographic landscape of the United States underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of bilingualism and disability in educational contexts. The 2019 U.S. Census reveals that approximately one in five individuals living in the United States speaks a language other than English at home (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022). This linguistic diversity is present in children aged 5-14, with some language groups reaching a 16% bilingualism rate

(Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022). These figures emphasize the increasing prevalence of multilingualism in American society and the growing population of students who navigate DL environments daily.

This demographic shift toward increasing linguistic diversity significantly impacts the nation's education system. Although only 1.6% of children in U.S. public schools are dually identified as English Learners (ELs) who also access services under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA; Office of Special Education Programs, 2022), these data vary widely across states. In California, Texas, and New Mexico, over 20% of children are dually identified (Migration Policy Institute, 2022). Oregon also exceeds the national average, with 13.87% of children dually identified as ELs receiving special education services (Migration Policy Institute, 2022). This intersection of bilingualism and disability poses a complex challenge for educators, particularly within DL classrooms, which are becoming more widely implemented (Roberts, 2021).

Given the rising number of bilingual students with disabilities, it is crucial to examine how current educational programs and services effectively support this unique population. A comprehensive understanding of the interplay between language, disability, and learning is essential for developing inclusive and equitable educational practices that meet the diverse needs of all learners in DL settings.

Dual Language for Children with Disabilities

Examining the intersection of bilingualism and disabilities requires active engagement with the complex and ever-evolving landscape of attitudes and policies shaping the educational experiences of children in both groups. We must not only recognize the historical marginalization and systemic inequities ELL children have faced but also critically analyze

current practices and advocate for inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive approaches that honor their unique linguistic and learning needs. It is worth noting that although my dissertation addresses areas of concern for children who are emerging bilingual and have a disability (EBSWD), it may not fully capture the complex history of the problem.

The United States has historically struggled with identifying ELL students with disabilities (Wright, 2015). Several factors contribute to this challenge, including language barriers, cultural differences, and inadequate training for educators in identifying and supporting ELL students with disabilities (de Valenzuela et al., 2015). Consequently, there is significant concern about the potential for overrepresentation and misidentification of bilingual students with disabilities. One study conducted by Cuba and Tefera (2024) captures the disproportionality in special education groups, and specifically notes that children of specific racial/ethnicity groups, and children who were economically disadvantaged were more likely to be overrepresented in special education. Once identified for special education, bilingual students often face recommendations for English-only environments at home and school (Genesee, 2007; Kremer-Sadlick, 2005). However, a growing body of research challenges this approach, emphasizing the numerous cognitive, linguistic, and social benefits of bilingualism for diverse learners, including those with disabilities (Collier & Thomas, 2017). Studies have shown that bilingual instruction, which leverages students' native languages alongside English, can foster the full potential of these learners (Collier & Thomas, 2012). This research highlights the need to re-evaluate traditional approaches and embrace inclusive practices that value and promote bilingualism for all students, including those with disabilities.

DL programs offer a wide range of benefits for students, including those with disabilities. While some research indicates that parents and school leaders express concerns about the

cognitive load of DL programs for children with disabilities, numerous studies highlight specific benefits for this population (Gonzalez-Barrero & Nadig, 2019). Concerns centered around DL programs as too difficult for children with disabilities, undermining the experiences of bilingual individuals who experience disabilities. Hesitance regarding children with disabilities being able to learn a new language conflicts with modern movements in special education which recognize the importance of inclusion and supporting students' needs in the least restrictive environment.

Research on the benefits of DL programs for children with disabilities, particularly those who may require additional supports and services such as students experiencing Down syndrome (DS) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), highlights the capabilities of these children. Research shows that children not only function well in these settings but can thrive. Bird et al. (2005) examined the English and second language abilities of bilingual children with DS and compared them to three control groups matched on developmental level: monolingual children with DS, monolingual typically developing children, and bilingual typically developing children. The authors found that bilingual children with DS did not differ significantly from monolingual children with DS in their English language abilities, suggesting that bilingualism does not hinder English language development for children with DS (Bird et al., 2005). Additionally, while all children performed better in English than in their second language, bilingual children with DS performed similarly to their typically developing peers in their second language abilities (Bird et al., 2005). This suggests that children with DS can successfully acquire two languages when consistently and intensively exposed to both.

While Bird et al. (2005) specifically notes student ability to develop a second language in contrast with typically developing peers, Gonzalez-Barerro and Nadig (2019) look at the ways in which bi/multilingualism impacts communication in children with ASD. They examined the

vocabulary and grammatical skills of monolingual and bilingual school-aged children with ASD. Gonzalez-Barerro and Nadig administered standardized vocabulary and morphology tests to monolingual and bilingual children with ASD without intellectual disability. The researchers found that bilingual children performed within the average monolingual range on a standardized receptive vocabulary test and slightly below the average range on a standardized morphological task. This research suggests that bilingualism does not hinder language development in children with ASD, and that bilingual children with ASD show similar language development patterns as typically developing bilingual children.

In one review of 22 studies to examine the impact of multilingualism on the language and communication skills of children with autism authors noted gaps in research that considers various facets of social language (Gilhuber et al, 2023). Authors noted that semantic skills, particularly vocabulary, were the most frequently assessed language dimension, while phonology and pragmatics were underreported. While the available research does not indicate that exposure to multiple languages adversely affects the communication skills of autistic children more information is required to continue our understanding of multilingualism in ASD (Gilhuber et al., 2023).

This research highlights the ways in which bilingual students with disabilities are able to adapt to bi/multilingualism. Given that EBSWD showcase the skills needed to adjust to new skills, we need to ensure that our school systems are ready to provide them the services they need to succeed in a wide range of language settings.

Limited School Resources

While research supports including all students in DL settings, it's essential to acknowledge the complex challenges that schools face in meeting the needs of this diverse

population. Limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and systemic barriers all contribute to the difficulties schools encounter in providing comprehensive support. Examining these limitations allows for a more nuanced understanding of the issue and can inform potential solutions to improve outcomes for EBSWD students.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in DL programs has highlighted a significant gap in teacher preparedness. Many educators feel ill-equipped to address the multifaceted needs of these learners, often resulting in students being placed in more restrictive special education settings (Jozwik et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2011). The reported feelings of professional inadequacy expressed by teachers stems from a lack of training and resources tailored to the unique challenges of EBSWD.

Jozwik et al. (2020) investigated the perceived competence of special education teachers in supporting emerging bilingual students. They found that bi/multilingual special education teachers reported feeling significantly more competent than their counterparts who held an ESL credential. This disparity in reported competency underscores the importance of linguistic and cultural fluency in effectively serving EBSWD. It also raises critical questions about the efficacy of current teacher training programs in preparing educators for the realities of diverse classrooms.

A case study examining the experiences of one bilingual teacher who supports EBSWD provides a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by bilingual educators (Delgado, 2008). The central teacher in the study described multiple examples of teachers having to choose between supporting student disabilities or language development, with many staff members treating EBSWD differently (Delgado, 2008). This sentiment reflects a systemic issue in which schools often compartmentalize these two areas, failing to recognize their

interconnectedness in the context of DL learners with disabilities. The study reveals how cultural nuances, individual abilities, and language development intersect to create a complex learning landscape for these students. It also highlights the difficulties teachers encounter in navigating the complexities of bilingual programs, which often lack a cohesive approach to addressing both language acquisition and special education needs. This lack of integration, combined with insufficient training, leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed and unprepared, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of DL programs and depriving students of the holistic support they require to thrive.

A shortage of qualified multilingual staff with expertise in special education limits the range of resources available for these students. A survey of school psychologists, who play a key role in identifying students with disabilities, revealed that 92% of school psychologists are monolingual English speakers (Goforth, 2021). The dominance of English only school psychologists plays a crucial role in accurate disability identification of multicultural and linguistically diverse students (Goforth, 2012). Further, there is a significant teacher shortage across the country with researchers noting a national need for bilingual teachers (Torre Gibney et al., 2021). There is little research specifically examining the number of bilingual special education teachers, but overall trends in teacher shortages suggest an inability to fully staff specialty areas. This is supported by recent data that revealed that in the 23-24 school year 70% of open positions in schools were for special education teachers, with bilingual teacher positions being among the hardest to fill (NCES, 2023). When schools cannot find qualified staff, students lack access to necessary services. The need for DL programs for students with disabilities further exacerbates the challenges of staffing shortages.

The issue of students in special education not receiving appropriate services becomes even more complex when we examine special education law within the context of DL programs. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, 2004) mandates that schools place students with disabilities in the “least restrictive environment” (LRE), ensuring access to general education peers and settings similar to those of non-disabled peers. However, the applicability of this law to students with disabilities in DL programs, where language adds another layer of complexity, remains unclear.

Ambiguity in federal programs regarding the identification and support of ELLs with disabilities often translates into inconsistent state-level decisions and guidance. Harris et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive review of state education departments, specifically seeking guidance on identifying ELL students with learning disabilities. Surprisingly, they found clear and specific guidance for this process in only four states. The lack of consistent direction at both federal and state levels creates significant challenges for educators and administrators in effectively identifying and supporting EBSWD. Soto-Boykin et al. (2022) further examined state policies regarding services for bilingual students with speech and language disabilities. Of the four states researched, they found only one had a policy specifically addressing these students (Soto-Boykin et al, 2022). This finding highlights the lack of guidance available to schools in supporting dually identified students.

The lack of adequate legal guidance directly corresponds to decision making in schools. Sullivan (2011) found that multilingual students with disabilities in general education programs are less likely to receive special education support in the LRE compared to their English-speaking peers. Conversely, Kangas (2014) found that staff are more likely to adhere to practices outlined in a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) within special education settings

due to the perceived legal significance of these plans. Although these studies present conflicting perspectives on program preferences, they both underscore the challenges that school districts face in meeting the unique needs of dually identified children. This highlights the need for further research and clearer guidance for how districts can improve services.

De Valenzuela et al. (2015) conducted an analysis to better understand the issue of equitable access for students with disabilities in bilingual school settings in four different schools across the world. While all research locations expressed a shared value of inclusion, their findings revealed a different reality. Specifically, children with disabilities were less likely to have equal access to bilingual spaces within the schools. Scheduling conflicts often forced parents to choose between ELL or special education services for their child, and when faced with this dilemma, they consistently prioritized special education. All four schools in the study exhibited this issue, citing staffing shortages, time constraints, and challenges supporting students with high-needs disabilities as the primary reasons for the discrepancy. De Valenzuela et al. (2015) further noted that all four schools placed the burden of decision-making regarding services onto the parents, rather than implementing systemic changes to adequately support dually identified children. This finding reinforces the notion that schools often prioritize compliance with legal mandates over ensuring equitable and comprehensive support for all students, especially those with intersecting identities.

Although more research is needed to fully understand this issue, these practices lead to significant disproportionality in special education services provided to multilingual students. The legal ambiguity surrounding the application of IDEA to students with disabilities in DL programs underscores the need for clearer guidelines and policies that explicitly address the

intersection of language learning and special education, ensuring that all students have access to appropriate services.

The lack of clear guidelines for DL programs at the state or federal level is increasingly concerning when considering the limited regulatory framework governing these programs. The absence of comprehensive guidance from state or federal authorities on critical aspects of program implementation is further complicated by the lack of a regulatory body to oversee DL programs in schools (US Department of Education, 2015). This lack of oversight is exacerbated by the fact that only seven states have established goals or statements pertaining to DL programs and only four have enacted legislation surrounding DL (US Department of Education, 2015). Moreover, the legislation in these four states solely mandates parental consent, failing to address the broader needs of DL programs. The regulatory void surrounding DL not only undermines the consistency and quality of DL programs nationwide, but also leaves schools and educators to grapple with the challenge of navigating a landscape without standardized guidelines, potentially hindering the effective implementation of these programs.

Researchers have suggested that DL programs can meet the needs of students with disabilities, but there is little research on how this happens in schools (Wright & Baker, 2017). This lack of research is concerning, given the existing systems that may lead to inequalities in these programs could have an even greater impact on students with disabilities. Without a clearer body of research supporting how programs should be organized, those in positions of power will struggle to provide adequate guidance to schools. DL programs have the potential to offer significant benefits to EBSWD. However, attention must be given to understand how school districts can best support students with disabilities in DL programs and to ensure that they have equitable access to the specialized services and resources they need to succeed. Moreover, the

absence of comprehensive studies examining the specific challenges and successes faced by students with disabilities in DL programs hinders the development of targeted interventions. Addressing this research gap is imperative to foster inclusive educational environments and dismantle potential barriers that could exacerbate disparities among students with diverse needs.

School and Family Disconnect

School districts with limited resources often prioritize providing services in a single language. As a result, some parents of bilingual students with disabilities have reported feeling pressured to speak English to their children at home to support their child's success in school-based interventions, even though they have concerns about this approach (Yu, 2013). Additionally, parents have observed instances where interventions to support their children were only provided in English at school, raising concerns about how these supports will be applied to the students' other languages. Yu's (2013) observations raise concerns about the potential for language loss and cultural alienation among these students. Furthermore, they raise questions about the true effectiveness of the interventions, as they may not transfer to other linguistic or cultural settings (Yu, 2013). An English-centric approach to interventions can place undue stress on bilingual families and reduce the cultural and linguistic richness that these students bring to the learning environment. This not only has implications for the preservation of students' heritage languages but also raises broader questions about the inclusivity and effectiveness of interventions and how they are implemented in ways that may inadvertently overlook the potential advantages of providing students with disabilities with access to quality DL programs.

When gathering insights from specialists, they further highlight concerns regarding providing services for EBSWD. Davis et al. (2024) interviewed speech and language therapists (SLTs) in the United Kingdom to understand their perspectives on working with autistic

bilingual children and their families. The study found that SLTs generally support bilingualism for autistic children and emphasize the importance of parents speaking their primary language with their child (Davis et al., 2024). However, SLTs reported that parents often express concerns about the potential negative impacts of bilingualism on their child's development. The authors identified several barriers in SLT's abilities to provide optimal support for these families, including a lack of cultural diversity within the field, limited resources and tools that are culturally and linguistically relevant, and a need for more access to training and research on autism and bilingualism (Davis et al., 2024). The study highlights the importance of addressing these barriers within education to ensure equitable access to essential services for children with disabilities.

When students do not receive the necessary special education services, they are often withdrawn from DL programs by their parents to seek the support they need elsewhere (Cobb, 2015; Cioè-Peña, 2020). Cobb (2015) notes that parents feeling forced to withdraw from programs is further supported by higher attrition rates in Canadian DL programs among students with learning disabilities. While Cobb (2015) drew conclusions from a case study, further research with more participants conducted by Cioè-Peña (2020) explores this issue. Cioè-Peña conducted a qualitative analysis of ten Latinx mothers navigating special education services for their emerging bilingual learners with disabilities in DL classrooms. The study found that mothers of these children often faced challenges related to their children's placement, perceived gatekeeping by educators, feelings of guilt about their children's skills, and maintained a strong desire to maintain their children's bilingualism and cultural connection. They also perceived their children receiving unequal educational experiences compared to white and/or non-disabled peers. Cioè-Peña's (2020) research emphasizes the importance of prioritizing a quality

experience for all students in DL classrooms. The findings underscore the need for equity-focused approaches throughout our education system. Addressing inequities in DL spaces can serve as a model for promoting inclusion and celebrating diversity across all school settings.

These studies reveal parent perspectives that highlight the ways that schools are failing to meet the needs of their children. While schools have significant room for improvement in their practices supporting EBSWD, numerous barriers hinder the provision of necessary services.

School-Wide Systems

Numerous potential barriers can create inequities in DL programs; however, strong school systems can proactively address these barriers and bridge the gap for diverse students through equitable policies, culturally responsive instruction, adequate staff training, and robust family engagement.

One example that highlights the importance of trained staff is showcased in Hamman-Ortiz's (2023) study of the development of student values in DL programs. The study found differences in how Latinx and non-Latinx students perceived bilingualism and their own bilingual experiences. Latinx students viewed bilingualism as necessary for future success, while non-Latinx students saw it as an enhancement. Non-Latinx students also viewed their bilingualism as exceptional, while Latinx students saw it as normal (Hamman-Ortiz, 2023). These differences in perceptions of the value of bilingualism reflect broader societal language ideologies, potentially perpetuated within the school environment. Hamman-Ortiz (2023) noted that this conflict can be challenging within a classroom space, but throughout the study the teacher's guidance turned cultural clashes into opportunities for learning and to challenge ideologies. This study notes that a well-trained teacher can ensure that DL classrooms support student growth.

Given the importance of adequate staff in DL programs, one study examined the ways in which a co-teaching model utilizing paraprofessionals could improve practices and ensure equal access to DL classrooms. Farrand and Deeg (2021) examined how paraprofessionals and other service providers can participate in co-teaching alongside a certified special education pre-Kindergarten teacher during DL instruction. The district assigned paraprofessionals as lead Spanish instructors when the lead teacher was not bilingual in Spanish and English to implement the DL program effectively. Findings indicated that the participants utilized multiple co-teaching models to collaborate and meet the needs of their students during English and Spanish instruction (Farrand & Deeg, 2021). Through co-teaching, all educators had opportunities to take lead and supporting roles in instruction. This study showcases one potential model for meeting the needs of a diverse, bilingual classroom. However, more research needs to be conducted to better understand how school-level systems can support equitable access to DL.

Advancing Research in DL

Despite the growing body of research on DL programs, our understanding of how these programs intersect with special education remains limited. This knowledge gap is particularly problematic given the potential for DL programs to provide unique benefits for students with and without disabilities, including enhanced language acquisition, improved academic achievement, and increased social-emotional development (Collier & Thomas, 2017). To fully realize the potential of DL programs for students with disabilities, we must prioritize research working to understand student, staff, and family experiences. By addressing key areas of research, we can work to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how to make DL programs truly equitable and accessible for all students, including those with disabilities. This will enable us to

harness the full potential of DL programs allowing educators to build systems that empower students with disabilities to achieve their academic, linguistic, and personal goals.

Present Study

This study delves into the practices and perspectives of school staff who support students navigating the intersection of special education and DL programs. The scarcity of research in this area creates a blind spot, hindering our understanding of how educators address the multifaceted needs of these diverse learners. This lack of knowledge and resources leaves administrators, teachers, and support staff on the frontlines ill-equipped to effectively serve these students. Through my study, I aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse about equitable learning environments for all students by highlighting practices identified by practitioners as useful for providing service for EBSWD.

Given the limited body of research, I plan to focus my study on school district-level systems that surround DL programs.

The following research questions will guide my study:

- R1. What are the school district policies, resources, and programs that ensure adequate support for students with disabilities in DL programs?
 - a. What are the successes associated with district policies, resources, and programs while providing services for EBSWD in dual language and special education classrooms?
 - b. What are the challenges associated with district policies, resources, and programs when providing services for EBSWD in dual language and special education classrooms?

- c. How do district level systems differentiate between special education and language services for EBSWD?
- d. What district level processes ensure adequate support for students with disabilities in DL classrooms?

This dissertation seeks to uncover ways in which district systems, programs, and resources impact the experiences of educators and administrators in designing and implementing DL programs that effectively serve EBSWD. By examining both promising practices and persistent challenges within these programs, I hope to identify specific district-level policies that either create barriers to equitable access or lead to creative solutions for addressing student needs. Ultimately, this research intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of how DL programs can be intentionally designed and implemented to ensure that EBSWD receive the appropriate support and resources needed to thrive academically and linguistically. I hope that the findings of this study will provide valuable insights for district leaders, educators, and policymakers committed to creating truly inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Research Design Overview

Given the limited research body surrounding the topic of students with disabilities being served in dual language classrooms, I adopted an exploratory-descriptive qualitative (EDQ) methodology. By applying Sandelowski's (2000) approach, I created a detailed description of school phenomena, to ensure my research stays firmly grounded in the specific research questions. The EDQ methodology centered my research on a naturalistic inquiry, which helped me to gain insight into individual perspectives within the school community. Further, this methodology prioritized practical exploration over established theory, which was valuable for this study due to the scarcity of existing research on this topic. Ultimately, the EDQ methodological framework was used to generate insights that could inform future research and educational practices.

Researcher Positionality

My personal and professional experiences have inevitably influenced this study. I identify as a White female and grew up among a family of educators in a community with a large Latinx population. Although I have had opportunities to learn Spanish throughout my life, I am a long way from mastering the language. I introduce myself in Spanish and engage in brief conversations with community members, but I rarely use the language in my personal or professional life. I do not identify as bilingual and may lack a full understanding of the lived experiences of bilingual and bicultural individuals. Being a white, English-speaking researcher may influence how participants interact with me and what they choose to share. I did not participate in a dual language (DL) program during my own schooling, so my language

experiences differ significantly from those explored in this study. These factors—my language background, my consistent use of English during study procedures, and how others perceive my identity—may shape the nature of my conversations with educators and influence how I interpret and analyze the data.

Professionally, my background lies in mental health, school psychology, and special program administration in rural schools. The majority of my work in schools has been with students outside of DL programs, providing a wide range of services to students with disabilities in English language majority settings. When engaging with individuals working within the DL system, gaps in perspective may arise due to differences between my personal and professional experiences and the focus of the study.

My experiences working in rural schools have shaped my perspective on the complexities surrounding bilingual education. Specifically, serving multilingual families has provided me with invaluable insights that have shaped my approach to this study. Similarly, my experiences in the special education world have highlighted the need for school staff to support and advocate for the needs of students. Acknowledging these personal experiences and their potential influence is an important step in reducing bias, increasing transparency, and supporting a more nuanced analysis of qualitative data.

As an educator working in the state where my study has been set, I acknowledge potential overlaps between my personal and professional life and participants. This includes the possibility of existing personal or professional relationships with school personnel. In recruiting participants for my study, I worked to find people with whom I do not have a pre-existing professional or personal relationship. In the event that a participant and I had an existing relationship, I took additional care to reduce its impact on the study and have considered the implications of this in

data analysis. For instance, I de-identified the sources of data prior to conducting my analyses, replacing names with codes to help obscure identities. While I took precautions when interpreting data where preexisting relationships were present, I acknowledge that such relationships may have influenced the study's findings.

Setting

I conducted my study in Oregon, where approximately 10.9% of the K–12 student population is identified as ELL (ODE, 2024b). To select research sites, I utilized data from the Oregon Department of Education (2024b) to identify districts with the highest proportions of ELL students. I included only districts that had operated a DL program for at least two years. Based on these criteria, I successfully established contact with two districts that met study requirements.

District 1 is a small, rural school district in Oregon. It serves under 2,000 students with the majority identifying as Latinx (72%), followed by White (24%) and other racial/ethnic groups (4%). The district has a high proportion of English Language Learners (ELLs), making up 55% of the student body. Additionally, 12% of students receive special education services, and 2% are identified as students who are EBSWD. There is a notable racial/ethnic disparity between the student population and school staff. While the student body is predominantly Latinx, 77% of staff members identify as White, 20% as Latinx, and 3% as other racial/ethnic groups. District 1 offers a Spanish DL program that follows a two-way model, with two DL classrooms and two English-only classrooms at each grade level from kindergarten through fifth grade. Bilingual teachers provide instruction in both Spanish and English in the DL classrooms. Each K–5 classroom includes a paraprofessional teaching assistant, and the district assigns additional

support as needed for students receiving special education services. DL classrooms are assigned paraprofessionals who are bilingual in Spanish and English.

District 2 is also a small, rural district in Oregon. District 2 enrolls under 2,000 students and has four school buildings. Sixty one percent of the students are Latinx; White students make up 36% of the student body, and 3% belong to other racial/ethnic groups. Twenty three percent of the students in District 2 are ELL students, and 16% of the students receive special education services, including 4% classified as EBSWD. Similar to District 1, District 2 has a predominantly White staff (85%), despite serving a majority Latinx student population. Only 12% of staff identify as Latinx, with 3% belonging to other racial/ethnic groups. District 2 offers a Spanish DL program that follows a two-way model, with two DL classrooms per grade level from kindergarten through sixth grade. At each grade level, one teacher provides instruction in Spanish, and students spend half the day in that classroom before switching to an English-speaking teacher for the remainder of the day. In addition to the DL program, each grade level includes two English-only classrooms. The district assigns paraprofessionals to support students receiving special education services, and bilingual staff members provide targeted assistance to English learners and EBSWD.

Participants

To gather a range of diverse perspectives within the school community, I engaged with many stakeholders in the realm of bilingual special education. Target participants included special education directors, DL directors, DL classroom teachers, and special education teachers. I gathered demographic information about each of my participants, as well as their highest level of education, experience in their role, and language proficiencies.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

A purposeful sampling was utilized to select participants directly knowledgeable about the topic under investigation. This method targeted information-rich cases, allowing the qualitative inquiry to address the complexities of the issue (Sandelowski, 2000). As a common practice in EDQ analyses, purposeful sampling aligns with the objectives of this study (Sefick & Bradway, 2017).

After identifying districts who meet the inclusion criteria, I coordinated with districts to recruit administrators and teachers who work specifically with EBSWD. These individuals were also recruited following a purposeful sampling technique, to only involve individuals who have a direct knowledge of the topic area. I recruited via email with multiple email attempts throughout the study window. Participants were informed that their engagement in the study was voluntary and unpaid.

Participant Demographics

In all, I recruited eight participants from Districts 1 and 2. Four were district-level administrators overseeing special education or ELL/DL programs across the two districts and the other four participants were k-5 teachers from the same district. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 51, with an average age of 38. They had an average of 13 years of experience in education, ranging from 4 to 25 years. Sixty-three percent identified as White or Caucasian, while 37% identified as Latinx or Hispanic. Half of the participants were bilingual in English and Spanish, while the other half were monolingual English speakers. The participants who were bilingual and Latinx were DL teachers or coordinated the ELL/DL programs, none of the special education participants were bilingual and all identified as White. One participant was male, with the remaining seven identifying as female.

Data Collection

After receiving University of Oregon's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, recruitment and data collection began in the fall of 2024.

Data Collection Procedures

Starting in late 2024, I collected data in four distinct phases. During the first phase, seven districts were identified as potential research partners based on inclusion criterion. After making successful contact with two districts, I worked with superintendents or other identified school staff to obtain district-level research participation agreements. As mentioned above (see Setting), once districts agreed to participate in the study, I gathered demographic data utilizing information from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and district staff to complete a district demographic profile (Appendix A). While I obtained this profile utilizing ODE data, I also coordinated with district staff to gather and confirm district information; this was done via a google document that I shared with staff to edit. Following the completion of the demographic profile, I coordinated with superintendents, or other identified staff, to identify participants for the next stages of the study. This initial phase supported the identification and recruitment districts and provided a deeper understanding of the demographics in participating districts.

The second phase of data collection focused on individual interviews with DL and special education program directors. By interviewing these key decision-makers, I aimed to gather valuable insights into the practices and procedures governing these programs. I used interviews as my primary means of data collection in phase two to gain an understanding into the larger picture of district procedures, current and previous (Merriam, 2009). Further, interviews allowed for a clear description of individual perspectives of the issue at hand. Interviewing administrators

provided a foundation for further data collection in phase three. All interviews were conducted in English.

I started the third phase of data collection by completing one-hour, semi-structured interviews conducted with each special education director and DL director in the participating districts. Depending on district resources, the number of interviews varied. To accommodate participant schedules, participants had the option to hold these interviews virtually via Google Meets or in person. For a rich data gathering process, I developed a set of five semi-structured interview questions, drawing on established principles outlined by Merriam (2009). To ensure these questions adhered to best practices in qualitative research methodology, I utilized a review from experts in the field. Furthermore, I refined the questions through a pilot session utilizing a think aloud protocol with an individual experienced in special education and ELL services in schools (Patton, 2014). Pilot testing steps helped mitigate potential threats to the study's validity. The interview protocol (see Appendix B) was developed following Creswell's (2016) methodology.

I gathered focus group data in the fourth phase of data collection to gather a wider range of perspectives than interviewing alone would allow (Patton, 2014). Further, I hoped that the interaction between participants would provide greater depth and highlight potential complexities of the issue at hand. In this data collection phase, I conducted focus groups with special education teachers and DL classroom teachers. Focus groups followed a focus group interview protocol outlined by Patton (2014) to ensure consistency and comparability. Focus groups included four individuals in each session with two separate sessions provided to accommodate scheduling. To accommodate participants and optimize online participation, I held these focus groups on Google Meets, aiming for a duration of one hour each. For the focus groups, I utilized

a set of five semi-structured group questions based on a pilot-tested protocol (see Appendix C). This pilot testing, which mirrored the phase three approach, ensured that the questions were well-phrased and enhanced the validity of the entire protocol (Patton, 2014).

In the fifth and final stage of data collection, I conducted follow-up interviews with individuals as needed. These interviews allowed me to follow up on earlier discussions and obtain richer data from key participants. Additionally, I used follow-up interviews to clarify points discussed in earlier interviews and focus groups. This step involved member checking (see description in Data Analytic Strategies below), ensuring accurate information gathering. This five-faceted approach to data collection allowed for diverse perspectives and rich sources of data.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was completed by interview and focus group participants. The procedure for obtaining consent within each group was as follows. Interview participants were sent the informed consent form via email prior to the interview to be returned before the start of research procedures. Interview participants received a copy of the signed form. Focus group participants were sent the informed consent form via email on an individual basis. I collected the forms via email prior to the focus group. Focus group participants were sent a copy of their form for their own record keeping. This consent process was completed at the time of follow-up interviews when they occurred. For additional information, see informed consent forms in Appendix A.

Recording and Transforming of Data

I employed two recording methods during interviews and focus groups to capture participant insights comprehensively. All sessions were recorded using Otter AI to develop real-time transcripts. A phone recording device was utilized as a backup in case the recording system

did not work. Upon completion of recordings, I cross-referenced the transcript with the audio recordings to verify the accuracy of the captured information, this ensured the quality and reliability of my data. Transcripts and recordings were deidentified and saved to a password protected file to ensure confidentiality. Once an accurate transcription was obtained, I uploaded transcripts to Dedoose and began the analysis process.

Data Analytic Strategies

I analyzed interview and focus group data using thematic analysis. This chosen approach aligned well with the exploratory nature of my research, allowing me to identify and interpret recurring themes within the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For maximum accuracy, I leveraged both the audio recordings and transcribed text during the initial coding phase. This cross-referencing process laid a solid foundation for coding while fostering a deeper understanding and connection to the data (Creswell, 2016). Following transcript finalization, I segmented the interviews to identify key ideas and concepts (Creswell, 2016). Building upon these segments, I then searched for and organized emergent themes through an iterative process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Once themes were identified, I engaged in three rounds of coding, involving multiple instances of reading, coding, and refining the codes. In between rounds of coding, I engaged in member checking where I reviewed identified themes with participants to ensure that the themes and patterns captured the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2016). I conducted two member checking sessions after the first two rounds of coding, with the final session taking place before my final rounds of coding. Member checking sessions lasted about one hour each and were held in a focus group setting, though participants had the option to meet with me on an individual basis. Before the final round of coding,

I also utilized a second graduate student who reviewed my interview and focus group transcripts to verify the accuracy of my themes. The graduate student was trained by me with a practice transcript before coding begins. We reached consensus on the codes, further increasing the credibility of my analyses.

This iterative process ensured comprehensive analysis and refined the identified themes. Finally, I reviewed and consolidated themes with fewer than three instances, ensuring their relevance and significance to the overall research findings.

Methodological Integrity

To increase the trustworthiness of my qualitative research, I implemented strategies suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including triangulation of data. I utilized multiple sources, including interviews, focus groups, and other relevant documents, for a richer understanding of experiences. Additionally, I included a second graduate student in the coding process to leverage diverse perspectives and further enhance data credibility. I also used member checking to ensure the data reflected participants' actual experiences to increase credibility. I shared key points summarized from interviews with participants for their feedback on accuracy and completeness.

Throughout the methodological process, I included other opportunities to ensure validity of data collected. For example, all interview protocols were reviewed by an expert in qualitative research and pilot tested using a think aloud protocol (Patton, 2014). Further, to strengthen confirmability and generalizability, I documented and reported my methodology and procedures within the specific population. This transparency may allow future researchers to replicate my study or compare findings with theirs, contributing to the overall knowledge base.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings from the current study, which employed an exploratory-descriptive qualitative approach. Over a four-month period, I conducted two interviews, one focus group, and three sessions of member checking with eight participants from two different school districts. Through these interviews and focus groups, I sought to identify themes and patterns in educator experiences related to supporting students with special needs in DL programs.

Administrator interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes, and participants chose school-based locations to meet. I held two administrator interviews in the two districts. I gave the administrators the option of holding individual interviews, but they preferred to conduct the interview sessions together; both interviews were held with one special education director and one ELL/DL director present. The administrators preferred the joint sessions, noting concerns with time constraints and staff availability.

After conducting the interviews in pairs, I engaged in two rounds of member checking. Participants had the choice to either conduct member checks with me in an individual setting, or with the group of all administrators. All four chose to engage with other administrators in a discussion to support their own professional learning and to allow for deeper discussion as a group. Each round of member checking lasted about an hour.

I held one focus group with the participating teachers via zoom with four teachers from the same district. Following the teacher focus group, I held one round of member checks with the teachers. The member checks for the teachers included two of the four original participants, who

participated in a forty-five-minute member check session. While all four were invited to join, only two were available within the time window selected.

Administrator Interviews

To provide a clear picture of the conversations between myself and participants, narrative information for the interview and member checking is provided below. While I conducted two interviews, I provide one narrative to maintain confidentiality for participants. In addition, quotations from administrators were edited to prevent sharing sensitive information.

I began each conversation with the administrators by discussing the format of their DL programs. As we explored program structures, both groups shared that they used a 50/50 Spanish-English model, and families opt into the DL classrooms by completing an application form. While student applications are selected using a lottery system, both districts give preference to students who are monolingual Spanish speaking and who have older siblings who are already in the DL program. Their programs are around the same age; the oldest student participant is in 6th grade in one district and 5th in the other, and over the length of the program, they have had to adapt their practices to help build equitable classrooms.

Building Equitable Classrooms

The administrators shared that their approach to building equitable practices has evolved over time. They discussed that at the start of the program, they did not include as many children with disabilities due to fears about community buy-in for DL programs if positive outcomes weren't achieved quickly. For this reason, both districts prioritized including students with strong academic foundations in their first DL cohorts. One administrator shared,

So I would say that one of the things that I take blame on [...] is that when we first started dual language, district wide, community wide, we weren't sure we could sell it. We

weren't sure families and our community would get on board. So that very first year, [...] we only invited kids [...] who had some strong academic skills coming into kindergarten, and we really shot ourselves in the foot, and it quickly looked like haves and have-nots. And I was really bummed by that, I really thought I was trying to do the best to build the strong program. [...] And then those kids started working their way up through the grades, and it was like the cream of the crop, the primo class.

Administrators acknowledged making mistakes while building the program. They noted that student placement in DL classrooms remains highly visible and presents ongoing challenges since they cannot go back and adjust prior cohorts. Both administrator pairs highlighted a need for conscious effort to build more equitable cohorts.

Administrators from one district explained that in their effort to create more inclusive DL classrooms, they had to shift both their mindset and priorities. To support this shift, they ensured that the special education director actively participated in the meetings where the elementary team assembled kindergarten classrooms. By involving the special education director in these discussions, the administrators hoped to strengthen collaboration between general and special education teams while also ensuring that a knowledgeable advocate for students with disabilities contributed to the placement process and promoted inclusion. While discussing this, one of the special education directors noted the importance of having someone present who knows about the needs of students with disabilities. They said, “taking a look at the different disabilities that they're coming in on as well. As you may or may not know, not every student with a disability has the same number of needs, and [we have some] complicated cases.” Participants from both districts highlighted the ways in which collaboration between departments, and having staff

trained in both language development and special education, were important aspects of navigating DL programs for children with disabilities.

Changing Student Populations. Administrators also discussed navigating changes in student populations. Administrators from one district shared that they are seeing a big change in how many newcomer, monolingual Spanish-speaking students are arriving in the community. In the last year, the number of monolingual Spanish-speaking students doubled. Because both districts prioritize placing monolingual newcomer students in DL classrooms over other educational spaces, shifts in the number of newcomer students leads to uncertainty around the number of students they include in their kindergarten cohort.

In small school districts where class sizes are smaller to begin with, the constraints of having only two DL classes to move students between becomes even more challenging. One administrator shared that, “[as] that class was moving on, at least up to third grade together [without being able to shift student schedules around] there got to be some social issues.” District administrators felt that each cohort group is a new opportunity to try to build more equitable classes with mistakes resulting in long-term difficulties.

Feelings of Uncertainty in Developing DL Cohorts. During member checking, when discussing what was most important to emphasize from earlier interviews, the administrators shared that an important theme is the balancing act at play within DL programs. One said, “one thing that I don’t know if is captured is the balancing act we have to deal with.” The administrators discussed the challenge of keeping class sizes equitable, which is challenging due to increases in the number of newcomer students enrolling in both districts. Administrators from both districts shared that they have seen more students moving into the district from other countries in the past year. Administrators discussed that changes in our political climate may

lead that number to shift dramatically again. They are worried about class sizes being able to stay steady so that they can leverage the number of students who are able to participate in DL. One administrator shared that, “we live in an uncertain program,” and felt that the ways in which they are having to navigate building a strong DL cohort continues to be an obstacle.

Family Engagement

Administrators shared that many parents don’t understand how learning a new language can impact their child’s academic progress, particularly in areas like achievement and reading development. These challenges often stem from a lack of awareness about the complexities involved in bilingual education; parents may not always recognize how acquiring proficiency in a second language can initially slow down certain academic skills before those skills improve. Educating parents about the ways in which their children are learning the language and growing academic skills was a big need, to dissuade parent worry if their child isn’t making progress they hope to see. One administrator said,

I think sometimes parents get frustrated, are a little unaware, or don't fully understand the process of it. And so if kids aren't succeeding at a rate in which or growing at a rate that they think that they should be [...] one of the first things that they say is, well, maybe dual language is too much work. It's, yeah, too difficult for them, and that's one of the things that they want to do first, is to try to pull them out, rather than understanding that it is a process for kids, even without a disability, it is difficult and hard, you know, for some of them.

The administrators also shared that there is a disconnect with families feeling like their kids should be learning their second language much faster. One administrator shared, “I asked [a family], early on, what do you think? How's it going? And parents would be like, Well, they

doesn't ever use [Spanish]. And then just that educating awareness, like, why would she use Spanish in your home when you guys only speak English.” Administrators shared that families from various language backgrounds expressed this feeling. They discussed that parents sent their kids to DL wanting them to quickly learn a second language and struggled when the reality of DL looked different for their child.

Administrators in both interviews acknowledged the need for clearer communication and more targeted support to help parents navigate these challenges and better understand their child's progress in the DL setting. One administrator talked about how they have worked to train staff on the benefits of DL programming, and acknowledge more work is needed to support educating parents and community stakeholders.

Student Behaviors

Navigating student behaviors has also been a challenge since transitioning back to school after the Covid-19 shutdown. There are more kids coming to schools with disabilities, and many more with autism than they have had in the past. Administrators felt that in recent years they are seeing more cases with more complex behavioral needs. While this is separate from the DL program, they felt that sometimes having multiple language settings made identifying triggers and efforts to prevent challenging behaviors more complicated. One administrator shared a story about a student who experiences autism in their district and speaks English and Spanish in the home. At school, this student was struggling behaviorally in spaces which were not bilingual. They found out that the student did not understand that not all adults are bilingual, so his teacher said to him,

I would love to speak with you in Spanish, but I don't have that skill. I want to but I can't do it, so if you could help me out and speak in English, you know what I mean? And so,

and then I think that that kind of the wheels turning, because even though they spoke both languages at home, I don't know if they understood that not every person speaks Spanish. After that conversation, they stopped having meltdowns and is making amazing progress in their academics and language learning.

Administrators shared that for some students, switching between bilingual and monolingual school settings can be challenging.

Behaviors as a Piece of the Puzzle. When discussing student behavior, administrators emphasized that the increase in behavioral challenges is not limited to special education settings but is evident across a wide range of students following the pandemic. They noted that both the frequency and nature of these behaviors have shifted significantly over the past five to six years. In response, administrators have implemented additional supports for all students to help alleviate pressure on the special education system and reduce behavior referrals. When asked whether these behavioral changes play a significant role in their leadership experiences within DL programs, they acknowledged that while not a top concern, it remains an important piece of the puzzle. They viewed these shifts in student behavior as part of the broader complexities of DL programs, which require the coordination of multiple school systems and initiatives. Our discussion also explored how these behavioral changes may reflect a larger sense of uncertainty and transition within DL programs.

Time Constraints

One administrator shared concerns for teachers who support emerging bilingual students, feeling like they don't have enough time to build student language proficiencies in the way that they would like. They said, "the biggest issue is we don't feel like we have enough time to really build the Spanish proficiency of the kids, and we need more time in Spanish if we really want to

do a good job.” Then, when you add in the special education supports students need things become even more challenging. Administrators were worried about fitting in special education supports while also providing the same level of quality instruction in core academics. One shared,

Well there are always time constraints [...] All kids have the same day length. They’re trying to learn things in English and in Spanish and for kids to get their specially designed instruction, it adds a whole other layer. Especially kids who have more impacted disabilities, they need to get pulled to get their occupational therapy, their physical therapy, their toileting routines, you know, they need to work on other skills, and we really have to pick and choose, like, what are they being pulled from when dual language is already short on time.

SPED Students Particularly Impacted by Limited Time. During later discussions, participants felt that while time was an issue in all school settings, DL spaces provide a particular challenge for students with disabilities. This discussion led one administrator to share, with “all of the logistics of dual language, and who gets lost in this is probably our students with the most needs, our special education students.” The admin felt that they were having to navigate organizing and shifting their program to meet student needs. One administrator shared that,

In an IEP I had yesterday, a student who is in dual language and is special ed, and he is struggling. He goes into this class that is only English, our special education teacher provides SDI in English. It is a lot of remedial stuff, we write the IEP and we only have the English reading state standards, we aren’t able to get to what would be needed for Spanish. So there is that roadblock too. [...] Then, we want to give this student the extra

support, but we aren't equipped to give that SDI in Spanish. The parents were asking, and it was a hard conversation to have.

Although administrators felt that they are doing what they can for their students, there are still things they can't provide. While they may approach issues between DL and non-DL spaces in a similar manner, in DL they more often feel like there is a gap in what needs are met.

Available Resources

One administrator shared that funding for DL programs is a huge concern in their district. They shared that when it comes to getting curriculum or even ordering books for DL classrooms, they need to be very careful about how they spend the money they have. Administrators talked about how there is so little guidance from state and federal entities, they have had to figure things out as they go. While individuals in both districts shared that they attend state-level meetings for DL programs to connect, they feel like it is hard to compare their districts to others that are bigger and/or have had programs for much longer. They have struggled to find model districts to emulate and wished that they could get expert guidance for their program. One administrator shared,

I would have liked to, if money wasn't an option, book in some kind of consultation firm or somebody like that knows dual language education, somebody who would be my sound board, and it felt like they were helping us drive that plane instead of me. When things don't work, I have to just fall into that hole by myself.

Overall, the administrators felt that they were building the program with little outside help and guidance. The lack of resources and direct comparisons made it harder to navigate the complexities of DL and made it feel like they were the only ones responsible for the failures that occurred.

Prioritizing DL Amid Shifts in Resources. In our later conversations, administrators further discussed the ways in which funding is a concern. Administrators shared that DL is expensive to run and because it is not required, and it needs a lot of community and staff buy-in to keep it going. One admin shared that,

The school districts really have to be invested in the program and really wanted to succeed, because it's super expensive to run a dual language program [...] You have double curriculum costs, because you're buying all the language arts stuff in English and in Spanish. You know, you have to make sure that you have paras that are bilingual. And so sometimes you have to create extra stipends, you know, to attract those types of staff. And you know, it doesn't fit nice and neat within an English only school. And so the district really has to be, like I said, committed to making sure that we have the resources, we have, the people, we have all of the little things, and it gets really expensive, so I'll be curious to see, I mean, especially going forward, you know, our school district is cutting a lot of money, and it's going to be something that our district and the community really has to prioritize going forward, because it is hard, and so you're working, you know, going uphill. It's like an uphill battle.

Administrators were concerned about the next few years as school districts, especially smaller ones, start to make cuts. They shared that without the bilingual staff, funding, and community buy-in DL programs will not succeed. There are many barriers with supporting EBSWD in DL classrooms, but administrators felt that the barriers connected to staffing, funding, and community support were a central theme.

Academic Intervention Systems

An individual from one district shared that they utilize teachers trained in reading development and intervention in Spanish to help provide academic interventions to students.

They're ELD teachers who are bilingual, who have a background in literacy and can support literacy in Spanish and know that Spanish literacy skills look a little different than English. So we're not just doing English a la Spanish, right. We really are going back to those foundational Spanish skills and making sure we're teaching all of it.

Having staff who can provide bilingual intervention for math and reading is critical, and when conducting interventions, both districts do their best to provide academic interventions in Spanish and English, with a priority for the student's native language. Then, as they monitor concerns, they compare their growth to other students in the DL program. The administrators shared that having comparison data was important to navigating the needs of students in DL classes. One said that,

Having a foundation of lots of data from lots of different sources, and school staff members that are bilingual and know the kids. Just having all of that information helps, helps support what the students are needing, wherever they're at.

Creative solutions to build intervention programs that appropriately serve student needs are important.

The administrators shared that one key part of developing strong intervention programs is having curricular resources for teachers. As they adjust curriculum in key subjects each year, they note that maintaining resources in English and Spanish for each grade level can be much more expensive. One administrator shared that "it costs a lot more to do dual language too... we're buying materials for all the kids in English, and we're buying it all the kids in Spanish."

While both districts were already supporting bilingual curriculum on a smaller level, the size of the DL program requires more money to get the bilingual materials to more kids. Cost is a concern and it is challenging for staff to adjust and support academic intervention programs and policies. One of the administrators discussed their efforts to navigate intervention programs, “we're trying to mold like fit all the plans together, because we have our reading literacy plan, our language arts curriculum steps, and then we have dual language and so sometimes it's hard to see how they all fit together.”

An administrator from one district emphasized the importance of collaboration across departments to support students effectively. They explained how they aim to stay involved in as many student cases as possible to help find ways they can improve practices for the specific programs they lead. This administrator shared,

One thing I try to do is stay involved with our sped kids that are [in DL] and I go to a lot of their meetings and try to stay on top of what's going on with them and what their needs are, what their individual plans are focusing on.

This led one administrator to note the importance of serving every student as “ours.” They explained that sometimes labeling students can lead to a mentality of passing them along rather than taking ownership of their success. Administrators felt that by prioritizing this as school leaders helped them to make sure that teachers didn't put kids into boxes. When asking about how they support their staff in differentiating between programs, one participant shared,

I'm hoping that they don't, because they're not just that. They're all our kids. [...] we're not, hopefully not, looking at them as a separate set of kids. It's just these are all our kids, and what supports do they need? Because every kid, I mean, there's lots of kids who are not identified as, you know, special ed, but they do have, they do have needs.

The administrators emphasized that promoting inclusion benefits all students, not just those in special education. They felt that collaboration is important within school buildings, programs, and departments. Administrators in one district shared that they hold quarterly meetings where DL teachers work together, discuss student cases, and refine their teaching strategies. While special education teachers do not attend these meetings, they regularly collaborate with DL teachers on individual student cases. Administrators stressed that providing regular opportunities for staff to collaborate allows them to work as a unified team to support more students effectively, which in turn reinforces the importance of meeting the needs of all learners.

Finding and Retaining Bilingual Staff

Administrators from both school districts felt that the need for staff with expertise in special education and DL classrooms is a huge challenge. Neither district currently employs bilingual special education personnel, including special education teachers, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, or other support staff. The shortage of bilingual special education staff has required both districts to rethink their approach to staffing.

Administrators from one district shared that they assign a paraprofessional to every classroom to support instruction, they utilize special education paraprofessionals to provide additional assistance to students who require extra support. The administrators felt that this way of utilizing paraprofessionals can lead to complications when it comes to hiring and building a schedule, one administrator shared that,

The paras that are working with [EBSWD] need to be bilingual, like fully bilingual. And so not only do we have paras in each of the classrooms, but the sped paras then also need to be bilingual for them to be able to support students in bilingual classrooms.

The administrators felt that the number of bilingual staff they needed to support DL is a barrier to providing the support kids need. Administrators shared that they use support staff to help bridge gaps in the number of bilingual staff available, but finding enough paraprofessionals is not always possible. Staffing solutions which may have helped support students in DL classrooms were harder to hire for and led to the district having to prioritize special education minutes from bilingual paraprofessionals over supporting adding Spanish speaking paraprofessionals to DL classrooms. One shared, “I want[ed] a bilingual para that was just tied to the dual language classrooms, and we can barely even fill our sped required minutes [with the paras we have], so it never came to fruition.”

All administrators expressed concerns about staffing and hiring to ensure that the supports required are in place as the DL programs expand to include new grade levels. When they do find bilingual teachers and paraprofessionals, they then need an open position to be able to hire them. One administrator shared,

And or will there even be a hole to fill. [...] I was just having this conversation with the dual language staff at the [the middle school], the math teacher said, you know, I'm really nervous about teaching seventh grade math, I'm happy in sixth grade math and to go up with that group again [with a higher math expectation is a worry]. And I said, well, I'm, I'm kind of hoping we'll have a spot come open, because I do know of a somebody who's interested. But right now we're [fully staffed in math at this building].

Administrators felt that they have been lucky in having the right positions open at the right time, but they worry about that continuing as students get older. Each year, both districts plan to expand the program to include an additional grade level. This ongoing growth requires them to continuously adapt and refine the program to meet the needs of a new group of students and a

different academic setting. They must plan for staffing, curriculum adjustments, and instructional strategies to ensure a smooth transition and maintain program effectiveness. While this is a worry for both districts, administrators remain hopeful and passionate about finding staff to fill the needs of the district. One administrator said,

However, I'm hopeful, because when we [...] started this program six years ago, we had, I think, three bilingual teachers. And so, it was an act of faith. We took a leap of faith. And people say, oh, what are you going to do next year? Well, we'll see. And by golly, here, six years later, we have 12 bilingual teachers that are teaching in dual language.

As they continue to grow the program, administrators felt the need to get creative to recruit the staff they need. However, administrators shared a feeling that having a DL program is attractive for some candidates and can lead to more bilingual staff applying for positions. One administrator shared that,

I've been on the hiring team and like, trying to recruit [staff] that are bilingual. I went to my daughter's [college] graduation, and I was handing out business cards, like, you're bilingual and you're a teacher, like, come work for [us]! You know what I mean? Like just trying to get people to come and apply. And on the flip side is, we have had some people apply because they want to do dual, they want to teach dual language, and that was very attractive to them.

The administrators also discussed programs in the district that work to recruit and retain bilingual staff. For example, in one district there is a stipend for being a bilingual staff member and a stipend for teaching in DL. They shared that by recognizing these programs they see teachers relocating to their district to get higher pay. The administrators also talked about how

when they do have bilingual teachers who are not teaching in the DL program, they still encourage them to incorporate Spanish into their teaching. One administrator shared,

I think, also, like at the high school right now [...] we have two science teachers are, actually, Spanish is their primary language, they are native and so they are teaching [in Spanish], if you go sit in their classrooms, it is 75% in Spanish, and it's just a way to support and embracing that as a whole district, we are trying to become a more bilingual district as a whole. And so, whenever those opportunities present themselves and we have teachers to do it, then we're gonna embrace that. Yes, teach it. Teach science in Spanish. Teach whatever content it is in Spanish.

The administrators felt that it was important to embrace a “bilingual culture” across the district to support growing DL classrooms.

They also shared that their district provides language learning opportunities for all staff. One district pays for the Rosetta Stone program for all staff. If staff then put a certain number of hours into language learning each year, they will pay for them to attend an immersion language school in a Spanish-speaking country over the summer. Administrators said that it is helpful when teachers do this because not only does it build their language skills to support their students, but “they have a bit more empathy,” for students who do not speak English or struggle to learn.

“Grow Your Own” Program. Administrators from both districts discussed using “Grow Your Own” (GYO) programs which provide opportunities for current staff members to get the training needed to become teachers. Administrators in one district shared that having a GYO program was essential to support their efforts to increase bilingual staff, “seven out of our twelve dual language teachers attended our elementary school as English learners.” Administrators

shared that their district has opportunities while students are in high school to take college level education classes which includes an internship at the elementary school as part of a program for students to get their associate's degree. Then there are partnerships with local colleges to support students in getting their degrees and student teaching in the district. The administrators shared that there are also opportunities for staff to get tuition reimbursement while working that can help make it more possible for classified staff to get their teaching credential. One of the administrators shared that they saw the GYO program as bigger than just the steps to credentialing a teacher. They shared that,

[The high school] has always had his Spanish for natives' classes. We now have it in the middle school. We now have, every year, a certain number of kids who test for the Seal of Biliteracy, and I think about 20 kids that passed it last year. Every year it's been a few more. So that raises the importance of Spanish and the importance of maintaining Spanish. So, it's not like, we've outlined some steps for [our students to] become a teacher. In fact, most of these kids, if you ask them, they want to become one they are like nah, forget that. Yeah, but we're providing opportunities to lay the groundwork. In case that's what they choose to do.

This administrator felt that in getting teachers who were bilingual, they had to work to invest in language development for students. They see growing their DL program and encouraging bilingualism in their school as improving their opportunities to grow bilingual staff.

Administrators emphasized the importance of Spanish language development opportunities at every grade level and expanding beyond the school day into summer school, after school, and classes for parents and community members.

Other administrators did not share as much enthusiasm for their GYO program. They shared that it helps with some areas, but it doesn't always work to help find new bilingual staff. When discussing two new special education teachers who recently transitioned from being paraprofessionals through their tuition reimbursement program, one administrator shared that "we did have two SPED staff members who did [GYO], but they are both English-only speaking." They shared that while GYO helped to find teaching staff, it hasn't supported them in finding more bilingual staff. The administrators shared that they had more paraprofessional bilingual staff at the elementary level, but they aren't taking advantage of tuition reimbursement. Without staff members taking these opportunities, it makes it more challenging to support students and grow new teachers who are interested and capable of becoming teachers.

Supporting DL Staff. Administrators shared that having the time and resources to train staff is a barrier for them as district leaders. One school district shared that they are using a dual language instructional coach to help navigate the unique needs of teachers in DL settings. This coach helps to build and monitor the Spanish reading interventions, helps teachers on a classroom level, and is also helping to find and fix system-level issues. The administrators felt that having a language coach has been helpful to improve practices in DL classrooms and have a voice at the building level who can advocate for multilingual students.

When Creative Solutions Run Short. During a follow-up discussion, the topic of staffing came up again. Administrators felt that navigating staffing needs was an area of need, particularly in the overlap of DL and SPED. One admin shared that, "We were able to get some RTI teachers in Spanish. So we can get them some reading support in Spanish. But when it comes to Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) we don't have a bilingual special education teacher, and that's that." The administrators have gotten creative to try to get more bilingual staff

to support their students who need extra support, but they feel like they are still missing key areas of service.

The conversation then shifted to talk about how, similar to students, staff dynamics have shifted since the pandemic. One of the administrator groups shared that Covid-19 led to big changes in staffing and staff culture, asserting that it felt that they had a brand-new staff who needed to be educated on the importance of inclusion. They felt efforts to build culture hadn't stuck, and that they were back to square one.

Additionally, one administrator shared that,

Overall, we are having a staff shortage, and are having to hire, and, I don't want this to come off in the wrong way, but we are getting [paraprofessionals] who are 18 year olds that don't have a whole lot of life experiences, which is changing some of the school culture too.

Administrators shared that they feel like some of the people they are hiring into positions are not necessarily interested in staying in the profession and instead are working in schools as paraprofessionals as a step before they do something else. Administrators shared that it is especially hard to get paraprofessionals to stay in a challenging job when many local businesses offer higher starting pay. One shared, "I think that this part of the balancing act makes it hard to build long term culture. Because we have the staffing shortages and changes in staff, plus changes in students, it makes it hard to build a stable school culture and reach the goals we have." The administrators said finding and keeping high quality paraprofessionals is difficult in DL and SPED where much of the support for kids comes from paraprofessional staff.

Building Staff Culture

Administrators shared concerns about staff-buy in for DL programs. One administrator shared that getting staff to look at the whole student and not just special education or ELL was important. One administrator shared that,

I think it's whether that's in the dual or not dual sped in general are, we're still, like, trying to get past that. They're all of our kids, like, felt like we had some good momentum going for a little bit, like we were starting to get there at the elementary level, but back this idea that [kids with disabilities] are burdens, they're distracting.

Administrators talked about how a school culture which promoted inclusion was important. They felt that this extended beyond children with disabilities but also for students who were English language learners. The administrators shared concerns regarding the ways in which staff were welcoming of inclusion and a growing bilingual population. One administrator shared that when their community and school started to become more diverse, many didn't accept a growing Latinx and Spanish speaking population.

I was doing staff PD, with the Paras, teaching them some phrases in Spanish, and trying to, like, kind of do a quick tutorial on, you know. We had a teacher [who was Latinx and many in the staff was mispronouncing her name], and just that, like the basic, like this is how you say her name, we're going to practice it. And I want you to start asking children, how do you say your name and practice it with them? Because this, we had another kid who had a really cool name, and it was very challenging for staff, and they would butcher his poor name all the time. And I was, I was, No, we've got to do something different. We've got to change this culture.

The administrators felt that while they have made a lot of progress with growing the acceptance of inclusion, they still have a long way to go.

Navigating school culture and staff knowledge becomes more complicated as the administrators transition their DL classes from K-5 to the secondary level. One admin shared, I think both [ELL and special education students] can be labeled by people in and it's hard when [...] you're wanting all kids to fit in you are getting there and [then when they switch to secondary it's suddenly] this is the real world now. It's secondary, and they have to meet a certain criteria.

Administrators felt that staff at the secondary level have a different amount of exposure and knowledge of their students. They shared that because they have more students to work with and a different knowledge of reading development, they are worried about how the transition to secondary will look.

Supporting a Unified Staff. The topic of staff culture was discussed again later, with a specific focus for the ways in which teachers interact with one another. Admin shared that the fact that DL teachers are working alongside non-DL teachers in the same buildings has led to a, Rift in between the teachers. Because it is like, oh well, class sizes, or they get the extra stipend. I mean there are a lot of small things that I feel like are building. [...] We want our schools to be seamless, and not two totally different components within the school.

In both interview sessions, administrators shared that they do not have a separate DL school building but rather have DL classrooms which fit within their typical elementary and middle school programs. The administrators shared that having teachers who work in the same grade levels but within different programs sometimes leads to divisions between DL teachers and their general education counterparts. They explained that both special education and DL teachers

often feel misunderstood, as many general education teachers struggle to recognize how their roles differ from their own. Administrators noted that this disconnect can create challenges in collaboration and planning, as it sometimes leads to misunderstandings about expectations and the resources needed to support students effectively.

The administrators emphasized the importance of leadership practices that work to support staff with different backgrounds and areas of expertise. They shared examples of staff feeling like they weren't always considered when it comes to professional development or data team meetings. One administrator shared,

So then when the dual language folks show up, and it doesn't look like there's any Spanish data to talk about, or it's not the focus, it's the English data and the English strategies, or those pieces the dual language Spanish teachers get very frustrated, and they take it very personally, rightfully so.

Individuals in both districts said that they were seeing these divisions between staff, and as the program grows more staff feel this divide. Administrators also expressed challenges in anticipating and planning for problems, even those just a few weeks ahead. They questioned whether their DL program would ever reach a point where it did not create additional challenges. While they acknowledged that some difficulties were simply part of their role as administrators, they believed that DL programs—especially when combined with special education—introduced additional complexities beyond typical administrative responsibilities.

Navigating School and Community Culture

Administrators in both districts discussed the importance of school and community culture for supporting EBSWD. They felt that having a school culture that prioritizes inclusion, and bilingualism was important to the success of DL for all kids. One said that,

Because both [DL and SPED] programs have students in Gen Ed settings that just have different needs, that helping build the culture in schools that allow, I guess, not allow, but support teachers in thinking that every kid is theirs is maybe the most important thing. ELD, bilingual classroom, or otherwise, building that culture and prioritizing teachers that meet students where they are is important.

They shared that having leadership which prioritizes an inclusive culture is important. One administrator shared that they work to make that clear to staff members who are newly hired in the district,

[This] is what we're going to do. And so if you're not on this train with us, then you can be successful somewhere else. [...] During our new teacher orientation, our superintendent takes everyone on a school bus [through] the community. And we learn, this is where [students] live, this is what they come from. It's not necessarily special ed, but it's different [...] if they miss the bus and they live [across town], you have to walk on a highway in order to get to school, and it's not safe [...]. There's lots of barriers but regardless, we're here for the kids, and so if you don't have that mindset, then maybe you would flourish somewhere else. [...] I mean, it's important because it's best for kids and not what's easiest for staff.

The administrators felt that policies and programs which have the most value and make the biggest difference for EBSWD, are those that build and hold an expectation for bilingualism that exists within and beyond DL.

Administrators also noted the ways in which culture can limit the programs and policies that they are trying to put in place. Specifically, they shared that community culture and systemic

racism sometimes gets in the way of supporting the changes they hope to make. One administrator shared that,

It's what this community was built on. It was, you know, my grandparents and my father were part of the migrant farming circuit, it's how that side of my family got here. And it's real, and it's like a very different divide. And so [for the white community members] to allow, or make it feel like they're allowing that Hispanic culture and population to take over, they start to feel like [the Latinx population] is taking over our staff, 'they're' taking from us.

Community-level division impacts the school culture, and the options for the administrators to help improve their schools. Administrators felt that this was especially challenging due to a recent history of neighborhood schools which segregated the community by socioeconomic and racial/ethnic lines. Once they ended neighborhood schools, they saw a change in how the community was organized. While this shift has been positive, there are still many ways in which the community continues to struggle with integration. One administrator shared that,

There has been a shift in how the community looked and felt, who had a say, and who was who, [for a long time] the school board was all white males [...] and just now we got [a Latina woman] on our school board and that was very untypical of how it had been done.

Administrators recognized their responsibility to drive cultural change and improve inclusion within their schools. However, they acknowledged that this work requires sustained effort and does not happen overnight and extends beyond the school itself and into the community. As they strive to create more equitable programs, they focus on developing policies that support these changes. Yet, they noted that without a strong cultural foundation, systemic

shifts often face resistance from teachers and other administrators. They emphasized that policy alone cannot guarantee progress—real change requires ongoing conversations, professional development, and a collective commitment to fostering inclusive practices at every level of the school system. While the administrators hope to make lasting change through the work they are doing in DL and elsewhere, they also recognize the need for change outside of the school community to truly support culture shifts at school.

Shifting Culture for Dual Language. One admin shared that they have been reflecting on the ways in which school culture fits into a DL program. They shared that,

I think that we are asking the wrong question about dual language programs. It's not how the dual language program is going to fit into our school culture, but how we're going to shift our school culture so that it fits dual language.

Administrators discussed the ways in which having a dedicated bilingual space may impact the school environment, and steps they can take to be sure that the community is prepared for changes.

While the admin shared that they were worried about shifting to the secondary level, they also discussed that it was a good opportunity to think about how to shift and improve the entire program. One administrator shared,

I think we need to do kind of a reset, make sure that [DL] fits all our students, and less like, this program is doing this, and this one is doing that. [...] And so we are at a crossroads right now where we're trying to think about how we are going to do that. It's a bit overwhelming because we are trying to meet the needs of all of our different learners, and we have that separation in our mind of the specific programs.

Administrators said that this ties into the ways that DL can be a balancing act. They said that because they are constantly growing the program while also reevaluating, things can feel messy.

One admin shared that building this vision is challenging when not everyone shares the same goal for the program or school in general. When other members of the administration team are at a different place or don't share the same knowledge, it is hard to keep the program progressing. One administrator shared that,

For me, that school culture piece is it, I came from a background of multilingual education, right. It is there in my schooling, my heritage, my background just naturally wants what's best for those kids. And not everyone comes from that same lens. So you have to reteach that dual language background to those new administrators, either at the elementary level, or when we hire new admin.

Administrators from both districts agreed that they felt responsible for implementing their DL programs. They are the only ones doing the work in their district and so sometimes when they don't have plans in writing or figured out, things don't come together. One administrator said that "if we are able to get it into writing and into a board policy, things become a lot easier to sell." They shared that because they are not a DL only school, but rather DL classrooms, this means that they are juggling different dynamics than many others in the state and region.

Administrator's "Why"

During member checking, participants talked about the many positive ways that DL has shifted the services that they can provide for students. While they felt that there were many challenges, they discussed that the opportunities DL provides makes the struggles worth it.

Administrators talked about the academic gains students have made and how they have seen an increase in bilingual staff since starting DL. Within the context of special education, one

admin said having more bilingual staff has led to more meaningful parent communication and participation in meetings. Administrators shared that their DL family nights, “are the most attended family events that we have by far [...] three times a year, we have English and Spanish speaking families coming into our schools.” Opportunities for families to engage in their students’ classrooms is an important success that staff felt came from the DL program. Another shared,

There was an IEP meeting I went to last week, that about 75% of it was in Spanish. And that was fine, because I didn't need to understand everything. But the parents did, and the teacher and, you know what, they worked out and everything it was, it was all good.

Administrators also shared the importance of having a space in their schools where monolingual students can be engaged and use their native language.

The administrators shared that for students with disabilities, the opportunity to have support in their native language is a huge help in supporting EBSWD to succeed. One shared,

I was in a meeting just earlier today for a student in the in a DL program, and who is experiencing autism, and it is pretty severe, and you know, their native language is Spanish, and just being able to have that Spanish Support for them, you know, for the majority of their day, it is huge because if they were in English only, I think we would be seeing a lot more behaviors manifested because his frustrations. And you know, the behaviors are coming from his frustration and lack of communication, and if he can't even, understand what the teacher says at all, I feel like we would be experiencing more behaviors.

Administrators emphasized the importance of creating a space where students who are not native English speakers can communicate and understand their learning environment. They believed

that prioritizing this for all students also makes it easier to provide necessary support for students with disabilities. Despite the many challenges, they concluded that DL programs establish a strong foundation for supporting a diverse student body.

Teacher Focus Group

The teacher focus group began by discussing the number of special education students in their DL classrooms. The two DL teachers, who taught older students, had only one student with an IEP across both classes. Although they did not interact frequently with the special education department, they observed meaningful progress in the students with disabilities they have supported in their classes.

The special education teachers worked with more students in DL classrooms. They described two Spanish-speaking, monolingual kindergarten students with autism who initially started in general education classrooms. However, due to behavioral challenges, the team decided that the DL setting might better support their needs. Since transitioning, both students have shown significant improvements in behavior. The special education teachers emphasized the importance of clear communication among staff to effectively support students with behavioral needs.

Gaps in Staff Support

The teachers agreed that their school lacked enough bilingual staff to support their students, especially those with disabilities. However, they did have a Spanish-speaking Speech-Language Therapist Assistant who provided some bilingual support. The special education teachers shared that having this level of assistance helped them monitor student progress more effectively.

Teachers felt that having staff capable of supporting students was important. They also discussed that individuals dedicated to helping them as teachers have been important in navigating supports for students. Teachers shared that their school district has a DL-specific instructional coach and emphasized that this resource has been instrumental in supporting their work.

We have a bilingual coach. She's like, designated part time with us as the language teachers, and she's been a lot of help in trying to find, not just find resources for us, but she's been helpful in kind of communicating with certain dual language teachers and kind of sharing what they've learned with the rest of us, and kind of just creating a like a dual language community within each other when we don't really get to touch base with all other dual language teachers in the building, so that's been helpful.

The teachers also said that having the DL instructional coach and quarterly DL program meetings has been helpful in building a teaching community and improving teaching practices. The special education teachers don't join those meetings, instead meeting monthly with each grade level to discuss specific student cases and to align schedules. The teachers felt that this monthly time was helpful to support connection and collaboration. Although the special education teachers said that they will also conduct additional check-ins with teachers as needs arise, they felt that the structured monthly meetings are helpful to ensure that they have the time to connect with teachers.

Bilingual Special Education Staff. The group noted difficulties that come with not having any bilingual special education teachers. While the teachers felt that this was an area of concern, one of the special education teachers noted that she gets a lot of support from bilingual paraprofessionals. She shared that,

So there were a couple of students in dual language that started out just in the gen ed placement, and then just behavior wise was just too much for them, like, so they're in my life skills class now, so their placement is less than, like 40% of the day in the gen ed class. And, I mean, I'm definitely fortunate they have paras that work with them, that do speak Spanish, and they're responsive to that. But it's, I don't know, I guess for me, I feel like it's hard because I don't speak Spanish like I don't have the ability to teach them the same curriculum that they would be exposed to in there in the dual language class, and they do go in there for parts of the day, and so they're exposed to some of it, and hopefully, like as they progress and improve, like they'll be able to be included more and more in the regular class.

Special education teachers felt that they did not have the skills to help these students but feel like having bilingual support staff can help bridge gaps.

The DL teachers also highlighted the crucial role of paraprofessionals in their classrooms. Having additional support allows them to better manage student needs, provide targeted interventions, and ensure all students receive the attention necessary to succeed. They felt that paraprofessionals play a key role in reinforcing instruction, assisting with behavioral challenges, and offering one-on-one support. One teacher said it is helpful because, “there's one extra person who can be more individualized with them. Or, like, if I need to teach something whole group where there's still some kiddos who need something maybe more small group and individualized. There's that extra person who can do that.” The teachers also said that they are glad to have special education specific paraprofessionals who can provide more individualized support to students who need extra help.

Initiatives to Grow Staff Knowledge. During follow-up discussions, the teachers shared that they individually benefitted from their district’s GYO program. One shared that, “the GYO program, was for me, pivotal in helping me become a dual language teacher. I think that it is an important resource for districts who are looking to start a DL program and/or need solutions for staffing.” They also discussed that while the GYO program is important, investments into helping monolingual English-speaking staff learn Spanish is important too. Teachers felt that support in learning even just small phrases can make a big difference in their classrooms to support students.

Staff Dynamics. Teachers also talked about divisions between DL staff members and other teachers. One teacher shared that,

I feel like sometimes it is like a little strife or tension between teachers because of the SPED caseload for dual and non-dual classrooms. Because my class right now was at the beginning of the program, and so there are fewer kids with disabilities in DL, the other teachers are frustrated because of that. But I know that it is better in the younger grades, we will be getting more of the caseload in the next few years. It is just one thing, like community or school-community wise that I think we are figuring out.

The teachers shared about how the divisions or tensions between staff impacted them at school.

One shared that,

I feel like it does impact the school culture. Not just between the DL and non-DL teachers, but with others too. But I guess I see the requirements for DL and others don’t. I mean how do you balance all of those cases when you also have certain requirements for DL.

The teachers discussed a shift in the program, with more special education kids in DL classes. One of the special education teachers said, “I think it makes it a lot more stressful for the DL teachers in kinder that are dealing with a lot of high needs cases all of a sudden, especially with teaching in both languages.” While the culture is shifting, it is challenging for teachers to meet the needs of students in DL.

Limited Instructional Time

As the conversation shifted to special education services, the group highlighted a major challenge—time. They felt that the school day did not allow enough time to provide students with the full range of services they needed. One teacher shared,

Last year, there was a student who is kind of losing his vision, like eventually they will be legally blind. We struggled a lot with time, like with them being in the classroom, because they were constantly pulled out for Braille. And they was learning braille, and not only English, but Spanish, and had to learn like, on top of that, they’re learning two languages, and learning braille, and they are being pulled out for a lot of things, a lot of interventions, and it was always a concern for me, was the time like they were out of my classroom.

Teachers expressed concerns about ensuring their students receive the support they need while still developing their academic skills. The teachers felt that students needed to be in their classrooms as much as possible, especially to ensure the growth of their new language skills. To address this, special education teachers have adjusted their SDI to align with classroom instruction, reducing the need for students to leave the room. However, teachers noted that this approach presents challenges since each K-5 teacher sets their own schedule, requiring special education staff to remain flexible to provide necessary services.

Teachers explained that some students struggle to transition between different school spaces, especially when they are unsure which staff members speak Spanish. This uncertainty can create confusion and make it harder for students to feel comfortable and supported in different environments.

Special education staff noted that communication challenges can be very significant for students who are not yet using verbal language. Without clear communication tools, these students face additional barriers in academic and social settings. Teachers shared that it has been helpful to have at least one bilingual speech language pathology assistant on staff. This assistant plays a crucial role in providing resources, strategies, and direct support for nonverbal students, helping to bridge communication gaps and ensure they receive the interventions they need to advocate for what they need and want.

Balancing Language and Special Education

Teachers expressed frustration over balancing the need to support struggling students while ensuring that only those who truly require special education services are identified. They felt that it was important to distinguish between problems in language fluency and acquisition and disabilities. To address this, they follow a referral and intervention process which uses interventions in Spanish and English. They gather data to monitor how language proficiency influences academic performance and to help them better understand why students might be struggling before making a special education referral.

Family Dynamics

Teachers also shared that they worry about parents understanding of how DL will impact their child and the ways that parents' expectations of DL differ from reality. The teachers felt that parents sometimes have misconceptions about what happens in DL classrooms. Specifically,

teachers shared that parents are frustrated or concerned when their child doesn't pick up the second language quickly. The DL classroom teacher shared that some of the language payoffs and academic growth is just starting to happen in their 5th grade class. They said that, "I feel like some of those payoffs are just starting to happen now, and we are seeing even more progress than the monolingual classrooms." Teachers felt that because things are so different between DL classrooms and English-only spaces, it is hard to get everyone on the same page.

Student Behavior

The conversation then shifted to talk about the behavioral challenges which can occur in DL settings. Teachers shared that it can be difficult to discern if a student is struggling because of the strain in the classroom or because of something else that might be specific to the DL setting, and this is not exclusive to monolingual Spanish students. They shared that English-speaking students with disabilities in DL classrooms can sometimes struggle when they come to the English-only special education room. One teacher shared that,

[We have a kindergarten student], he does have a lot of behaviors, but he does better during the Spanish learning, I don't know if it is because he's engaged and doesn't know what it is, so he's really curious on what the language is. But the behaviors are a lot, he will throw things and destroy my classroom, and then it's interesting. If I come in, he wants me to talk Spanish to him, even though he doesn't know Spanish. So then typically, like our behavior coordinator this year, he'll come in and he will speak in Spanish with him, and it calms him down and stops the behavior.

This led into a discussion about how it can be more challenging to deal with behavior cases and teach in DL with the limited resources available. One of the teachers said,

I think something they don't realize is how much harder it is to find even simple resources for our classes. I can go and track down the behavior chart, or math tool that I want, but then I have to sit down and translate it. Every teacher has to spend time tracking resources down, but not every teacher also has to translate that resource.

When it comes to writing IEPs, teachers also felt that this was sometimes a barrier. While they aren't worried about writing strong IEPs for DL students in math, they felt that they needed more training in learning about how reading support is different in Spanish. One teacher shared that,

Some of the goals I have written for kids are extending skills to both English and Spanish, but I'm not providing the SDI in Spanish. We don't have SPED teacher who is bilingual, so any kids that have strong needs, there isn't somewhere they can get extra support in Spanish.

Teachers felt that they lacked the training and resources needed to support the special education needs of EBSWD.

From here, our conversation ended with a discussion of the ways in which DL can make it possible for a wide range of students to engage in their education. One felt that in her teacher preparation, she noticed students who were not getting support from the regular education teacher because they were monolingual. This teacher felt that in DL, they can more easily ensure that all students have the help they need.

Data Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis to identify key themes in the interviews between administrators and teachers to address the research questions. This process involved systematically coding the data, identifying recurring patterns, and interpreting their significance

in relation to the study’s objectives. Throughout the coding process, I engaged in member checking to ensure the codes accurately reflected participants' lived experiences and provided a clear representation of the shared phenomena.

I identified seven themes which were present during my conversations with administrators and teachers. These themes include fostering an inclusive school culture, family engagement, staff buy-in, available resources, staff recruitment and retention, academic interventions, managing the “balancing act,” and building diverse class cohorts. I then organized the themes to connect them to each specific research question, see the table below.

Table 2
Identified Themes Presented by Research Question

	Sub Question	Identified Themes
What are the district policies, resources, and programs that ensure adequate support for students with disabilities in DL programs?	Successes	Fostering Inclusive School Culture Staff Recruitment and Retention Family Engagement
	Challenges	Fostering Inclusive School Culture Staff Recruitment and Retention Staff Buy-in Available Resources Managing the ‘Balancing Act’
	Service Differentiation	Fostering Inclusive School Culture Available Resources
	Supports for Students	Staff Recruitment and Retention Academic Interventions
	Post-Hoc Analysis	Designing Equitable DL Cohorts

Fostering an Inclusive School Culture

This theme highlights the importance of school and community culture to create an environment that values bilingualism and inclusion. In DL programs, fostering inclusivity means

ensuring that all students, including EBSWD, feel supported and represented in the school community. Participants emphasized that a strong school culture promotes collaboration, reduces stigmas surrounding special education, and encourages the integration of language learning and specialized services. However, the educators also acknowledged challenges in shifting long-standing staff perceptions and practices to align with inclusive goals.

Family Engagement

Strong school-family connections shape the success of DL programs, especially for students receiving special education services. Participants emphasized that bilingual communication and culturally responsive outreach, such as family nights and bilingual parent meetings, help build trust between schools and families. When parents trust school staff, they collaborate more effectively in IEP meetings and student support planning, creating a more cohesive team. This theme also highlights how differences in family expectations influence student success. Participants shared that some parents expressed concerns about their child's progress in a bilingual setting, questioning whether language acquisition difficulties indicated a disability. Participants noted that maintaining family support for DL while addressing concerns about potential disabilities remains an ongoing challenge.

Staff Buy-In

Educators shared that the success of DL and special education initiatives heavily depends on staff buy-in. This theme focuses on the ways in which participants who do not fully support the goals of bilingual education or inclusive practices may be hesitant to implement necessary interventions, which can negatively impact student outcomes. Administrators emphasized the need for ongoing professional development and clear communication about the benefits of DL

programming to ensure that all staff members are committed to fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Available Resources

This theme captures the financial and instructional materials available to support both DL and special education programs. Participants noted that limited funding at the state and federal levels often forces districts to piece together resources, creating inconsistencies in program implementation. They also highlighted the difficulty of securing bilingual instructional materials, which are essential for providing high-quality content that can support diverse students in both languages. Participants felt that navigating their available resources is especially difficult given uncertainty around how federal supports may change surrounding regulations and funding.

Staff Recruitment and Retention

Participants felt that finding and keeping bilingual educators, particularly those with special education training, remains one of the most significant challenges for districts implementing DL programs. Administrators discussed the importance of initiatives like GYO programs, partnerships with universities, and targeted recruitment efforts. While these initiatives have shown promise, they do not always support all staffing needs. Participants expressed concern that the gap in bilingual special education staff may persist without more systemic solutions.

Academic Interventions

Providing effective academic interventions in a bilingual setting requires careful planning and differentiation. Participants described how schools implement interventions in both Spanish and English to distinguish between language acquisition challenges and disabilities. This process

ensures that students are not misidentified for special education services due to language barriers and that they receive appropriate support tailored to their individual needs.

Managing the ‘Balancing Act’

Educators in DL programs must navigate a complex balancing act between core instruction, bilingual education, and specialized support for students with disabilities. Participants shared feelings of uncertainty within navigating the various demands involved in coordinating a DL program. During my conversations with participants, they felt that this was consistently a challenge and closely connects feelings of uncertainty connected to other themes.

Building Diverse Class Cohorts

Administrators play a critical role in structuring classrooms to ensure an equitable distribution of students based on language proficiency, special education needs, and overall program goals. All participants felt that when a student cohort was not equal to non-DL counterparts this led to challenges with other staff members and in the district’s ability to train staff. They emphasized the importance of thoughtful planning to create balanced classrooms that foster collaboration and peer learning among diverse groups of students.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Dual Language programs are rapidly expanding across the United States as educators recognize the critical role bilingualism plays in students' academic and social development (Roberts, 2021). Schools and policymakers increasingly acknowledge that proficiency in multiple languages enhances cognitive flexibility, strengthens cultural awareness, and opens doors to greater career opportunities (Gandára & Acevedo, 2016; Kibler et al., 2013; Zelazo et al., 1996). In response, districts are actively investing in DL programs to provide students with meaningful opportunities to develop bilingual and biliterate skills. This expansion reflects a growing commitment to linguistic diversity and educational equity, ensuring that all students receive high-quality instruction that supports both language acquisition and academic success.

The rise of DL programs is encouraging and suggests a broad shift toward more inclusive educational practices that support emergent bilingual students. However, as these programs continue to grow, it is essential to examine how they are structured to ensure they meet the needs of all learners. Prior research highlights the complexities that arise at the intersection of DL programs and special education, revealing that integrating these two systems presents significant challenges at a practice level (Collier & Thomas, 2017). Addressing these challenges requires intentional planning, collaboration, and resource allocation to create a model where DL and special education work together to support a more inclusive learning environment for all students.

The goal of the present study was to better understand the ways in which schools can support EBSWD in DL programs. Specifically, I wanted to better understand the systems in place that help to ensure students with disabilities have their needs met in DL classrooms. To

explore this question, I conducted interviews with administrators and a focus group with teachers.

While the findings offer an understanding of DL and special education practices within these specific districts, their applicability may vary in different school communities. Factors such as district size, available resources, student demographics, and state policies can all influence how schools approach the intersection of DL and special education. However, the themes identified in this study can inform broader discussions on best practices for supporting EBSWD in diverse educational settings. By examining these insights within the context of other districts, educators and policymakers can adapt and refine strategies to better serve EBSWD.

I designed my research to identify themes related to systems-level practices for supporting EBSWD in DL programs. The overarching themes from interviews and focus groups highlight both the challenges and innovative solutions that emerge at the intersection of DL education and special education. Administrators and teachers identified the complexities involved in structuring and coordinating DL programs, particularly when ensuring equitable access for students with disabilities. They discussed barriers such as staffing shortages, resource limitations, and the need for targeted interventions that align with bilingual instruction.

Despite these challenges, educators also shared creative and strategic solutions that foster a more inclusive and linguistically diverse school environment. From leveraging bilingual paraprofessionals and implementing GYO programs to strengthening collaboration between special education and DL staff, schools are finding ways to build sustainable, equity-driven models. These efforts not only support students with disabilities in DL settings but also contribute to a broader cultural shift—one that values bilingualism, inclusion, and innovative

approaches to meeting diverse student needs. In the following sections, I address each research question and discuss observations and conclusions that emerged from this research.

Successes in District Policies, Resources, and Programs for EBSWD in DL

My first question focuses on the successes that participants identified in supporting EBSWD. Administrators and teachers shared a wide range of success stories in the DL program. They emphasized the importance of having a dedicated space where emergent bilingual students can learn and get academic support. They highlighted that having a DL program helped establish a school culture which prioritizes inclusivity and affirms the linguistic and cultural identities of the families they serve. Participants noted that this environment can foster a stronger relationship between schools and families, particularly for those who are not native English speakers.

Administrators also emphasized the critical role of language continuity between home and school, particularly for students with disabilities. They explained that maintaining consistent routines is essential for many students, and when schools provide support in a student's native language, they can better align with family practices and reinforce learning goals. This alignment strengthens the partnership between families and educators, creating a more cohesive and supportive educational experience for students.

Within the broader theme of school culture, participants described how DL programs have contributed to increased family engagement. Hosting DL-specific family nights provided a space for families from diverse linguistic backgrounds to connect, fostering a sense of community and belonging. This increased family involvement also played a crucial role in special education processes, as parents who felt more comfortable and engaged in the school setting were more likely to advocate for their children during IEP meetings and other support

services. Administrators and teachers recognized that building trust with families not only improved communication but also led to more collaborative decision-making.

Staffing was another area where participants felt success. They observed that the presence of a DL program led to an increase in bilingual staff members, which, in turn, allows for greater support for monolingual students who experience disabilities and enhanced communication pathways between schools and families. With more staff able to effectively engage with parents in their native language, schools strengthened their connections with the broader community. Additionally, participants shared that the positive influence of the DL program extended beyond bilingual classrooms, as more teachers across various subjects began integrating Spanish into their instruction, reinforcing a school-wide appreciation for bilingualism.

Administrators emphasized the critical role of the GYO program in developing and sustaining a strong bilingual education workforce. In one district, administrators viewed GYO as more than just a tuition reimbursement program for current staff; they saw it as a comprehensive initiative designed to cultivate bilingual educators from an early stage. They highlighted efforts to strengthen native language proficiency among students and create pathways for high school students to gain hands-on experience in education through supervised learning opportunities. The teacher interviews reinforced the impact of these initiatives, as three of the four teachers interviewed had come through the GYO program. Two of them began their journey in high school by participating in native literacy initiatives and enrolling in education-related courses that provided early exposure to the teaching profession. These structured opportunities helped them develop both linguistic and pedagogical skills, ultimately preparing them for careers in bilingual education. Administrators emphasized that investing in long-term strategies like GYO

not only helps address staffing shortages but also ensures that bilingual programs reflect and support the linguistic and cultural diversity of their communities.

While many of the successes identified were not exclusive to special education, they contributed to fostering an inclusive school environment that benefits all students. At the systems level, participants highlighted that their most significant achievements were closely linked to school-wide initiatives that reinforced the values of inclusion, equity, and linguistic diversity. Policies and programs which were centered around these values created a more supportive and accessible learning environment for EBSWD, ensuring that both language development and special education needs were addressed in a meaningful and integrated way.

Throughout my conversations, I was struck by the passion and dedication of the administrators and teachers. Each participant shared a commitment for ensuring that all students receive the support they need, regardless of their linguistic background or disability. They consistently emphasized the importance of collaboration across different staff departments, recognizing that working together enhances student outcomes. Although not directly tied to specific systems-level policies and programs, this shared commitment to collaboration plays a crucial role in shaping inclusive school environments. Educators who are both knowledgeable and passionate about their work, and who actively engage with colleagues across disciplines, contribute to stronger, more effective support systems for students. Administrators highlighted the essential role of strong leadership in fostering a culture of inclusion and teamwork, underscoring that collaboration is not just beneficial, but necessary for improving outcomes for EBSWD.

Challenges in District Policies, Resources, and Programs for EBSWD in DL

My second question builds upon the previous by examining the challenges of developing district policies and securing resources to support EBSWD. Participants highlighted how limited resources directly impacted their ability to implement and sustain effective support systems. They explained that many of the common challenges faced in education—such as time constraints, funding shortages, and staffing difficulties—are even more pronounced in the DL setting.

Administrators and teachers described how managing instructional time in two languages made balancing core instruction, language development, and special education support more challenging within an already packed schedule. Limited funding resulting from no dedicated state or federal support for DL programs forced districts to patch together resources making it difficult to sustain high-quality bilingual instruction. Participants also highlighted the lack of clear state and federal guidance, leaving districts to build their own frameworks without a standardized roadmap. Staffing shortages further complicates these challenges, particularly in rural areas where recruiting bilingual educators is difficult. While initiatives like GYO programs helped increase bilingual staff, administrators noted that these efforts did not extend to special education staff, leaving a gap in bilingual special education support.

Participants discussed how school and community culture can create barriers to successfully implementing and sustaining DL programs. Administrators emphasized that staff and community support play a crucial role in determining the success of these initiatives. They noted that as they built DL cohorts and introduced the program, they faced pressure to demonstrate strong student outcomes to gain broader acceptance. Systemic racism, both within and outside the school environment, heightened these challenges, making it even more critical

for administrators to invest time and effort in shifting staff mindsets. They described the ongoing work of fostering an inclusive school culture that values bilingualism as essential but time-intensive, requiring persistent professional development, open dialogue, and strong leadership to counter resistance and promote equity in education.

Throughout my conversations with school staff, the importance of school culture repeatedly emerged as a key theme. Administrators emphasized that staff buy-in significantly influenced the success of the DL program. They noted that staff members who did not support or align with the values of DL were often reluctant to implement initiatives that would benefit students. Administrators felt that differing values regarding what schools should provide and how to approach education created tension. They stressed that for DL programs to be successful, particularly for EBSWD, staff and school culture must prioritize inclusion. When members of the school community do not share these values, no system or policy can effectively support the program. While administrators identified ways to support these values, culture was consistently a clear challenge in navigating supports for EBSWD in DL classrooms.

District Level Systems That Differentiate Between SPED and Language Services

Participants' responses about differentiating special education and language services for EBSWD intrigued me. Despite multiple questions and follow-ups, staff consistently shared concerns with drawing a clear line between these services. Instead, administrators stressed the need to integrate both programs rather than treat them separately. They highlighted the importance of collaboration between special education staff and DL teachers, which regularly took place during grade-level team meetings. Additionally, kindergarten classroom planning involved coordination among building principals, the special education director, the ELL coordinator, and kindergarten teachers.

Administrators felt that it was more important to provide supports for all students at the district level than to tailor efforts towards individual programs. Building systems that benefit all students, no matter language or disability background, is most important in creating an inclusive environment where EBSWD can thrive. They felt that when they worked to promote inclusion at the district level, it led to positive outcomes for staff buy-in and student outcomes. While the rural setting and smaller district size may contribute to this approach, participants emphasized that treating EBSWD as individuals rather than categorizing them by labels leads to better outcomes.

Although educators emphasized the need for avoiding rigid divisions between DL and special education, they acknowledged differences in how resources are allocated to each program. Participants noted that DL lacks dedicated funding sources, unlike special education, which has established financial and accountability structures. As a result, when districts face tough decisions about resource allocation, DL programs often receive lower priority. While staff strive to focus on the whole student and encourage collaboration across departments, systemic constraints make this challenging at the planning level.

District Level Processes That Support EBSWD in DL classrooms

While discussing how to ensure students receive the support they need, I appreciated the participants' honesty. They openly acknowledged that they are still figuring out how to improve their programs and practices. Rather than offering a clear solution, they described ongoing challenges in providing special education services and navigating the complexities of DL settings. Some educators admitted that there were instances where they struggled to deliver the necessary support due to limited bilingual staff, but they emphasized their commitment to working toward solutions. For example, administrators noted the importance of having a strong

intervention system that tracks academic progress in both Spanish and English. This bilingual data collection allows educators to identify student needs more accurately, tailor interventions effectively, and ensure that students receive support in both languages—an essential component for multilingual learners with disabilities. While they may not have the special education teachers to provide specially designed instruction in two languages, administrators felt that their intervention systems helped to bridge this gap.

Participants highlighted that DL programs can sometimes facilitate service navigation by providing a structured framework that inherently supports emergent bilingual students. DL settings may add complexity to delivering high-quality special education support, but educators felt reassured in knowing that EBSWD receive instruction in their native language. This foundation ensures students have access to meaningful learning, even when other supports fall short.

Additional Observations

While coding and analyzing the data, I uncovered ideas that were not addressed by the original research questions and highlight areas for further exploration.

Why so Much DL?

As I coded and analyzed the conversations with educators, I found it intriguing that DL often seemed to be more prominent in discussions than special education. Although participants did mention both DL and special education, it frequently required prompting to get them to elaborate on the intersection of these two areas. At times, it felt as though the issues raised were more specific to DL than related to the overlap of the two programs. To better understand this, I asked participants why DL seemed to dominate our discussions. Administrators explained that for them, navigating the DL program was still a relatively new experience. They noted that many

of the challenges they were identifying were more directly connected to the complexities of the DL program itself, rather than special education. This insight highlights the evolving nature of DL implementation and the need for continued reflection on its relationship with special education. This also ties back to the concerns that motivated my research; when schools are tasked with managing complex programs that sometimes have different goals, they often end up prioritizing one framework over the other.

Analysis of Participants & Recruitment

One interesting aspect of my study—not directly addressed in the research questions—was how my ability to recruit participants, the relationships I had with them, and their demographics may reveal deeper insights about the intersection of dual language education and special education.

Limited Number of Districts. I reached out to seven districts and conducted research in only two. Several factors likely contributed to this, including the time constraints of my study and the specificity of the topic. However, many districts did not respond to my outreach at all. In districts where I established a connection, I struggled to recruit teachers, resulting in a smaller sample size than I initially intended.

To better understand these limitations, I asked participants during member checking why others might not have participated. All of them cited time as a major barrier. Scheduling our conversations proved challenging, and participants felt that time constraints likely deterred others. Some also believed they lacked the necessary expertise. They expressed uncertainty about their knowledge and ability to answer my questions.

I conducted my study in the districts where I had personal or professional connections, as those were the only ones that responded to my outreach. One participant shared that knowing me outside of my initial email influenced their decision to participate, stating,

“I was more likely to help someone I knew. I just thought, Cam helps me with things so I will help her too. [Those] other emails from student researchers I just didn’t have the time for, and I feel guilty, but I just deleted those emails.”

Participants consistently said they were more inclined to support someone they had a personal connection with. Therefore, while these relationships may have shaped their responses, they also made the study possible.

External Relationships. My existing relationships with many of the participants both supported and complicated my study. On one hand, familiarity appeared to build trust—several participants seemed more willing to share candid reflections, including critiques of their district, program, or community. They may have felt safer doing so because they already knew me. On the other hand, those same relationships may have created assumptions about my prior knowledge. During several interviews, participants referenced programs or resources without elaboration, assuming I was already familiar. As a result, I often had to prompt them for more detail, which sometimes made it harder to quickly arrive at clear examples or directly address my research questions. My existing relationships with some participants may have introduced bias during conversations, potentially influencing the direction of those discussions in ways that might not have occurred otherwise.

Participant Demographics. I found it interesting to consider participant demographics in light of the study’s goals. None of the special education staff I recruited spoke Spanish, and all identified as White. In contrast, all the DL staff were bilingual, and three of the four identified as

Latinx. During our conversations, participants acknowledged the difficulty of finding staff who can effectively support students across both DL and special education settings. The fact that none of the participants themselves reflected this overlap in language ability or cultural background highlights a critical gap in staffing—one that may directly impact the quality and equity of services for emergent bilingual students with disabilities.

Designing DL Cohorts

Although this theme did not directly align with any of my specific research questions, the way administrators described the process of building DL classroom cohorts stood out as significant. They explained that each year, they use kindergarten registration data to create DL cohorts and hold meetings to plan class placements. While the administrators I interviewed emphasized their commitment to equity and fair access, their descriptions raised important questions about how these processes unfold in other districts—and how individual biases might shape which students gain access to DL programs.

Administrators in both districts reported using a lottery system to determine who enters the DL classrooms, giving priority to monolingual students and those with siblings already enrolled. However, after the lottery, they review placements to ensure that the DL classes reflect the broader school population. In practice, this means class composition is influenced not just by chance, but also by student needs, family history, and broader demographic considerations.

Even though administrators framed the process as a lottery, what they described reflects a more curated and intentional method of student placement. When the administrators organizing this system are intentional about equitable classrooms, a truly random lottery becomes difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. This raises questions about the practices used to ensure equal access to classrooms and puts responsibility on the educators to prioritize all students. At the

community level, this method of organizing classroom cohorts raises important concerns. For educators and leaders who prioritize inclusivity, building classes with intention makes sense. However, when these cohorts do not reflect the demographics of the broader community, the approach could create tension and raise questions about access and representation. Looking forward, there may be interesting questions connected to educator practices in building DL cohorts.

Limitations & Future Research

The qualitative methodology employed in this study proved effective in exploring the experiences of practitioners implementing DL programs in rural areas, but there are some areas for growth. First, the sample size was relatively small, limiting the breadth of perspectives captured. I was unable to gather insights from a wide range of districts across the state, which reduces the generalizability of the findings. Second, my existing relationships with many of the participants may have introduced bias, potentially influencing the responses shared compared to what might have emerged with a different researcher. Holding the interviews in English may have further impacted findings and the types of conversations I had with participants. Lastly, one district had more participants than the other, which could skew the findings and further impact the study's generalizability. Given that my research focuses on a niche topic with a limited sample, the results likely do not reflect broader national trends or the experiences of districts in different educational contexts.

The findings of this study reveal several promising directions for future research and raise important new questions. Expanding the scope beyond Oregon to include other states could increase the sample size and offer a broader range of perspectives on DL education. Incorporating additional languages and conducting interviews in languages other than English

may also capture more linguistically diverse perspectives. Further, considering differences in DL programs which offer instruction in languages other than Spanish may lead to different findings. Future studies could benefit from examining teacher and administrator perspectives separately, as these roles look at district systems differently. Administrator interviews, in particular, may provide critical insights into systems-level decision-making, given administrators' central role in shaping school structures, allocating resources, and sustaining DL programs. Additionally, adopting a systems-centered lens in future research could deepen our understanding of how districts design, implement, and adapt their DL models over time. Such an approach might illuminate the broader organizational, policy, and community dynamics that influence program success and sustainability. Lastly, I wonder about the ways in which schools are ensuring that all students are benefitting from DL. Future research exploring how districts ensure that DL is beneficial for various students would be an important area of future research. Overall, further research that considers these dimensions can help build a more comprehensive understanding of how to support equitable and effective DL education.

Conclusion

Throughout my discussions with educators, I identified several strong examples of school district policies, resources, and programs designed to support EBSWD in DL settings. One theme that consistently emerged as both prominent and powerful was the role of culture in shaping the success of DL for all students. After talking with educators, I believe that the systems supporting school and community culture are the most influential in helping EBSWD thrive within DL programs.

Participants frequently highlighted the significance of staff and leadership who prioritize inclusion and uphold high standards for cultural responsiveness. These leaders were seen as

crucial in fostering environments where bilingualism and cross-cultural practices are embedded into daily practices. Among the most impactful systems mentioned were GYO programs, which help cultivate a diverse and culturally competent workforce, as well as clear expectations for staff performance. Additionally, family engagement initiatives—such as family nights—were key in building strong home-school partnerships.

Efforts to reduce the division between neighborhood schools and to break down departmental silos also emerged as important strategies for creating a more unified, supportive educational environment. These practices are essential in ensuring that EBSWD in DL programs receive the integrated, holistic support they need to succeed.

It is interesting to consider the cyclical impact of cultural systems in the implementation of DL programs, as reflected in the interviews. Participants acknowledged that culture could act as a barrier to establishing strong systems, yet they also recognized that implementing robust systems is essential for building a positive school culture. The reciprocal relationship between culture and structure—where one shapes and reinforces the other—emphasizes the need for intentional efforts to align systems with culturally sustaining practices in order to support the long-term success of DL programs.

Changing school culture requires time, commitment, and strong leadership. Educators from both districts pointed out how these factors—time and leadership—significantly influenced the success and sustainability of key programs. Although the professionals I interviewed showed deep dedication to building systems that support and strengthen school culture, I worry that many of these supports depend heavily on having leaders who share their values. In programs with limited resources, where the success of systems often hinges on leadership and school culture, there's a real risk that district services could shift away from inclusive practices if future

leaders prioritize different goals. Without structural safeguards, these inclusive efforts may not be sustainable over time.

Looking forward, I hope that my study findings are useful for educators seeking to organize DL programs and ensure they are inclusive for all students. While additional research on supports for EBSWD within the context of DL programs is sorely needed, I hope that illuminating school systems and programs that work to support EBSWD in DL will help guide practice and inform the development of guidelines for implementing effective DL programs.

Appendix A

District Demographic Profile

Questions:

I have gathered information from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and appreciate your help ensuring accuracy and providing information that may not be accessible from ODE. If you have questions about the study at any point, please contact me with questions.

District Name:

District Contact Name:

How many students are served in your district K-12?

How many students in your district are served in Special Education?

How many students in your district are classified as having limited English proficiency?

How many dual language classrooms do you have in your district?

How many students are involved in dual language programs in your district?

What languages does your school district offer?

In your district's dual language program, how many students qualify for special education services?

In your district's dual language program, how many students are considered Ever English Language Learners?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Interview Questions:

Date/Time:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Recording info:

Introduction:

Introduce myself:

Share the purpose of the study:

Get informed consent signature:

Gather Demographic Data:

- Age, role, experience in position, education, racial/ethnic identity, and language proficiencies.

Review structure (audio recordings, taking notes)

Questions:

1. Describe the characteristics of the dual language program in your district.
 - a. Probe: How many classrooms are there per grade level?
 - b. Probe: How do students typically enter the program and transition between languages?
2. Describe the unique challenges and opportunities you see in providing special education services within dual language classrooms?

- a. Probe: What concerns have been brought by staff, students, and families regarding challenges and successes?
 - b. Probe: How has this shifted with longer implementation of your program?
3. Can you describe programs/policies/resources that your district has which address potential inequities in district level policies, resources, and programs?
 - a. Probe: How did changes/updates in policies come about?
 - b. Probe: Who in the district has taken charge of navigating finding new resources and building policies?
4. What changes could be made at the district level to better support students with disabilities in DL programs?
 - a. Probe: Who should be involved in making these changes?
 - b. Probe: How would these changes impact collaboration between DL and special education teams?
 - c. Probe: What has worked well for students with disabilities in DL programs?
5. What recommendations would you have for schools and districts to better support the unique needs of students with disabilities in dual language programs?
 - a. Probe: Describe the resources, policies, and programs which you would have wanted in place before starting a dual language program.

Closing:

Thank participants, discuss any questions that occurred during the interview process, and contact information for further questions.

Appendix C

Focus Group Protocol

Date and Time:

Location:

Focus Group Facilitators:

Focus Group Participants:

Gather Demographic Data:

- Age, role, experience in position, education, racial/ethnic identity, and language proficiencies.

Focus Group Questions:

- 1) Tell me about successes you have encountered when providing support for bilingual students with disabilities in your class.
 - a) Probe: What support from admin/processes/community are in place that supported this?
- 2) Tell me about any specific challenges you have encountered when providing support for bilingual students with disabilities in your class.
 - a) Probe: What supports did you get from district admin/processes/community
 - b) Probe: What supports would have been helpful from admin/district/community?
 - c) Probe: What changes have occurred to change this issue?
 - d) If applicable, what changes did you make to improve this for future cases?
- 3) What changes could be made at the district level to better support students with disabilities in DL programs?
 - a) Probe: Who should be involved in making these changes?

- b) Probe: How would these changes impact collaboration between DL and special education teams?
 - c) Probe: If you had to choose one (of examples provided), what would it be?
- 4) What does the district do well to support students with disabilities in DL programs?
- a) Probe: How does the district promote collaboration across programs and teaching groups?

Appendix D

District Letter of Agreement

Contact:

- Cameron Sipe, Doctoral Student, University of Oregon
csipe@uoregon.edu

Agreement with the district:

- Data will be collected that could benefit the development of Dual Language and Special Education programming and inform district initiatives.

Secure Data Sharing:

- Data will be shared via a secured Google Drive file or Word Document via secure file sharing.

Data requested:

- 1) Staff Contact Information
 - a. Staff email addresses
 - b. Staff phone numbers
- 2) District Level Demographic Data
 - a. Student involvement in Dual Language and Special Education Programming
 - b. School-level systems around Dual Language and Special Education.

Superintendent Signature: _____ Date: _____

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